

Vennie Britt

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

414 East Tremont Street
Champaign, Illinois
August 24, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
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Introduction

This interview is with Mrs. Vennie Britt, a long-time resident of the Champaign-Urbana area. Mrs. Britt was born in Tennessee on December 23, 1894, and she came to this area in the 1920s.

The interview was conducted on August 24, 1983, at her home, 414 East Tremont, Champaign. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree representing the Urbana Free Library Archives. Mrs. Britt's daughter, Mildred Wilson, also spoke with the interviewers.

Vennie Britt, Oral Interview

Patrick Tyler: Mrs. Britt, could you tell us the date that you was born, and the place that you was born?

Vennie Britt: I can't tell you the date. I can tell you I was born in Tennessee.

Mildred Wilson: I don't know what year she was born either. Okay, we have to figure it out. She is 89 years old now. [Tape is turned off.]

Patrick Tyler: December 23, 1894, and you was born in Tennessee?

Vennie Britt: Yes, Huntingdon, Tennessee. I been up here now, how many years Millie?

Mildred Wilson: You've been up here over 60 years.

Vennie Britt: Oh yeah, over 60 years. Yes, because when I brought Millie here she was only six weeks old wasn't she - when we come up here to live. My husband was up here working. He come up here staying with his cousin, the house right across the street. Now what else?

Patrick Tyler: Why did you come to Champaign?

Vennie Britt: Well, my husband he was home, and left the boys in the country. He had some people up here and he come up here to work and stay, and then after when he come up, well I stayed home about five or six weeks, as soon as the baby got old enough, then I came up here. And from there we lived, who did we room with? We roomed with a lady. I can't think of her name, down on Sixth Street. We roomed there about three months, and then we started - we didn't buy a house, we rented a little house in the park. It's park now. Then I decided to move to a larger house, and people moved in a nice house. I moved in there and then somebody bought this house because it was big house and people with a big family.

Then we went down to the little house right next to that white house, and lived there seven years. Then we bought this one right here next to this house, right next to this house. And it got too little. I have ten children living - five boys and five girls and we bought this big house and fixed it over. All the children are gone, and there's nobody here but me. [Laughs.] Now what else could I say, Millie?

Mildred Wilson: She's been living in one house for 45 years.

Patrick Tyler: When you first came here what was the community like, the town?

Vennie Britt: Well, it was - a lot of poor folks was working and doing . . . all this in here was houses, and this wasn't no park or nothing there - all that was houses all the way. Now it's got to be a big park over there. And when I come, this church right there (St.

Luke CME) was just a little church down to the basement church, brick, and it's brick now of course. And I don't know what else.

Patrick Tyler: What schools did you send your children to?

Vennie Britt: That big old schoolhouse over there, what do you call it? Lawhead.

Patrick Tyler: And then, you know, how was it in the school system when you first came? Was it a lot of segregation, was it separate, or how was it?

Vennie Britt: All colored over here.

Mildred Wilson: White teachers.

Vennie Britt: White teachers, yes, I guess it was, yes, for a while.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell us if you've worked here in Champaign?

Vennie Britt: Did I work here?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes ma'am.

Vennie Britt: Yes, I worked around washing and cooking and doing everything. I wasn't never much of a cook, but then I'd go places and wash. And my husband, and he was a hod carrier. Bricking the houses and things like that. We just worked.

Mildred Wilson: You did house work. There wasn't no buses or nothing. We walked to work.

Vennie Britt: Yes, it was, but wasn't no buses running then. I don't think there was. I'd jump off and run here to west side and all around. I've come a long ways. Now what else?

Melinda Roundtree: We talked to Mr. Bowles, and he said that back then the community was pretty close ...

