

TAPE TRANSCRIPT
Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project
CDS, Durham, NC

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Place: Hayti Heritage Center
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804 Old Fayetteville Street
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Description of Interviewee:

Circumstances of the Interview:

Barbara Lau (BL): Let me start again. Gotta put that stuff on the top again, I'm sorry. Today is November 15, 2003. This is Barbara Lau. I'm at the Hayti Heritage Center as part of the Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project with Annie Smith. Annie, I'm sorry to ask you to repeat this, but you said you were born in Durham.

Annie Smith (AS): Born in Durham.

BL: Grew up in Durham, and you lived within a 5-mile radius of where you grew up.

AS: () I was born.

BL: You were telling me a little bit about going to school.

AS: And I went to school, we walked to Union School. I had the first through the seventh grade at Union School. Right about the time I finished, I finished in May of 1938, and my daddy died in March of 1938. My mommy had to go to work, and I had a brother that was 10, a sister that was 6, a niece that was 5, and a baby brother that was 9 months. And I stayed there and kept those children for five years, until my baby brother was old enough to go to school. Mama said I could go to school. He was 5 years old, but I had to take him with me. I carried him with me to school, and I had the 8th grade at Pearisonton, where Dr. J. W. Davidson was the principal. The next year he was 6 years old, and he could go to the classroom and be taught, and I went to his side of () 9th grade. I believe () come out of the other side with a almost A average, but my clothes were so scarce, the children had laughed at me so much. I had one pair of shoes, one coat, and no hat, and things like that. Two or three dresses that I told Mom I'm not going back, and I did not go back. At 21 years old, I went to Woolworth's and got a job as a maid. I worked there for 40 years. Every day I was supposed to () God blessed me (). It was hard sometimes, but eventually () I got there on time 99% of the time. I've never had to call in sick, and I thank God for that.

BL: That's amazing, I can't say that for myself. Never have to call in sick. So when you were 21, was that your first job?

AS: That was my first paid job. I did that.

BL: At Woolworth's?

AS: At Woolworth's on Main Street. Store 222.

BL: Yeah, the one they just tore down. How did you feel about that?

AS: I felt badly about it, because it had been there 90 years when they closed it. And I felt like they should have worked it out, then stayed there to 10 years and made the 100 years.

BL: () tried to save the building?

AS: In that same spot.

BL: What was your job? What kind of things did you do every day? Mostly cleaning?

AS: I was the maid, but I had a hour for lunch every day, and I would take that hour and spend it where other people were working, and I watched them. And on days when they couldn't come to work, they would come and ask me to work in that person's place. And I was able to do it, because I had watched them, because I () watch them on my lunch hour. So one day the girl that worked the steam table didn't come to work, and they asked me, "Can you work the steam table?" I said, "I'll try." And I went over there, and I could fix the plates just as fast as those girls called them in. And they took that job away from that girl and gave it to me and gave her another job. And I worked that steam table I reckon 20 years. I loved to work that steam table, and they loved to hear me work it. I could fix them plates just as fast as they called them in. And if they didn't pick them up quick, I carried them to the customers, cause I didn't have room there for all that food to be sitting around. I trained a many girl, showed them how. I've seen girls come in that didn't even know how to wait on a customer. Give them a plate and glass of water, and go on off and leave them. And they had to call and say, "You didn't give me no silver." I worked with those girls to show them how to wait on people. So I stayed on that steam table so long, and finally we got into demonstration, when the demonstration gave out I was still there working and working and working, and after we got through all the commotion of sit-ins and opened the lunch counter back up, I still worked because the bakery was open and I made donuts all that time. I made donuts.

BL: Do you remember that day? The first day that some of the people came in and sat in?

AS: I remember the first day.

BL: Tell me about that day.

AS: That first day, they came in there and sat down so fast, every time a person got up, somebody sat in that seat, and they did not get up. We had to close the store. And every time we opened up, they would come back, and they would sit, and we'd have to close the store.

BL: They closed the whole store, not just the lunch counter, they closed the whole store?

