

Cleveland State University
Praying Grounds Oral History Project
Harriette Bailey

Good afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to be part of Praying Grounds Oral History Project. Today is Thursday the 26th of April, 2007, and we're here in the sanctuary of the Gethsemane Baptist Church. We'd just like to get started by asking that you please state your name and the name of your church and your choir affiliation if that's appropriate.

Harriette Bailey. Gethsemane Baptist Church and I have no choir affiliation.

Okay. Now Mrs. Bailey we're focusing today on the musical legacy of the Wings Over Jordan. So I wonder do you have any connection at all with that group or its history?

Primarily through my aunt, Williette Thompson [sp].

Okay. And what was her connection with the choir?

She directed the choir and was director for, pianist for a while, the senior choir Gethsemane where Wings originated.

Okay. Now for Mrs. Thompson, I've heard the name Firmbanks. Is that her maiden name?

No, her maiden name was Pierce.

Okay. Williette Pierce.

Firmbanks [inaudible].

Okay, thank you. Now we can cross reference and know that all of those comments then refer to the same woman. So Mrs. Williette Pierce Firmbanks Thompson [sp] was the pianist and accompanist for Wings Over Jordan.

Yes.

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Okay. And was she also excuse me, a member of this church?

Yes.

Okay. And can you tell me please how long you've been a member of Gethsemane.

I've been a member of Gethsemane since 1949. How many years is that?

Almost 58 years. Okay. And you said you have no choir affiliation.

No, no choir. I don't sing.

Okay. Then I won't ask you to sing.

I wish I could.

All right. Now, I'd like to talk for a little while about your early life. Would you please share with us your parents' names?

My mother was Alberta Pierce Bailey Gamble.

And your father's name please?

Thomas George Bailey.

Okay. Were they native Clevelanders?

No.

Okay. But where were they born?

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Aniston, Alabama.

Both from the same community?

Yes.

Okay.

Actually outside of Aniston, Hopson City, Alabama, but our mail was Aniston.

Aniston and Hopson?

Hopson City was an all black town outside of Aniston.

Okay. Now can you tell us a little about the history then of Hopson City? You know when that was formed? And how it came to be incorporated as an all black town?

Um, very little on the history. I know it was incorporated as a black town. My father was a mayor for a while. My grandfather was over the water department of that city. And I had other relatives. It was just about, I guess the community was about maybe 200 - 250, maybe more.

This is interesting. Those all black towns. We hear a lot about Eatonville in Florida because that's where Zora Neale Hurston was from. Can't say that I've heard a lot thus far about Hopson City but it's worth looking into certainly. Thank you for sharing that with us. And you said your father was mayor for a while. Okay. Now how large is that community? Or was it at the time when you were?

I imagine about roughly about 250 or 300, between 250 and 300 residents.

Okay so it's a town.

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Harriette Bailey

Um-hmm.

And not a big city.

No.

Okay. And how long did you live in Hopson City?

I lived in Hopson City from, until 1949 when I graduated from college then I came to Cleveland.

Okay, so you attended the public schools of that community?

Yes.

Okay. What are the names of your schools there? Elementary?

Elementary was Calhoun [sp] County Training School.

And the name again please?

Calhoun [sp].

Calhoun [sp] okay.

Um-hmm.

Okay. And uh.

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High school I went to private boarding school. Presbyterian boarding school; Margaret Barber Seminary. It closed and then I went to [inaudible] Institute in Tuscaloosa. Both of those were Presbyterian schools.

And you said when you graduated from Stillman you came to Cleveland?

When I graduated from Clark in Atlanta I came to Cleveland. When I graduated college I came to Cleveland.

Oh, I'm sorry. Stillman was the secondary school.

It was a boarding school.

Okay.

But it was a high school.

All right. And then you went to Spellman?

Clark College.

Clark. Atlanta.

Atlanta.

Okay. And came to Cleveland in what year please?

1949.

Okay, thank you. That's quite an educational journey. I just wanted to make sure I had all the stops along the way. And what was the reason for coming to Cleveland?

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My aunts. I had two aunts here. My older aunt was here and then her sister which was Williette was here. And I came here on vacation and stayed.

Okay. And did you work in the City of Cleveland?

I worked for the Board of Education as clerk first and then I taught later.

