

Bailey Drive Gateway at Walnut Creek Wetland Park
Raleigh, NC

Transcript of Phone Interview with **Betty Thompson**
Interviewed by Jackie Turner of J. Turner Consulting
May 22, 2020

**The following transcription is provided for reference only. Personal and unrelated conversation has been omitted from the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity by removing stuttering, start-and-stop sentences, and filler words such as “um,” “just,” “yeah” and “like.” Clarifying information is notated with [brackets]. Periodic time markers are provided in minutes:seconds format.*

Jackie Turner (JT): This is an interview with Mrs. Bettie Thompson who has been involved with the Bailey Drive Gateway and Parks with Purpose and other Rochester Heights projects for years.

Betty Thompson (BT): Yes, I go back 40-50 years to St. Ambrose.

JT: Are you originally from Raleigh? Where were you born and what brought you to Rochester Heights?

BT: I was one born August 12th, 1939 on the campus of St. Augustine's University (It was called St. Augustine's College then). I was born to Mr. and Mrs. James Brodie. I came over here after I finished Ligon High School. My Aunt was a graduate of Shaw University and she would always take me over to State College and I would ride with her to different places. And she would take my mother.

My mother went to high school on the campus of Saint Augustine University but my aunt would take us out riding and she would show us all the new places in town. So at that time, in the fifties, I would always go with my mother on her trips. We came over here in the 1960's and she thought this was a good place. It was owned by Bruce Lightner's father, Clarence Lightner.

They have a funeral up on Smithfield Street, it's now Martin Luther King Boulevard. I found out the history -- it was just a big farm and they had built houses and most of the houses were empty. When we came over we looked at the house and me and my mother picked this one out. My father was working. We all came over here in 1960.

JT: Your aunt was the one who drove you. What was her name and what is your maiden name?

My name is Bettie Jean Brodie. My father and mother were Mr. and Mrs. James E. Brodie. My aunt's name was Armita Hasty. She and her husband owned a lot of properties in the city at that time.

And she was a graduate of Shaw University and taught home economics at different places. And she worked with President Boyer's wife at the Y for years. So that's how we got over here because she showed my mother the place. And so we brought my father and we bought this house. At that time it was just us and the lady across the street, Ms. Morris, and she and her husband owned a store over near Shaw University. At night, it would be just our lights and her lights on. Yeah, most of the houses on this street were empty. And so later people began to move in and we would welcome them to the neighborhood.

I had one cousin that lived right behind me on Charles Street, and my other cousins later on they moved on Boaz - the Hicks. They were my mother's cousins. There was Roy, and they ran things over at Chavis Park. They ran the concession stand. There was Freddie and Roy, Jr. and Barbara (she and I went to school at St. Augs together later on). I can't remember all the other names because they were smaller/younger children.

But anyway we were over here and so after I graduated from St. Aug, I taught and went to Cleveland Ohio. I married a baseball player.

JT: What year did you graduate from St. Aug?

BT: 1966. This is my scarf right here (points to scarf around her neck).

JT: So how did you meet your husband?

BT: Okay I met him at Peebles. He and my Daddy belonged to the 3A club and they used to go to dances and take their wives down to the auditorium and all that. Anyway, I was the first African American working at Charles Department Store on Fayetteville Street. It's not there anymore but I was working and my grandfather, Lucious Brodie, lived in New Jersey and I would go in the summer up to New Jersey, but that summer I decided to stay here and I would go to Mr. Peebles' because I knew them and they were right on the corner of Martin and Bloodworth Street in a tall building. They had a restaurant downstairs and a hotel upstairs in the same building, and so I saw this Monarch bus parked on the side — Kansas City Monarchs. I would eat there almost every day — lunch and dinner — and I got meals, what they call, on the house, because they knew my father.

And so I met a guy from Chicago and he came down to eat with me. And then another day, I came, and that's when I met my future husband, but I didn't know it then. So we came in. I was looking for the other guy but he said he had gone back to Chicago. Something came up — sickness in the family. And so he sat down and he talked with me. His name was Ozzie Tidmore. He was second baseman for the Kansas City Monarchs. And that was the team that Satchel Paige and Jackie Robinson were on. They were older than he was. That is documented in history and you can look that up on the Internet. A lot of people don't know about Satchel Paige. He was one of the older players before Jackie Robinson.