Vennie Britt: Yes, 'cause all them - somebody come here yesterday talking about that tree out there. I planted it, and children would all come over here - Mr. Bowles' children, and all those children would come over here and play, and that's why we was crying. The son was here yesterday. Did you see him? Well, that's the reason why he sent you here because I could get him such a record and we just cried, both of us just cried over what we'd been through. Well, bless his heart. I didn't know he took it that serious, because I really took it serious. And I planted that little tree, and I'd go to church in the morning, but in the evening it'd be so many of the children come from Mr. Bowles and all the children come over here and I would hardly ever get to go to

church. My husband was a deacon, and I was a mother, but I had so many children. I have ten, and children would come here in the evening and folks just had so much confidence in some them, they'd let the children and I'd just sometimes cry because so many children would come here, but I couldn't afford to make them go home. A lot of women called up and asked, "Is my daughter, girl there?" whatever her name was. I said, "Yes. Tell her to come home, because I want you all to go home." But I couldn't make it go home, and I'd just stay home that evening at church. I planted that tree you see out there, I planted it with these hands. That whole lot belongs to the American Legion, but they cut it off right there. You can see where they cut the grass. They don't bother my half. They just give me this place in a way. This summer I didn't get it fixed up like I usually - I just got two tables, old tables and chairs - like I used to keep it. And that's the way they've always done. Somebody else was here the other day asking or talking about me, how I always kept the children.

Mildred Wilson: Yes, this was the neighborhood house. This was the whole neighborhood house.

Vennie Britt: Yes, a lot of the young people love me now, because I let them come and play in the evening out there, and that tree you see sitting out there I put it out with my hand - little bush. And so what else?

Mildred Wilson: The park wasn't as big as it is now.

Vennie Britt: They played out there on the school ground. That was a little playground for the children when they wanted to play ball or something.

Patrick Tyler: What church did you attend?

Vennie Britt: Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church. I still go to it. I'm one of the oldest mothers. I haven't been able to go much this year. I'm one of the oldest mothers. You all ever been out to Mount Olive Baptist Church? Well that's my church. I just haven't been able to go very much this year. And I told you I had five boys and five girls. Now what else?

Patrick Tyler: Where was the church first located when you first came here?

Vennie Britt: Oh, up on Fourth Street. It was first located in a little house, and how long we - and, of course, I guess you don't know that. How we stay out in - way out in that building in the other church - what street is that out there?

Patrick Tyler: Bradley.

Vennie Britt: Bradley. It is a very nice church out there.

Patrick Tyler: Who was the pastor when you first joined?

Vennie Britt: Oh, Reverend - what was Reverend - old tall man, our first pastor. What was his name? I'm so old - Reverend ... I can just see his face, but I can't remember his name. What was his name?

Mildred Wilson: Katheryn (Humphrey, another daughter) probably knows from the church history. See I don't belong to Mr. Olive so I don't know.

Vennie Britt: I wonder if it's in that old Bible upstairs? You don't want to go up there?

Patrick Tyler: We'd like to see it anyway.

Mildred Wilson: Oh, okay.

Vennie Britt: It's an old Bible upstairs.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you ever raise a garden?

Vennie Britt: What you say honey?

Melinda Roundtree: Raise a garden?

Vennie Britt: Had to raise a garden all my life. I got a great big place out there now. It never did grown up like that, but I'm sick all this year ... My son come take care of me.

He come and fix my breakfast and things in the morning, but he, they won't clean the garden. I want to get together and clean that garden so bad I don't know what to do. They haven't did it yet.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of things did you grow in your garden?

Vennie Britt: Oh, beans, cabbage, grapes, everything you want. I got grapes out there now. Yes, I just made it a regular old country home.

Mildred Wilson: Is this the one?

Vennie Britt: I think that's the old Bible.

Mildred Wilson: What did you do with that paper from the family reunion?

Vennie Britt: Oh yea, Katheryn gave me one?

Patrick Tyler: How was crime when you first came here?

Vennie Britt: Crime? I don't know very well I guess.

Patrick Tyler: Was it a lot of shooting, and gangs and stuff when your first came?

Vennie Britt: No, I don't think so. I thought everybody was - I've never had no trouble around. I have ten children and I ain't never had but one get in jail and that was my baby one night. He got out with some little boys and got into something and the next day I went and got him out and he never did get into anymore trouble. That was my baby boy, David. Find any history? [Talking to Mildred.] I have five daughters and five sons all living.

Patrick Tyler: That's good.

Vennie Britt: I think there's five here and five gone ain't it Mildred? I got to admit sometimes call one name and call the other one name.

Mildred Wilson: It's six here and four away.