AS: They ended up closing the whole store, because somebody would () bomb threats. And they'd have to vacate, we'd have to vacate the building (). A lot of stuff was going on.

BL: How did that make you feel when you watched those kids come in?

AS: Made me feel terrible, but you had to--I had a very good manager. He told me don't take no sides with nobody. Don't () comments, because you don't know what to tell them anyway. Just leave it, just stay silent. And that's what I did.

BL: Did you think they should have--I mean, you knew the manager. Do you think he would have integrated the store any other way?

AS: Well, I feel like, if they had went all and just done it, we would have saved money, and we wouldn't have lost money. Because they were ready to eat, and they were ready to pay. But the manager, see, couldn't do--it had to come from the office. And after they stayed closed so long, that office said open up, and they opened up. And we seated, served, and we didn't have no problem. We just served them. But I had waited on a lot of people that come in there. We had some black people. If you don't know who they are, you don't know what race they are. Because they look like they're white. And I have seen people come in there that I knew was in the black race. Come in and sit down, and nobody'd know who he was. They couldn't tell them to leave, cause they couldn't tell if they were black, because they didn't know.

BL: Because they were were passing.

AS: Uh-huh.

BL: And they were served, then?

AS: And they would be served. And so after they just, they'd have to let them eat, they just went on and eat, and it was all over with.

BL: How long did it go on, for them to sit in and sit in and sit in. How many days did they close the store? Do you remember?

AS: We ended up being closed about 3 or 4 months, I think, before we really opened up, best I can remember. It's probably in some of that writing, cause I had (). () a long, long time.

BL: Did you get involved in any of the other kinds of boycotts or protests after that?

AS: No, no, no, no. I stayed right there at Woolworth's. That was in what, the '50s, '60s?

BL: Yeah, it was in the '60s.

AS: In the '60s, that was in the '60s. And I stayed right there until 1985, when I retired.

BL: But you thought your manager was kind of sympathetic.

AS: He was. He was not a ().

BL: He wanted to serve everybody, he didn't want to--

AS: He wanted to, but he couldn't. You know, he didn't have a choice.

BL: What about some of the other people that you worked with? Did they make comments, some of the other white people?

AS: Some of them (), some of them was laid off because they didn't have the work for them to do. But I had made donuts before, and I knew how to do that, and we were going to be serving donuts, so they gave me that job of making donuts. But there were people waiting for me. They said, if that store closes, we want her. So I had jobs out there waiting.

BL: Other restaurants?

AS: They were waiting for me, because they wanted me. But I wouldn't go, because they told me I would have a job there. And so I stayed there. And then the last 8 years, I trained many girls. I trained many girls. But the last 8 years I worked there, if they had put anybody over for me, I told them, I said, "I will walk out of here, I will go to Kress', and I will take all of my customers with me." And they gave me the job of managing the lunch counter. And I managed that lunch counter for 8 years.

BL: When was that?

AS: That was in 1985, was my () year.

BL: So that's when you started managing the lunch counter?

AS: No, that's (). So I left that year, and then--

BL: Had there been a black person who had managed the lunch counter?

AS: I was the first black person to ever manage that Woolworth's lunch counter. The only one ever manage ().

BL: Do you think that the people who did the protesting, do you think they made that possible in a way? Before that, they probably wouldn't have thought about making black people managers.

AS: Well, I don't know. I really don't know. But I had (). I had a man to come in there, a really customer, that loved (). We ran the register, and we counted the change back to the customer. And that man loved to hear me count money back to him, he said he'd never nobody count money like I did. He brought a recorder in there and put it up under the counter, cause he

wanted to record it without me knowing about it. But if he had set it on the counter, I would have done it for him.

BL: Did you do it in a special way?

AS: Yes.

BL: Tell me how

AS: I would say, like, "Your bill was two dollars and 96 cents." I would say, "96, 97, 98, 99, 3, 4, 5, 10, 15, 20, thank you and have a good day."

BL: That's great. Kind of like an auctioneer, right? You got a little ().

