

Mary Spencer

Mary: I have a Biblical name. Mary and Elizabeth.

Interviewer: You know the first question anyway. When and where were you born.

Mary: I was born in Waterloo, Iowa. I was born at home on a Sunday, May 27, 1934.

Interviewer: 1934. So you are a native of Waterloo?

Mary: Native of Waterloo.

Interviewer: Now I know you have an extensive photo collection about your family coming to Waterloo. Now I say coming to Waterloo, about some of the experiences and things like that. You have a very, very impressive photo collection covering your mother's side.

Mary: Mama's side. Daddy's side we didn't get.

Interviewer: Ok. So you didn't get much of your father. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about what part of the country did she come from as they begin to make their move from Mount Pleasant and then to Waterloo.

Mary: The family that I first knew about was from Bellefontaine, Ohio. They tell about, that particular generation came to Iowa in a covered wagon. So that's how far back whenever people were coming West by covered wagon. They were probably a part of that. She mentioned in her writings that one of the stops was in Indiana. When you are traveling by covered wagon you don't go too far, too fast. In Indiana and then they stopped in Illinois someplace.

Interviewer: About what time was, you said Bellefont, Ohio.

Mary: Bellefontaine.

Interviewer: Bellefontaine, excuse me. Bellefontaine, Ohio. About what time period, approximately was this.

Mary: Well, I had this sheet of paper that had all these lists of people and people wherever. My grandmother was born in Bellefontaine.

Interviewer: Grandma. Ok.

Mary: My mother's mother.

Interviewer: This had to be mid 1800s.

Mary: Yes. Late 1800s.

Interviewer: Excuse me late 1800s.

Mary: Well, maybe 1860s. Yeah somewhere in there.

Interviewer: Ok. Just roughly 1860s. Ok. Belfont, Ohio.

Mary: Bellefontaine.

Interviewer: Bellefontaine, ok, excuse me.

Mary: I'm gonna do it to you again.

Interviewer: Now continue. Your covered wagon. You're traveling at this point.

Mary: And, eh, a, went as far west as Nebraska. Then quite like that, moved back into Iowa, into Mount Pleasant. I'm going to under the assumption that there were other people of color there at the time. I can recall the house that they lived in. That was the homestead in east Madison in Mount Pleasant. I never met my grandmother because she passed in 1912. Yeah, cause mom had just graduated from college and was venturing out. In fact was teaching in Buxton, Iowa. That's where she met daddy. Daddy was working in the coal mines there.

Interviewer: Lets talk more about Mount Pleasant. This is good. Because you're talking about the arrival of the black family to Mount Pleasant. Have come to Mount Pleasant, Iowa. Small, white, for the most part. What, I know you have a photograph, a very good photograph of your grandparents, your mother.

Mary: Yep. Our grandparents and my aunts.

Interviewer: You aunts? What were their names? There are three or four individuals.

Mary: There were four girls, like me. And a man, a boy.

Interviewer: What are their names? Identify the people in that photograph.

Mary: There was Aunt Nora. Nora Maybell Harris, who taught. Then my mother Grace Beatrice Harris. She graduated from Iowa Wesleyan too. She also went to Buxton, Iowa to teach where Aunt Nora had been teaching. Then there was Aunt Viola. She did not take the college route I guess. Then Uncle Willy. How many did I get? Who'd I miss?

Interviewer: I think you got them all. All four.

Mary: Ok.

Interviewer: Then there is your mother. She is seated between your mother and your father. Your grandmother and grandfather, I'm sorry.

Mary: Yeah

Interviewer: Is that correct?

Mary: In the picture?

Interviewer: yeah.

Mary: Yeah. She's the little one. She's the baby. She be the baby.

Interviewer: Do you recall any stories of your mother talking about the type of work your dad did in Mount Pleasant. Excuse me.

Mary: My father wasn't in Mount Pleasant. My grandfather.

Interviewer: Oh sorry, I'm getting them confused. Let's start this over. Start the question over.

Mary: Actually, grandpa was among jack of all trades. He did a whole lot of things. He was a sign painter. In fact there was a sign that was on what is known as a mill here in Waterloo that he had painted way back when. He was also a wild game hunter. He would accompany some of the Caucasian men, they would hire him to come and cook and help them out when they went on their hunting jaunts. So that gave him an opportunity to do some traveling. Traveling in particular maybe farther west. I'm not sure, I can't remember just how far west mom said he went. But I think he we as far as up into the Dakotas.

Interviewer: Yeah. Ok

Mary: Yeah that's quite a walk.