Vennie Britt: Six and four away. The young one, see they live in another town. I guess Gary is about the closest one of the - my baby boy lives there.

Patrick Tyler: How was life during the Depression?

Vennie Britt: Oh, it was very well. They helped me and I worked out a lot, and ladies would help me where I worked at. I got along pretty good. I was raised in the country and I got to know how to get along with the white folks. Tell they was pretty and all kind of tales. [Laughs.] Tell the old woman how pretty she was, and she give me so

many nice clothes and things. [Laughs.] I knowed how to get along with them. I know I was hungry, and my children was hungry, but I knowed how to get along with them. Well, see I was raised down in Tennessee, and I already knowed some of it when I come from home. We lived out in the country. I plowed, my hands ain't got right yet. [Laughs.] ... I knowed how to load them, put the wagon around and bring them out to the big road. Yes, I was one of those old-time mothers. Now what else?

Melinda Roundtree: Did you parents live on a farm?

Vennie Britt: Oh yes, we was on a farm. It was a pretty good old farm. We had pretty rooms. We had a smokehouse, and papa drank - we had jugs all way around the . . . And so we just country folks. We had country church. We had nice, frame church, we call it "Smyrna." Huntingdon, Tennessee, was a county seat and a little place we called "Bunie" [?] that's where we used to go three miles to buy our groceries and things. Daddy put me on the mule and I'd go to the mill and put the sacks up and I'd be sitting on the sacks. One time the sack fell off and white man came along and put the sack up for me. And he knowed my daddy, and he told my daddy not to send me across no river to be out that far from home. He told him he better not, so he didn't do that. You know how it was, used to be with old folks, you know. But sometimes white folks would tell you what to do.

Melinda Roundtree: How did you get to Champaign, on the train?

Vennie Britt: Huh?

Melinda Roundtree: How did you get to Champaign when you first came here?

Vennie Britt: Oh, on the train.

Melinda Roundtree: Was it segregated?

Vennie Britt: Yes, we was sitting in the place where the colored folks sit when I come to town.

Patrick Tyler: How was life here in Champaign during the Civil Rights Movement with Martin Luther King and ... ?

Vennie Britt: Well, this Martin Luther King was here and we all done the best we can. I have his picture here. And something come up the other day and his voice - I just got so much joy out of it. I have his picture sitting upstairs now. Now what else?

Melinda Roundtree: You remember the streetcars?

Vennie Britt: The streetcar?

Melinda Roundtree: Were they here when you came, the streetcars?

Vennie Britt: I don't know. Millie, I know you don't know nothing about it. How long streetcars been here?

Mildred Wilson: I don't know about no streetcars either mamma.

Vennie Britt: I almost forgot myself. I don't know whether the streets was running when I come here. I'm sure they was. I'm sure they was.

Patrick Tyler: Can you remember the first time your husband bought a car?

Vennie Britt: Yes, I remember when he bought the car, but I don't remember what year it was. We always had cars pretty well.

Mildred Wilson: We always kept a car.

Vennie Britt: Well, since you been here.

Mildred Wilson: Yes.

Vennie Britt: How many children is it between you and?

Mildred Wilson: I'm number six. [Laughter.]

Vennie Britt: Yes, she's number six, but there's ten all living, five boys and five girls.
Now what else? Is that a pretty full paper?

Patrick Tyler: Yes.

Vennie Britt: Is it?

Patrick Tyler: How about, did you join any organizations or any clubs besides the church?

Vennie Britt: The Willing Workers Club, wasn't it? The Willing Workers Club. Was that for the church or what?

Mildred Wilson: That's for the church.

Vennie Britt: Yes.

Patrick Tyler: Anything else?

Vennie Britt: No, I had so many children.

Mildred Wilson: Honey Tutt's, the senior citizens. You were in the Honey Tutt's.

Patrick Tyler: Yes, with Mrs. Matthews.

Mildred Wilson: Mrs. Matthews.

Vennie Britt: Yeah, oh yeah.

Mildred Wilson: For many years.

Patrick Tyler: What kinds of things did you do with the Honey Tutt's?