AS: And I could say it so fast and so smooth, just like that (snaps fingers).

BL: And he liked it.

AS: And they just was amazed at how I said it.

BL: Did that lunch counter change once it was integrated? How was it different?

AS: Well, what happened was, that lunch counter, when I went there, they extended it, made it longer. Then they made it shorter. The kitchen was upstairs--they moved the kitchen downstairs. They moved the snack bar from the middle of the floor over to the side, and put in some booths back there. And made the counter shorter again. And then after they'd done all of that remodeling, they didn't stay open but 2 or 3 more years. I just felt like, they should have left it like it was, if they weren't going to stay open no longer than that. I reckon they stayed open 5 years after all that remodeling.

BL: Did you notice that people, and the way they acted, and the conversations they had, was that different when it was all white and then when it was integrated?

AS: I don't think so.

BL: No? Pretty much the same? Did the food change? Did you serve any different foods?

AS: No.

BL: All the same food?

AS: All the same food.

BL: What kind of food generally did you serve?

AS: We had a full-course meal. We had, like, turkey dinner every day, that was our normal dinner every day was turkey dinner. And we had country style steak, we had meat loaf, we had chicken pot pie, we had a vegetable plate, and we had 5 plates every day. And we had homemade pies, and homemade cakes. We really had good food.

BL: I know, I miss having a place like that here.

AS: It was really good food. And the service was good, the food was good. And eventually, they got where they would let us take tips. And I made good tips.

BL: When was that?

AS: I don't even remember what year.

BL: Was that before the sit-ins, or after?

AS: I think it started before the sit-ins, best I can remember.

BL: What kind of impact do you think the Civil Rights movement made on Durham?

AS: Well, it let people know that we're all human. That none of us (). When I knew what color I was, I was already this color, and I couldn't change it. If you knew what color you were, you were already, and you can't change it. And so, I don't have a problem with white people. In fact, I love them. Because, when my daddy died, and Mama had to go to work, she worked for white people. I was at home with my baby brother and the other children were gone to school, and if I was doing something that I didn't know how to do, I'd take it and go down to Mrs. Parrish's house, or Miss Penny's house, and tell them that I don't know what to do, tell me how to do this. And they would tell me, and I would go back home and do it. And if I was making me a dress and didn't know how to get it together, at 12 years old, they would show me what to do and tell me what to () to put in, when to put the sleeves in, and this, that and the other. And then when I got it finished, I would go back down there, and either wear it so she could see it, or carry it and let her see it. So white people are just like my family. And I would have people to tell me, I had a woman one time to tell me, she said, "Annie, I'm gonna die. And I know it, cause the doctor's already told me, and I have already lived longer than the doctor said I would live." And she said, "When I die, you come on over to my house, and spend time with my family, and when you come to funeral, sit with the family. Do not sit in the back of the church." And I said, "Okay." And one day at work, I got a call, and they told me that she had passed. When I got off, I went right on over there, and I took her husband out to himself, and I told him, I said, "Do not let nobody have her car until you have the chance to check it out good." Because she told me she had some important stuff in her trunk. And that's what I told him. I went to the funeral, I sat beside of him. And I've done others the same way. When I go to their funerals, I sat in the family. They don't want me to sit in the back of the church, they want me to sit with them. And I do that. And I have no problem with white people, none whatsoever. I don't have

no problem with Jews. People claim to hate Jews. Why? People claim to hate white people. Why? Why do you hate them? And they tell you about, well, what they done to my () parents way back yonder. Well, I won't back that. I won't back that. They treated us good, when Papa died in 1938, everybody that knowed us treated us good. They'd come, and they brought what they thought we needed. Why would I hate them? If it hadn't been for them, we could have starved. Or we could have died. We could have not had enough food, or the house could have caught on fire and burned everyone, all of us up. A lot of things could have happened.

BL: Do you ever wonder if maybe you would have had a better education, or you might have been able to have a different kind of life if there had been integration earlier, or if people--if there wasn't such a--the way that some people looked at other people as not as good as them? Do you think that would have made a difference for you?