Okay. So it's the Cleveland Board of Education? All right. And you said you taught in the Cleveland Schools?

Yes.

Okay, and what grade please?

Elementary. I had fourth, fifth primarily and I had one third grade class, but mostly fourth grade and fifth grade.

Was it in different schools? Or the same?

Yes, um-hmm.

Okay. Do you remember some of the schools you taught?

I started at Clark, not at Charles Lake I think was one elementary schools. And then I was in Career Ed. and I had had several schools then.

Okay.

East and west elementary; all elementary. John Burroughs. I ended up at Paul Dunbar on the west side. And my last school was Gorden Elementary [?] on the west side.

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Okay. And did you retire from the school board?

Yes.

Okay. How long ago was that?

I'd retired in 1985.

All right, thank you. Again you've been actively involved in education. I commented on the interesting journey at getting finally from Clark, Atlanta, and then to Cleveland, Ohio, but then lots of experience in the schools here. Do you still see yourself as an educator or are you definitely retired from that line of work?

Definitely retired.

But you're here today to talk about some important lessons that the world learned thanks to the activities of Wings Over Jordan. Usually it's the spirituals that people will associate with that choir. Is it correct for us to do that or were there other styles of music that they were known for performing as well?

I would say primarily spirituals that I know of.

Um-hm. Now you said that Mrs. Firmbanks Thompson was your aunt.

Yes.

Was the home filled with music too or was that just work?

Well, my grandmother loved music. My mother loved music and when we grew up, when I grew up, remember my aunt was in Cleveland. I mean mostly but she came home. You know

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they came home during the summertime. I don't remember growing up with her there in Hopson City. She was in Cleveland by the time. I mean when I rememory.

Well, I think that perhaps I misunderstood something you said you said earlier but you said you came to Cleveland because you had relatives here after college.

After college.

Oh but you weren't living in the same home.

Oh, no.

With Mrs. Firmbanks Tho-. Okay, but just had relatives.

I had another aunt here.

Oh.

I used to visit in the summertime, but I always went back home.

Okay.

To Aniston.

All right. All right. I would like to ask also, well I know we did all of the schooling, but a little bit more about your early life in Alabama. Were you the only child?

Yes.

Oh, okay. And you already told us about school, but I wonder also whether the family was active in the church in Alabama?

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Yes.

And what church was that please?

The Old Baptist Church.

All right. And was it also in Hopson City.

Hopson City.

Okay. Were you Baptist throughout your life?

All my life.

Okay. I'm wondering also about your connections to Gethsemane Baptist Church here in Cleveland. Did you join when you came immediately in 1949?

Probably, I came about May or June. I probably joined about four or five months later in the fall of the year I remember.

Okay. And were your other family members already active in the church here?

My aunt was. And her son Luther was. My older aunt belonged to Triedstone [sp] Baptist Church. So she was not at Gethsemane, but I used to go with her sometimes to Triedstone [sp]. But I joined Gethsemane.

In talking with a number of people who are members of the Alumni and Friends group for Wings Over Jordan, I guess they talk about the hey day for the Wings Over Jordan group that had the radio broadcast from the late 1930s through the 1940s, and that's just before you come to

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Cleveland. But I wonder even as a college student, did you realize how famous Wings Over Jordan were and that you had a relative with a direct connection to the choir?

Yes.

You did?

I did because they came to -- my senior year at Stillman they came, the choir came to Tuscaloosa. But prior to that we heard it on the radio even before they came to Alabama. You could hear it on Sunday mornings. And yeah, we always heard it.

So this is a national broadcast.

Yes.

North and south.

Yes.

Throughout the United States. Okay. And at that time were you telling all your friends? That you had a relative in the choir?

I suppose I think so. I think I probably did.

Okay. Now you said when the choir came to your high school, came to Stillman, what was that like?

They came to Tuscaloosa's auditorium they have at the school at Stillman.

Oh, okay.

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But they did not come on the campus of Stillman.

All right.

They came to the auditorium in Tuscaloosa I think it was.

Okay was that University of Alabama or? At Tuscaloosa? Or just a public?

I think it was probably public auditorium probably.

Okay. All right. Were they well received in Alabama at that time?

I think so.

Okay. And I know that the Wings Over Jordan group made a number of recordings. Do you have any of those in your collection?