Interviewer: Yeah was moving around. What about your grandmother? What was she doin' in Mount Pleasant.

Mary: She was a homemaker.

Interviewer: She was a homemaker, busy tendin' to the children

Mary: Taking care of the children, going to church, raising the family and keeping things together. That's what women did in those days.

Interviewer: Now, let's talk about your mother because she pretty much grew up in

Mount Pleasant.

Mary: Yes. Yes, she did.

Interviewer: Do you recall he talking about any stories about Mount Pleasant?

Mary: There apparently were not a lot of African Americans, blacks, colored people in Mount Pleasant, because I remember one of the tales mother told was that when she went to kindergarten, or first grade, because they didn't have kindergarten that she had to sit in any area that was better known as nigger row. And said she just broke into tears and was almost next to hysterical. And when she went home and told her mother. Grandmother went back and raised some cane and said she is not to sit there.

Interviewer: This is interesting.

Mary: Women and the power over the women in our family.

Interviewer: This says a lot about your grandmother, taking your mother's education seriously.

Mary: Oh, that was in the family. Education was a necessity, was required. I think Uncle Willy was the only one that did not go beyond, if he managed to get through high school. He kinda liked to wander. And in those days they went from place to place, I don't know if they were seeking a fortune or adventure or what. All of them got at least, other than Uncle Willy, got a high school education. And that was saying something in those days.

Interviewer: That's impressive. A high school education very impressive.

Mary: And then when mom and Aunt Nora both went on to college and graduated from there. And then Aunt Nora went on to Buxton, Iowa, which is where momma met daddy. And she did stay there, Aunt Nora didn't stay there long. But mom went behind her and went down there too. And she stayed there awhile, until the mines petered out.

Interviewer: Don't get ahead of me now. Don't get ahead of me. I want to talk about that. But let's, tell me a little more about Mount Pleasant, about your mother, she's growing up, she has this experience as a first grader, she's supposed to sit in Nigger row. This is, this could make or break a child, make or break a child's confidence. It can do a lot of damage psychologically to a person, especially at that age. But still your mother would overcome this.

Mary: Oh yes, and I think it would have to do with the strength of her mother.

Interviewer: Tell us how she would go on and get the college degree at Mount Pleasant.

Mary: When she finished high school in Mount Pleasant. Both she and her sister attended Iowa Wesleyan and graduated from there. And got their teaching degree. Most black

women in those days, that was the only type occupation that was reasonably open and available to them. That they could feel like they were doing something worthwhile with the education they received.

Interviewer: This is impressive, I mean this is 19...

Mary: Momma graduated in 1912.

Interviewer: 1912. And she was a teacher.

Mary: She was a teacher.

Interviewer: She went to Iowa Wesleyan

Mary: Iowa Wesleyan.

Interviewer: This is good.

Mary: Yes, it is. Well, both of them went to Iowa Wesleyan and mom did take a course or two in graduate studies in Chicago. Of course, Nora went on and went to, like I said, Atlantic City, where she taught for over forty some years.

Interviewer: So you come from a family of educators.

Mary: Yes. They felt that education was the key out of being looked down on as a Negro, North Negroes, or black people were not educated and do they even think that they have the aspiration to want to be that way. Or family has always had that, generations back.

Interviewer: I know that your mother has taught at a number of schools during her time as an educator. Let's talk about her teaching experiences as far as Buxton, her going to Buxton and teaching there.

Mary: It's interesting. I have some pictures there of her with her class. And, the children would, she said a lot of times they were, the children she would have were the very first beginning, which would be first grade and some of them were like, 8, 9, 10. Because the parents were reluctant to send them to school because they needed them to be working. Even the little things they could do to help. Some of the pictures, I remember lookin' and thinkin' momma looks awful little she the only one in the kindergarten that look kindergarten age. The other's looked like they were third, fourth, and fifth graders. But the family was focused on education. You couldn't get anyplace without it.

Interviewer: This is interesting, because here she goes, you mother she's teaching at a school in Buxton, she's teaching first grade, how long would she be there?

Mary: I think momma was only there for a couple of years. Being a mining town, once the mines petered out people moved on.

Interviewer: Ok. Now do you remember, cause I know that black folks do not like to talk about the past that much, its very tough. But do you remember any stories of her talking about her teaching experience in Buxton, dealing with the students or did you ask her anything or did she volunteer any information or reflect?