AS: I really don't know. I really don't know. The thing that we really should have had was another place to put the school. When we finished the 7th grade, there was nowhere for us to go to school. Now Lowe's Grove had a high school, but we weren't allowed to go, cause we were black. We would have to go to town and stay with a relative if we had went up there. ()

BL: () Hillside.

AS: In order too go to Hillside. Because we was like 10 miles ().

BL: Because you were really--at that time, that part of the county was pretty rural, wasn't it?

AS: Oh, yes.

BL: Yeah, it was really out in the country.

AS: But I was the person that liked to read, and I continued to read and I've had a lot of people to not be able to accept the fact that I'm not educated, because I depend on God, and God makes me do things, and shows me things that I don't know how to do. And I can do things that are so smooth, they really believe, I've been asked many times, "Are you a nurse?" And I've been asked many times, "Were you ever a schoolteacher?"

BL: Well, it sounds like you continue to educate yourself, if you kept reading.

AS: There's education in reading that you won't get from nothing else. And you could get a--and I encourage children right now to read, read, read--the more you read, the better you'll be able to do your other work. Because if you read something and don't understand it, you can't work a problem. You can't work a problem.

BL: You're absolutely right. Where did you get your books when you were younger? Did people give them to you?

AS: Magazines.

BL: Were you able to go to the library?

AS: Oh, every time white people cleaned out their house, we got it. You didn't go to the library. We didn't know where the library was.

BL: It was far away, wasn't it?

AS: Any books, any newspapers, old magazines, old clothes, anything, they always come to our house. And if we didn't have anything else to read, Mama said, the Bible.

BL: Well, so, it sounds like what you are saying is that people kind of divided in a way, based on how much money they had sometimes, as much as they divided based on what race they were.

AS: No, at the time my Daddy died, I thought those white people that my Mama went to work for were rich. I thought they were rich, but you know what, they were poor. They had land, and they had a house. They didn't have no electricity, and we didn't have no electricity. They had a farm, but we didn't have a farm. And Mama, after she started to work for them, bought a linoleum rug and put it on our kitchen floor, and those people that she was working for did not have a linoleum rug on their floor. They bought one and put on their floor after Mama bought one and put it on her floor.

BL: She was ahead of them.

AS: And that let me know that they weren't rich. But I tell you what they were rich in. They believed in planting, cause they could own slaves, they believed in planting big gardens. They'd have a cornfield, they'd have a sweet potato patch, they'd have big white potatoes, and okra and squash and everything you could think of. In fact, the way they planted garden, they had garden year round. They planted some early, they had something else that came on in the middle of the summer, and then they had that fall garden, like them collards and turnips and things. But they had a garden year round.

BL: So they had fresh vegetables.

AS: Fresh (). And every time my Mama went there to work or wash or iron or () or whatever she went to do, she'd come home with--they killed hogs, it was a ham bone and some collards, or some sweet potatoes, or whatever. I know Mama to come home with so much stuff that she'd

get about halfway home, and stop and set it down beside of a tree, and the she would come on home with the rest of it. She would get home and tell us, "Go back up there to the big elm, and get the stuff setting beside it, and bring it home." I've known her to do that many times. So they planned a big garden, and their garden was our grocery store, because that's what we eat out of, was their garden. We didn't have no big garden. We had a little peas, it wasn't a little peas (). They planted peas, they'd plant 4 or 5 rows.

BL: What did you have then, 3 brothers and sisters?

AS: I had 3 brothers and I had 4--I had 3 brothers and 3 sisters.

BL: Oh, so there were 7 of you.

AS: There were 7 of us, and I'm right in the middle.

BL: And so what happened to some of the other brothers and sisters? Have they stayed in Durham as well, or have they moved on?

AS: At one time, all 6 of us was on the Durham County farm line, and the other one was on the Raleigh line. We stayed that close together.

BL: Are they still here, most ().

AS: My second sister died first, and then my oldest brother died next, and then my oldest sister died next, and then my baby sister died next.

