

Neppie Donaldson

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

409 E. Vine Street
Urbana, Illinois
August 9, 1983

Interviewed by
Patrick Tyler and
Melinda Roundtree

Champaign County Historical Archives
Urbana, Illinois
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Introduction

This interview is with Mrs. Neppie Donaldson, one of the founders of the Mount Olive Baptist Church, Champaign, Illinois. Mrs. Donaldson was born in 1898 and came to Champaign in January 1916.

The interview was conducted on August 9, 1983, at her home at 409 E. Vine St. in Champaign. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives.

Patrick Tyler: When you were born?

Neppie Donaldson: I was born March 11, 1898.

Patrick Tyler: Where was you born at?

Neppie Donaldson: Well, just leave it there, will you? Because I'm trying to keep my family out of this.

Patrick Tyler: Okay.

Neppie Donaldson: I don't want my family in this.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay. What year did you come to Champaign-Urbana?

Neppie Donaldson: January 1916.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember the first place that you lived when you came to Champaign-Urbana?

Neppie Donaldson: 510 East Tremont.

Melinda Roundtree: Where did you move when you left there? What street? Did you come here or . . . ?

Neppie Donaldson: I lived . . . I don't even remember the number, I can't think of the number . . . it was on the corner of Fourth and Beardsley. But I don't know the number. I can't tell you. That's about the 1000 block. Now, I don't know which side the odd and even numbers are on that street. Must have been 1002, because the odd numbers are on that side, going north. And that corner house is 1002.

Melinda Roundtree: When you moved from Beardsley, did you come here to this house?

Neppie Donaldson: No. I lived on Tremont Street again.

Melinda Roundtree: That's in Champaign?

Neppie Donaldson: Yes, it's in Champaign.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay. When you moved into the area, was it white and black?

Neppie Donaldson: White and black.

Melinda Roundtree: Were they friendly?

Neppie Donaldson: Everybody was friendly and neighborly towards one another.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay. Could you tell us about the jobs that you had in the past here in Champaign-Urbana? Some of them as you can remember?

Neppie Donaldson: I worked at the Champaign Country Club, and I told you I worked on the campus. I cooked on the campus for several years, at the Alpha Delta Phi, Kappa Sigs, and Alpha Kappa, I think it was. It was right across from Evans Hall, it would be. I can't think of the number. Besides, I worked several places on the campus. I can't remember their numbers.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay. I don't remember who it was we talked to, but they said had a bunch of cooks' clubs.

Neppie Donaldson: Yes, but I didn't belong to any cooks' clubs. They had cooks' clubs, but I didn't belong to any.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay. You were here during the '20s, right during the Depression time. Do you remember how it was for blacks and for you, yourself?

Neppie Donaldson: Well, it wasn't too bad. You learned to manage, because they had to ration things. You couldn't buy meat, and you couldn't buy sugar, either. You had

certain things that you could buy, those things. But you learned to manage how to make ends meet. You'd have to work.

Melinda Roundtree: How about during the wars, World War I and World War II? Did you have any relatives in these?

Neppie Donaldson: . . . and my cousin were in World War I, and I had two nephews in World War II.

Melinda Roundtree: How about during the '30s and '40s and up to the '50s? The theaters here in Champaign-Urbana, like the Orpheum and the Virginia, were segregated. Did you ever go to them?

Neppie Donaldson: When I first came to Champaign, the Orpheum Theater was not segregated then. You could go in and sit anywhere you wanted to. But you know how . . . are you taping this?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes.

Neppie Donaldson: Well, I won't say what I started to say. But things changed. I can say that.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay. When you came to Champaign-Urbana, did you join a church?

Neppie Donaldson: I attended Salem and Freewill and St. Luke. But I joined Mt. Olive, because they were organizing.

[Loud noises from cars in the street.]

Neppie Donaldson: I could just shoot . . .

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember some of the other people? I know that Mrs. Britt and her husband were one of the founders, too. Right? Do you remember some of the other people?

Neppie Donaldson: Mrs. Eva Knight. She was the real founder of the church. Her husband, and brother and sister Watts, and brother Johnny Sykes. They were the first five people who started Mt. Olive with prayer meeting and Bible classes.

Melinda Roundtree: Who was the pastor, the first minister of your church?

Neppie Donaldson: Tyler, Reverend David Tyler.

Melinda Roundtree: How many members were there when it first started out?

Neppie Donaldson: I couldn't tell you.

Melinda Roundtree: Back then, did they have choirs and everything? Can you tell us about the structure of the church, you know, how it developed? Like did they have the missionary society that they have now?

Neppie Donaldson: Oh, yes. We had a missionary society and we had . . . I don't remember what they called it . . . we went from house to house. After the church was organized, they would visit the jail every Friday. That was the day that we could go and have service. At that time, we walked from Champaign to Urbana . . . I can't remember where it was . . . but before we moved, it was closer. But Friday was the visiting day when they allowed us to come and visit. And we always went and had prayer and singing and scripture reading.

Melinda Roundtree: Did they sing more from the hymnal books back then?

Neppie Donaldson: Yes, and we used a lot of Dr. Watts' hymns and music.

Melinda Roundtree: So, would you say that the church was more involved in the community then, more so than now? You know, with helping people and families, providing food for those families who didn't have food at times, and you know, just trying to what they can to help the community in general?