Mary: Well she was the same type of teacher that she was a mother, I doubt she had any problems. Very strict. She was raised in an atmosphere where that was expected of her and she expected that of her children. I don't know the attitude of a lot of the black students then, African-American. Colored. I just trying to be politically correct. It was important that they get an education so that they can advance. No matter where they came from. Your not going anyplace unless you get an education. That's the kind of thing that she carried down. And I have carried down the tradition. You know, it's like you graduate from high school now, now, at one time that was good. Now you need to get a college degree and beyond.

Interviewer: I am quite sure that she had to be an inspirational teacher as far as being able to come in and bring in her knowledge and stuff like that. Let's talk about Buxton and what you know about Buxton 'cause we know that it is a very unique town when we're looking at the history of Iowa when we're talking about black folks. Do you recall her talking about any stories about maybe the church she went to? I know that had an AME church.

Mary: They had an AME church and a Baptist church.

Interviewer: Can you tell us anything about that, what you may know or not.

Mary: I guess just the idea that there were only like two different people there. There were the black people and they lived in a certain area. And the white people that were the Sweds lived in a white area they called, Swed Town. And, then I guess there was a down town area, because Daddy ran the YMCA there.

Interviewer: So you have the black population.

Mary: In Buxton.

Interviewer: Then you have the white population.

Mary: In Swed Town.

Interviewer: So how did they interact? Did they interact?

Mary: Oh probably when they can to town to the grocery stores or to the places they had where you can purchase things. And as far as I can generally remember, even the YMCA there was African-American.

Interviewer: Your dad worked there. This is where they would meet at least. This is where they would meet, would be in Buxton.

Mary: If it wasn't in church it would be at the Y.

Interviewer: So they met at the Y there. So let's talk about, do you know why your dad left Buxton.

Mary: The mines petered out. And he left from there. Where did Daddy go? I think he went first to Cedar Rapids and didn't find any thing. And he had some other friends that had moved from Waterloo from Buxton. And so then he moved up to Waterloo and that's where he stayed.

Interviewer: This is good. What would he do in Waterloo.

Mary: His first job was in a hotel. And whatever they did that black people could do in a hotel. Hotel Ellis. Which is no longer downtown, downtown Waterloo. He went to work at Ras. And that's where he retired from where he retired.

Interviewer: So now here he is. And he's made it to Waterloo. Now let's talk about how your mother got to Waterloo. She was obviously in Buxton.

Mary: Well, she and daddy were courting and then she left and she and her sister went to Saint Paul and opened a candy store and of course it didn't profit too much. And, daddy kept writing her and courting her and she finally yielded and gave in. And it took a while too, they were married in 1925.

Interviewer: In Waterloo?

Mary: 21 Flower Street. She was married in the house in which she was living. Next door was Annie Oxford's first pastor, Arronie Browles, and he performed the ceremony. Small knit community but very closely knit because there weren't that many colored people in those days.

Interviewer: Now, what would your mother do there?

Mary: Oh, between the time she married and they came here.

Interviewer: 1925 they would get married. Your father at this time?

Mary: He was at Ras by then.

Interviewer: Ok he was at Ras packing. What was she doing in Waterloo?

Mary: Housewife. That was traditional in those days. You got married and you were a housewife. If you had to work outside of the house then you usually went a Black woman

would have to go clean a white woman's house. And she wasn't having none of that, not with her education.

Interviewer: Housewife. Ok. So you would come shortly, 1934.

Mary: Yeah, in between. I would have a brother that was born in 1927.

Interviewer: Then you were born

Mary: seven years later

Interviewer: Is this Melvin Potter.

Mary: Yes. George Melvin Potter.

Interviewer: Now you're here in Waterloo, what is your mother doing in a way of any social organizations, is she doing anything?

Mary: Oh, yes. Active in the church. They also formed a women's group, a social improvement club. There may be a picture of that in the photos we have.

Interviewer: Yes. We got it.

Mary: Because she felt like, you know, that women should get together and keep themselves intellectually alert. And they would do things that are not just social but then would keep, I don't know the word, cognitively aware of what's going on around them.

Interviewer: Oh yes this is good.

Mary: I can remember them as a little girl having to have to help serve. Which was a good thing, it's training because it taught you how to be social and how to do things in an orderly fashion. And even Claudia will recall the club was still in place when my kids were little.

Interviewer: Claudia is?

Mary: My little girl, my baby girl.

Interviewer: And the girls would all help with serving the tea and picking up and cleaning up around and making sure. So it was a good experience for them it gave them a good background in how to be social.

Interviewer: This social organization that your mother is a part of, did she start this organization?

Mary: She and a couple of other ladies.

Interviewer: She and a couple of other ladies. This is very progressive for the time period.