I don't. My cousin has. Luther has them. The ones that my aunt had. He has those I think.

All right so there's a family archive of sorts of those?

Uh, yeah I guess you could call it that.

Okay. Did Mrs. Firmbanks Thompson leave a lot of papers or manuscripts of music?

Not that I'm, not that I'm aware of. Luther, her son, probably has most of the things that she had. I know she had a lot of music and he probably has those still.

Okay. Now Ms. Bailey in your teaching in the Cleveland schools, were you ever able to integrate any of the music into the classroom activities or were you focused more on something else?

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More on something else.

Okay.

I'm not a musician.

Oh, just curious. But when you came in the late 1940s although that's just after the broadcast period, was the choir still popular with audiences in Cleveland or in other places?

Yes, even after they did the regional choir and I guess there was a travelling choir, but I do remember the church choir, the senior choir was still popular and they went to different churches you know. Rotated like sometimes the church would come to Gethsemane, I think probably for choir's day and they would go to another church. But I don't know if it was, it was not still the Wing's choir, but it was Gethsemane's senior choir.

Um-hm. But they continued to perform the spirituals?

Yes.

And the other arranged songs by Mrs. Firmbanks Thompson?

Yeah, they did gospel too I think at that time.

How long was she active in music ministry here at Gethsemane?

I would say, let's see I came in 40 and she retired probably in the 60s. I would say 35 or 40 years. I'm not sure of that. Date's elude me. But I know she was here when I came to [inaudible] choir. I used to come in the summertime and I think she played for the choir then so that had to be in the early 40s and I think she died in about 60 or 70. I'm not sure.

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Okay. Ms. Bailey, may I ask your date of birth?

Twelve eight, twenty-eight.

December 8, 1928. Thank you very much. Now I know you told us that you're not a singer.

No. Nope.

So I suppose if I ask you to sing something you're not gonna do it.

No, I can't sing.

Oh, okay. But I wonder with all that music in your life through your family and your church activities, do you have a favorite song either spiritual or gospel or hymn?

I have a favorite hymn.

And which one is that please?

Great is our Faithfulness.

Now why is that a favorite?

I don't know. The words. The music.

Could you recite for us the words of one of the verses since you're not gonna sing it for me. Or just a line or two if you prefer.

All I have needed thy hands have provided. I think that's what sticks out the mostly with me.

Great is our faithfulness.

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Okay. Thank you. Now of the various styles of music, since that hymn is your favorite of the spirituals, hymns, and gospels which style would be performed today most frequently at Gethsemane?

Gospel, I would say.

Now would this be the traditional gospel of perhaps the Dorsey and James Cleveland era's through the 1960s, or is this a more contemporary style?

I would say more contemporary. Not the James Cleveland predominantly, but more contemporarily I would say.

And that's very popular with the congregants here?

Yes.

All right. Do you have different choirs at Gethsemane?

Yes we have Celestial Choir and we have the Echo's of Joy and then we have the combined choirs.

Now what's the difference? What style of music would the Celestial Choir perform?

I guess the Celestial does more of the hymns and the traditional gospel, and the Echo's of Joy would be more of the upbeat I guess.

Okay. Is there a generational difference there?

Probably generational.

Okay so the more senior members would likely be in the Celestial Choir?

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Celestial, um-hmm.

Okay and then the Echo's of Joy who are a younger adult choir.

Yes.

Okay. Is there a children's choir here?

Not now. We did have one at one time, but we don't have one now.

Okay. And you said from time to time they combine the choirs?

On the fourth Sunday I think, first and fourth Sunday I think they combine choirs.

Okay.

And the second is Echo's Joy. The third Sunday is the Celestial Choir and the fourth Sunday is combined choir.

Okay. And who is your Minister of Music here?

Deborah Jones.

Deborah. And she would direct both choirs?

She directs, I guess she directs the Echo's. No she directs I guess Glen Brackens directs the Celestial Choir and I guess Deborah fills in for whoever's not there, but she's the Minister of Music so I guess her job is to help assist with all of the choirs.

Now it's my understanding that your pastor here at Gethsemane is also a musician.

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Yes.

Okay, so I'm correct in that understand. What is his name again please?

Stephen D. I think the "D" stands for Dethless [sp] Sullivan.

I seem to recall that he played the organ and perhaps sang a solo the last time I was here during a worship service.