Neppie Donaldson: Well, we were always involved in it, I'll say that. The church was always involved in helping our people and caring for our people.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay. I also want to move along up to the '60s. You said you remember Blanche Harris, right? Her husband had a newspaper, The Illinois Times.

Neppie Donaldson: I don't remember the name. I just know they had a paper.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember what kind of things she had in it? Did she have people writing with her, or did she do most of the work herself?

Neppie Donaldson: I really don't know, because she lived way down in the south part of town and I lived way back here.

Melinda Roundtree: Did they distribute the paper all over? Did you have to go to a certain place and get it, or do you remember?

Neppie Donaldson: I think that they copies in the mail. I'm not sure. They could have had somebody distribute it, but I'm not sure.

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

Neppie Donaldson: The boys used to deliver . . . I think it was The Defender. I'm not sure. I think that was the name of it. That was a colored paper.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember the year the community was segregated, an estimate?

Neppie Donaldson: No, I couldn't say for sure. I know it was in the '50s. It was in the '40s and '50s.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of transportation was there when you first came here?

Neppie Donaldson: We had a streetcar that ran on University Avenue from Champaign to Urbana. If you wanted to ride, you would have to walk down to University, or you could go down to Third Street and catch one at University and Fifth, or you could even walk down to University and Third to catch it. Either one would take you to Urbana, or either one would take you to Champaign. Then what they called the "Short" line, that went out west to the west part of the town. There was another one, but I can't think of the other one that went down John Street. The short line went out west Church to the end of the line out there, somewhere out there. And then they had a short line that went down to Third and down through the campus.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember the price to ride?

Neppie Donaldson: It was five cents.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember about what year it went up?

Neppie Donaldson: No, I can't quite remember what year that was.

Melinda Roundtree: I know, in talking to some other people, they say that crime wasn't as bad as it is now. They say you could leave your house and door open, and nobody would come in and do anything.

Neppie Donaldson: Yeah, you didn't have to worry about nothing happening. When my husband passed in '59, I didn't have a lock on the door that would work.

Melinda Roundtree: Also, during the '60s, the gangs were very bad around Douglass Center. Do you remember anything about that that stuck out in your mind?

Neppie Donaldson: Nothing I would care to talk about.

Melinda Roundtree: How about during the Civil Rights Movement? How did the blacks react?

Neppie Donaldson: I think they played a good part, really. They really played a good part.

Melinda Roundtree: How about the mail service back then?

Neppie Donaldson: Oh, we had mail twice a day, early in the morning and then in the afternoon. We had good mail service.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you plant gardens and raise your own crops?

Neppie Donaldson: Always. Always.

Melinda Roundtree: What kinds of things did you plant?

Neppie Donaldson: I raised onions, lettuce, potatoes, peas, beans, watermelon, peanuts, corn, just anything. Flowers, everything. My garden didn't do much good this year. The drought has really taken its toll on it.

Melinda Roundtree: How about gas and electricity? I know the prices were lower then. Do you remember how much they were?

Neppie Donaldson: Yes. Then, you mostly paid for just what you used.

Melinda Roundtree: Have you been involved in any kinds of organizations or clubs in Champaign-Urbana?

Neppie Donaldson: I belonged to the Frederick Douglass Committee, which I felt was one of the best things that could ever happen in Champaign.

Melinda Roundtree: What kinds of things did you do?

Neppie Donaldson: Well, they did a lot of good in the community, and the public really respected that committee.

Melinda Roundtree: I remember Mrs. Matthews and the Anna Tutt Honey's. Were you involved in that?

Neppie Donaldson: Mm-hmm. I belonged to it.

Melinda Roundtree: What places did you all go?

Neppie Donaldson: We went to Chicago to the zoo; we went to Chicago to Reverend Jackson's church, his organization; we went to Springfield to the Fair; we went to Terre Haute two to three years. We just went a lot of places. We really had a good time. I miss it. I love to go and do things.

Melinda Roundtree: They took you on shopping sprees?

Neppie Donaldson: Yes. And we still go shopping once a week. Our club is not functioning right now, but we still have a bus that takes us shopping once a week, which I'm very grateful for. It helps you be independent; you don't have to bother people. They pick you up at the door and let you off right at the door to the store, they bring you back and let you out at the door. Now, you couldn't ask for more. That way, I don't have to bother nobody. I can go to the store when I want. You know, people are nice to me, but . . . I forget what I'm saying, I'll shut my mouth.

Melinda Roundtree: Go on if you want to.

Neppie Donaldson: Well, when I get to thinking of all the nice things that people do for me, then I guess I get kind of carried away. But I do appreciate them. And they don't have to do it.

Melinda Roundtree: I have one more question that I want to ask you. What are your interests? What do you like to do in your spare time? Do you like to read?

Neppie Donaldson: In the winter months, I like to crochet and do things like that. I go about once a month, I guess, to work with the senior citizens. Then, I go to school one day and I have a project whenever I go, for the kids, to teach them something. And in the summertime, I like to go fishing. I would go every day if I could.

Melinda Roundtree: Where do you go fishing?

Neppie Donaldson: Anywhere there's a watering hole! I go to Homer Lake and I go to Lake of the Woods. Sometimes I get to go other places, but those are the closest places I get to go.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay, Mrs. Donaldson. Those are all the questions that I have, unless you have anything else you want to say.

Neppie Donaldson: I hope I haven't said anything to embarrass you. I didn't want to do that.

Melinda Roundtree: No. We enjoyed it.

Neppie Donaldson: I never want to embarrass people. I try to be careful not to.