Mary: One of the things they did was that they eventually got some money and gave scholarships for those students that wanted to go on to college. And if they didn't have the money to give to them, they at least encouraged them to go on and get an education and go on through.

Interviewer: So she is still begins to advocate her cause.

Mary: She's still teachin'

Interviewer: Yeah. Just in a different capacity.

Mary: There was a young family down the street, the Lapoles. A son, who was a round Melvin's age. And he was not the sharpest blade on the strap. Not that he was dumb or anything he just needed a lot of help with his homework and schoolwork. And momma would help him. And they never even considered the fact that she's black or colored. She would have that demeanor, that way that she carried herself. They knew that she knew. So they would just. They were happy that she would come in and be willing to just come and help them. And I can remember as a little kid him coming over and being tutored. She encouraged, I don't know whether you know him, Dr. Percy Harris?

Interviewer: Ah, ok, yeah.

Mary: Yeah. She took him under her wing, just encouraged him to go to school and get your college education and he went beyond that. Yes, she was quite a lady.

Interviewer: Now, being active doing the ladies' organization she was a part of, now I know you also mentioned her being a part of the church. I know that you have a nice photograph in your collection of her standing with the Pastor and a group of members from the church.

Mary: Oh, yes and she's holding a baby. The baby's Melvin so that'd be 1927.

Interviewer: Alright. Do you recall anything, how she was involved with the church, what she was doing for the church?

Mary: Not really. Because at that time, between Melvin and me she'd had some problems delivering so she was not able to be as active as she would've liked to been with the church.

Interviewer: Alright, lets talk about, let's go to your father. He was working hard at Ras, but he also was able to be a part of the Mason's.

Mary: He never made the shrine, he didn't go that level. But he was a Mason. Daddy was

also a Stuart at the church.

Interviewer: Ok. He was a stuart at the church.

Mary: And his little daughter would follow him everywhere. And that's how I think I got so involved in the church. 'Cause I can remember where we would go to church from where we lived on Fowler Street, the railroad tracks was a diagonal straight over to Mobile and then up to church. And so, I can remember many of morning walking with daddy to church and going to Sunday school and down the tracks. I can also recall we had coal furnaces in those days and he would take a bucket or something and we'd walk the tracks again and where the engine would drop coal and where they shovel coal in there to make fire to make the engine go and a lot of the coal would fall on the ground. And that's the way people would supply their coal supply.

Interviewer: Pick it up and use it naturally, why not.

Mary: It's there. What else are you going to do with it. I can use it.

Interviewer: Do you recall anything as far as his work as a Mason. I know that we have a photograph just to identify some of the people at the event. Either with the ceremony, there was a ceremony taking place.

Mary: Oh yeah. He was given his fifty year pen.

Interviewer: Who are the people in the photography with your father, there is a ceremony taking place, your father is receiving an award or some kind of recognition.

Mary: Yep, fifty year pen. Being in the Mason for fifty years. William Coney, Nathaniel Taylor, Daddy, Bishop Burt, Russel Burt, Jacob Brown, and I can't think of that man's name. When it comes back to me I'm going to write it on the back of the paper. I did pretty good remembering.

Interviewer: And so both of your parents very active doing stuff. They are doing very progressive. Because being affiliated with this organization, the Masons, this is very prominent, prestigious, very respectful organization. And then your mother goes along and creates a local organization again that becomes very progressive and goes on and influences Dr. Percy Harris. I mean, this guy is a phenomenon in the community in his prime. Let's talk a little bit about yourself and how your mother inspired you. Because we know that you, yourself, are an educator. You, yourself, are a teacher. Where did you go to school at.

Mary: I was born on Fowler street. There was a school named McKinnley, named after the president. Which was like one block over. It didn't last long. From there I went on to Francis Grout, the grade school there. And the junior high was down town where the city hall is now. From there I went to East High. And graduated in 1952 and got married the day after I graduate. The stipulation from my mother was, "Yeah, ok you can get married

but you gotta go to school.”

Interviewer: What were some of the things that you did in East High.

Mary: Oh, I didn't bring the annual, I shouldn't brought the annual.

Interviewer: Just tell me a couple things.

Mary: I was in the band and the chorus, I couldn't sing a lick. Oh what else did I do.

Interviewer: Let's talk about East High. I know that we have a picture of you and your sophomore class.

Mary: Have you seen my album with my senior picture?

Interviewer: I thought you picture of you sophomore class was interesting.

Mary: That was the way that they gathered the information about who was there what class they were with. And the year that you graduated you were with individual photos and your name and descript behind you and what you had accomplished in high school.