Oh, he probably did.

Probably.

Sang I know. I don't know about the organ, but he did sing.

Okay, well maybe I'm not remembering correctly.

He has been known to play the organ from time to time.

Okay. All right.

In the interest of musicians I should say.

Okay, multi-talented then. So there's quite a bit of music making then here at the church. Now you said that Glen Brackens directs one of the choirs.

He directs the Celestial Choir.

Now is my understanding that he is also the musician for The Wings Over Jordan Celebration Choir.

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He is.

Okay. Now which came first? Glen and the Celebration Choir? Or Glen as a member of the staff of musicians here at the church?

Glen as a member of the staff of musicians here at church.

So he's had a long affiliation with this church.

Um-hmm. With Gethsemane. His aunt, Mrs. Ford, I mean his grandmother Mrs. Ford was one of the original Wings.

Okay. Ms. Bailey as someone who had a family relationship with a member of the Wings Over Jordan, are you satisfied that enough is being done to preserve that musical legacy of Wings?

Am I satisfied that enough is being done?

Or is that a fair question? I can rephrase it if you don't like the question.

I prefer hymns and spirituals, so I would say that I would like to see more hymns and spirituals done to preserve, or more spirituals done.

And as an educator, do you think that's something that music teachers in school should be involved in or is it more of a responsibility of churches to keep that legacy going?

Churches I would say. Unfortunately Cleveland public schools have kinda downsized the music departments in all of the schools so I guess that would be quite a bit to ask for most of the music teachers, even before I retired, had several schools so they really did not have a lot of times I think to devote to the music per se anyway. But there are a lot of like Glen does a job, great job

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with his choir so they do a lot of spirituals and Mister, I can't think of his name over at Observation School, Cleveland Music School of the Arts.

Oh, Dr. Woods. Dr. Bill Woods.

He does a lot of with that too. So, I think quite a lot is being done but not as much as I would like to see. [Inaudible] occasionally the college choirs that come in they do a great job with the spirituals.

All right. Again, you said you'd like to see more done in the preservation area. Now for the non singers among us, is there a role that we can play in addition to having those young people at the school of the arts actually make the music, is there something that people who are not musically inclined can do to preserve that musical legacy?

I would say that if we would support the groups like The Celebration Chorus, there's another group that's Ecumenical Disciples they do a lot of spirituals. And maybe just foster appreciation for it in our churches, in our church groups, [inaudible] church choirs. Maybe encourage them for do more. But I guess with the younger generation they really do not know. Don't have much spiritual [inaudible] many spirituals because they've grown up on a different kind of music I think than we did. Whereas when we were growing up we'd do about that because we heard Wings and all. But not the music trend now is away from that I think.

Are you excited about the 70th Anniversary? Coming up?

Yeah, I really am.

Okay.

I think it's one way to keep, to perpetuate the spirituals and keep it going. At least keep it before us and maybe then it will catch on you know and they will go from there. But yeah, I am excited about it um-hmm.

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You know there is a -- I'm sure you know there's a wonderful collection of Wing's material at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill where Sam Barber, who wrote his dissertation on Wings Over Jordan. I think he collected everything he could get his hands on related to this choir and anybody who knew any of the choir members and I just wondered are you part of that collection? Were you interviewed? For that thesis?

No, my aunt was though.

Oh, she was? Okay. When did Mrs. Firmbanks Thompson pass?

1993 I think it was.

So it's relatively recently. Okay. And I just wanted to mention while the tape is rolling that there is a finding aid for the University of North Carolina's collection. We just google Wing's Over Jordan and Sam Barber and it usually comes up at the top of the list. So it just seems to me that this one way, the non singers among us can support you know by gathering that material and then making it available to the next generation perhaps through the library. I'll do my part. I'm not a singer either. But before we conclude our interview today I just wanted to thank you again.

Sure.

For sharing with us and for keeping before us the name of Mrs. Williatte Pierce Firmbanks Thompson [sp] so that we'll spell it correctly and know that she was the one helped arrange so much of that music along with Worth Kramer and then to teach it to those members of the original Wings Over Jordan choir and then to share that music through them with the world. Before we finish is there anything else that you would like to add?

No, not at this time.

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Okay. But thank you very much. Please call us if you think of anything else.

Certainly.

All right.

Are we through?