BL: Well, now, so when you were young, did some of your brothers and sisters have the same ideas you had about civil rights, or did some of them have different ideas?

AS: We didn't talk about civil rights. We had never heard the word civil rights. We had never heard the word.

BL: So none of them got--what kind of work did they do? Did they get involved at all in the ()?

AS: () when we could find work to do. Because none of us was educated except the youngest ().

BL: Because there was no way to go to school.

AS: My brother that's 2 years younger than I am, he, I think after he got to be () tailor, went in the Army and come back, and got to be a tailor, I think he got his GED, and my youngest sister graduated from Hillside and my baby brother graduated from Hillside. But it was only 2 children that graduated from Hillside.

BL: But that wasn't a conversation in your family, to talk about civil rights or to talk about what was going on, even to criticize it, or--

AS: No, no, no.

BL: So when people started picketing, or they had the boycott of downtown, was it because your family lived far away?

AS: It didn't involve us, we were 10 miles out. And we didn't come into town. Mama came to town on Saturdays, and bought what she had wanted to buy. And we were at home.

BL: But by the time your were 21 when all that stuff was going on, some of your brothers and sisters must have been working and doing other things, right? But they weren't downtown, they were still kind of farther out.

AS: They weren't downtown. Because my 2 older sisters, didn't neither one of them work for years. After they got married, they didn't do nothing. And my oldest brother, when he got married, he worked at the flour mill. And he left there and went and worked for the gas company. And then my brother that's younger, 2 years younger than I am, he went in the Army--all 3 of my brothers went in the Army, and all 3 of them came back. And that was a blessing to Mama, in a way, because Mama got money from the Army, which was a big help to us.

BL: Did you get married?

AS: Yeah, I got married. I met my husband at Woolworth's, and () I was married 46 years, 4 months, 10 days () he died.

BL: I'm sorry.

AS: So I've been a widow now for 9 years. But I tell you one thing, God has blessed me beyond a reasonable doubt. I am happy as I can be. I don't know that I have ever been anywhere or done anything over a period of 9 years, that I found as much joy, peace, happiness, comfort, as I've had these 9 years. I had one son, whew. He's an angel. God blessed me to have one child. And he blessed me to have a good child. He's never told me, I'm not going to eat this, I'm not going to wear this, why don't you do this, and you don't know how to do this. He never said those things to me. He said, "You're the only mama I got, and I love you." We could be talking on the--he lives in Sterling, Virginia. We could be talking on the phone, and just hang up when we quit talking, and in a minute my phone will ring, and he () one or the other of us is going to ring in a minute. You know what, I forgot to say, "I love you."

BL: That's really nice. Did your husband work at Woolworth's? () there?

AS: He got a job working part time--the bus boy didn't come that day, and the manager went out on the street, and just saw him, and said, "Come here. Will you work for us 2 hours, and bus the dishes for us?" And he did, and that's how I met him. And my sister, she worked up there one time, and she met her husband there.

BL: At Woolworth's?

AS: Uh-huh. And they thought it was funny, cause they met their wives at the dime store. They got a dime store wife, cause they got them at the dime store.

BL: I'm sure they didn't them like a dime store woman.

AS: Oh, no. Life has been good. It has been good.

BL: How do you think Durham has changed since you were a little girl?

AS: It's changed a lot. Because I know houses that we thought were really nice houses, they had heaters in them, the had fireplaces in them, and we thought they were nice houses. But when they started building really nice houses, putting 2 bathrooms in a house, (), a heat system. Them folks got out of them houses and went to them new houses. And a lot of them old houses got torn down for more improvement. like streets and things. And that expressway come (), that's when they cleaned up Durham. They cleaned up Durham. They cut out some alleys and things that people living in.

BL: Really not-so-great places.

AS: Not such (). And now, they got nice houses.

BL: So you think Durham's gotten better ().

AS: Durham is much better.

BL: Do you think it's better for white people and black people.

AS: Uh-huh.

BL: Well, that's great. I know you said you wanted to get (), so I appreciate it very much.

AS: ()

END OF TAPE