Interviewer: Can you remember, as a sophomore, in what way you were participating in ways of extra curricular activities?

Mary: Not really, I'm sure I was other than Girl's Chorus, can't sing a lick.

Interviewer: You were in girl's chorus and can't sing a lick.

Mary: I was in band, I played the clarinet, a little better at that.

Interviewer: Tell me about, we got this senior picture, very good looking woman here. You graduated from East in 1952, and then it would not stop then, of course your education. What would happen at that point?

Mary: When you were under 21 then you had to have permission from your parents to get married. My momma only gave permission based on the fact I would go to college immediately. So that fall I came to all the places best known as Iowa State's teachers college. Whose grounds we sit now.

Interviewer: She wasn't going to have in any other way obviously.

Mary: That's right. No nonsense, you will get an education. I'm sure she was even more excited when she looked down and said she finally got there.

Interviewer: So you are at Iowa State's Teacher college. You would go on to graduate?

Mary: I didn't get to go very long because Jolene came along. The beginning of the children, we had the five of them in seven years. Jolene was born in, lets see, I graduated in 52 she was born in '53, '54, Francine's '56, Frankie is ' 59 and Claudia's 1960, then I said time out this is enough yet already. And so then I got involved with the kids and their activities and did basically the same thing my mother did. Only I was active and able to get out and back them up and be with them wherever they were. Follow them around every place they were into.

Interviewer: This is ok 'cause here in '52 you get into Iowa State Teacher's College, you have a family, so you decide to go the route with a family, you raise some beautiful children. I met them, I met most of them anyways. But still yet what I think is most impressive is that once you raise your children you would hold on to the dream.

Mary: Yet, I went back when Francine graduate from Iowa State. She walked across the podium, and we went out to meet them. She handed me her diploma, and said, "Ok Mama, its your turn." I said I already signed up. So from that point on, whenever I had an opportunity, whenever I had some money, I took a class or two. And I just persisted with it, and I had a very good boss toward the end of my employment. I know he's in Des Moines, James Kilman. He was newspaper, then he went on to work in corrections, and I was with corrections. And he allowed me to take off periodically. If I had a class at eight in the morning, I could come in later after I had the class. He was very encouraging. Finally, decided that after a few years of doing that, the hours had began to accumulate. It got to the point, "Ah ha, now. Finally, I went in and they had changed directors by then, and I told them, I said, "Know what. I'm retiring, I'm leaving, whatever. I'm gonna go to school full-time." I remember the man looked like he wanted to get rid of me and I was like, fffill, your loss not mine. And from that point I did. I just had maybe a semester or two. And went back and came up here to school and graduated. And you should've seen the family that gather when I, they had the UNIDome at the time. So that's, how old is the UNIDome?

Interviewer: I don't know.

Mary: Oh sorry.

Interviewer: Wait now, you were talking about. You raised a family; you've taken on a number of jobs to support your family, and at the same time you were creating time to take courses. And then, at retirement that is when you'd finish up.

Mary: No. I graduated from this university and I taught for twelve years and I've been retired for three.

Interviewer: Who was your employer while you were going to school?

Mary: Umm, the first employer, the Department of Correctional Services, let's leave it at that the individual person doesn't matter.

Interviewer: And this is where you'd make the break. 'Cause your working and working, supporting your family.

Mary: And going to school. A piece at a time and it was just like I wasn't getting anywhere fast enough. And I just, by that time the oldest one had graduated from Iowa State and she just encouraged me, "you need to go on." And so I did eventually. I continued to work but it got to the point I didn't seem to be making significant headway. When I looked at the amount of credits I had, and I looked and I thought, you know, I could finish in a year and a half or a year.

Interviewer: About what time was it roughly, give or take a year.

Mary: Fifty... I don't know... help. When did I go back?

Interviewer: Late fifties?

Mary: Nineteen sixty something, maybe nineteen seventy, 'cause I went forever.

Interviewer: 'Cause you said you were at the correctional facility, you would resign from there then you would commit, you would go to school full time.

Mary: It was after Jolene graduated from Iowa State, whatever year that was. They all backed it up, and they all contributed to make sure that I could make it through that last year. In fact, Claudia came home and stayed with me if that was help.

Interviewer: Ah, ok.

Mary: It was a blessing. It was.

Interviewer: So then you would go on to graduated and the ceremony, when was this?

Mary: Here I go multiplying and dividing again. Why can't I remember when I graduated from college?

Interviewer: Do you want to look it up?

Mary: What would we look it up in?

Interviewer: I didn't know if you had it in a notebook.

Mary: No. That's ok we can go on to something else.