Vennie Britt: Well, we went out to see folks, and then every Friday she'd have a truck to carrying us and get our food and stuff. And then we have a meeting over to her house, over at the old school there. We'd go there, we'd have night service, and have people to come speak for us, white people come speak for us and they give us TVs and things. We'd meet over there every week.

Mildred Wilson: You went on field trips. You forgot you went on the boat ride, on the ferry, on the boats.

Vennie Britt: Yes, she'd carry us out and what you call it? It would carry us out to Decatur and all those places every once in a while, about once or twice a year.

Mildred Wilson: You all went on a lot of trips.

Vennie Britt: Yes, help me because I been kind of tired cleaning up and ... Yes, she was awfully nice. Did you all know Mrs. Tutt? Have you got acquainted with her since you been here? Yes, Mrs. Matthews.

Melinda Roundtree: I talked to her on the phone.

Mildred Wilson: Go and talk to her. She's a lovely person.

Vennie Britt: Yes, she is. She knows us well. She used to come here. She's been here round about a year.

Mildred Wilson: She had good relations with all the old people, she really loved them - they're her Honey's. [Laughs.]

Vennie Britt: Yes, she really was somebody. And somebody yet because she's not able to get around. Have you met her?

Patrick Tyler: No ma'am.

Vennie Britt: I wish you'd go talk with her sometime. I think you'd get a lot out her for your paper. Now where's she at? She's in that place.

Mildred Wilson: Round Barn Senior Citizens' Building over in Round Barn apartments.

Vennie Britt: Try to go see her. She can really give you the history, because she's very well-read. She's old, but she's well-read. She could give you some history worthwhile.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember they stopped having it?

Vennie Britt: What did you say honey?

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember when the Honey Tutt's was closed down, when they stopped?

Mildred Wilson: After they got the Annex over here then they started their own group over there, and Mrs. Matthews wasn't able to work with older people then. They had to go with the Annex over here.

Vennie Britt: Yes, we have it right over here. Have you all been there? That's where I go sometimes. I ain't been now here lately. We go for dinner. See I hadn't been, the reason I said I was going back, but I haven't. I thought about going back this week but I got.

Mildred Wilson: Mrs. Matthews, she started them off.

Vennie Britt: Yes, she sure did. She started us off.

Patrick Tyler: Are the black families now more ... What's the difference of the black family in today's time, than it was when you first came here? Or when you was growing up?

Vennie Britt: I don't think it is. Is it?

Mildred Wilson: Black people are not the same.

Vennie Britt: Well, it ain't the same.

Mildred Wilson: Tell them about the neighbors.

Vennie Britt: What about them?

Mildred Wilson: Everybody help take care each others children, and everybody was family. We knew everybody.

Vennie Britt: That's the reason why I want you to, 'cause I was tired see. I got up this morning trying to clean the house, and that kind of, I got tired.

Mildred Wilson: It was just like everyone was kin to each other because everybody loved each other more. It was more love than it is now, because even in my

neighborhood, I live in a white neighborhood, I don't know my neighbors and people don't care anymore about each other.

Vennie Britt: But yes we go help one another. Now a lady get sick, I run over there help and wash dishes for her, and just take care of their - that's the way we did. That's the way we did down home.

Mildred Wilson: They're both widows, so now they look after each other.

Vennie Britt: Yesterday I had some grapes. I picked some grapes and carried them over and give her some grapes. Sometimes she have something nice, she call me over.

Patrick Tyler: Now that's what I call a friend.

Mildred Wilson: They share everything.

Vennie Britt: She's in that house by herself, and I'm over here by myself, and five beds upstairs. But it's my home, all the children married and gone. I'm still at home. That's one of my little grandchildren, great-grandchildren.

Patrick Tyler: We don't have anymore questions, but we would like to thank you for your time.

Vennie Britt: You're welcome. I'm glad just for you to know it 'cause you're all young, and you know kind of what the world's been doing - some parts of what the world's been doing. Whatever it is. I think the Lord's been very good to me. I don't owe a penny on the house now or nothing. I'm hanging right in here now. See I couldn't get out of it, but it's mine now and it's paid for. Now that's the reason why I hang on. I really old enough to be here just by myself, but this is mine. And I'm hanging right in here because I ain't going to buy me another. I just stay home.