So I met him, and I graduated from St. Aug. He said he's going to finish playing ball to Canada and everywhere else the bus went. They played in Durham at the Bulls ballpark and they stayed for much and much, but I said, 'I gotta go back to school after the summer is over.' But along the way we were talking and everything, and he came back in '66, and we got married, and I went to Cleveland, Ohio, and that was my first certified job, teaching in the Cleveland public school system. The school was called Sandusky and also at Paul Revere in Shaker Heights. That's where we lived.

It was a very nice place. I told him I wanted to be at one of the nicer schools because I didn't want to put my life on the line. So that's what they gave me.

10:29

And I had some friends from there. I'm a member of the Baha'i World Faith. And that's the headquarters, the _____ of Israel on Mt. Carmel. We were the first Baha'is in Raleigh and that was in the fifties, I mean it was before integration and my mother would have all these little kids coming to the house playing and at twelve o'clock we had to go in and say prayers. And the kids would come in with us.

My mother had a dream. I was baptized at Martin Street Baptist Church and she had a dream that we were going to be in something international. So we talked with Reverend Johnson, and he said, 'okay.' My mother was a healer. She would lay hands on you and pray. A lot of people don't know about things like that but she was. I was like the secretary because people would be calling and asking if my mother could pray for them and she gave them some healing water.

Long story about my mother. My grandfather was a preacher, Reverend Branch. He was over at Martin Street Baptist — he and Reverend Johnson. He would be in the pulpit. So I grew up that way. There were Baha'is in Cleveland, well there were Baha'is all over the world and in every state. But the main things are Haifa, Israel. We have a temple; it's called a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, but I say 'church' because people don't understand that.

JT: When did you come back to Raleigh?

BT: Yeah, well I had lived here most of my life, but then my husband died and is buried in Bedford, Ohio. My husband, he worked at Ford Motor Company, and I worked for the Cleveland city school system. So I came back down here when my parents got sick, and that's a long story — 15 years. Both were sick at the same time.

My cousin, they were still up there on Boaz. It was them and Ms. Peebles lived up there on that corner at Calloway and Boaz. There were other Hicks that lived up there back in 1970. The Colemans were on the corner up there. She was a little girl — much younger than me, but she was big and tall, and everybody you know. She went to St. Ambrose.

15:11

I would go to St. Ambrose because it was like the center then. A lot of people, they didn't go, but my mother and I would go to the meetings around there — like for an advisory board. Like the CAC. I was on that much later on but my first time going around there and being involved. That was 40 years ago. Father Calloway was there then. He had taught at St. Aug too. We would invite people to come over and discuss community affairs. He would have the members of the city council, the police department, and we would tell them, you know, whatever. This neighborhood has always been nice and quiet but we wanted to stay that way, so we had the meetings. And it was nobody but our neighborhood doing it. It was just Rochester Heights, doing it first organized by Father Calloway, and I would just go right around the corner to St. Ambrose. Now later on, much later, maybe 30 years, well they can tell you when the advisory meeting started up on Sanderford Road. That started when other subdivisions were built. In the 50s and 60s, they were not even built.

So this is Hadley Road started down at Bailey and goes all the way through Biltmore Hills, but the numbers are different. When you cross Calloway, it starts at 600, and somebody was saying, well, if this was one whole section, but it's not. Rochester Heights is a historical section because they built that first from Clarence Lightner's grandfather's farm. And developers came, and he sold it and got money and built this. And later on, I forget how many years it was before they built Biltmore Hills. We watched them build Biltmore Hills, and when they started up there past Calloway, they started with the number six hundred and twelve (612), so that's why this is the same street and it goes all the way but it started down here. So that's the history of that.

JT: So you had some cousins in the area. What were some of the favorite things you did besides visiting? I know you were working or caring for your parents. Were there neighborhood gatherings other than meeting at St. Ambrose to talk about the neighborhood?

BT: Well we had a lot of social — being a member of the first family of the Baha'i faith, and a lot of people come from California, and I remember we had a block party. They were on their way to our temple in Wilmette, Illinois. But the youth group stopped through here, and there were dancers and poets. So they wanted to have something. When I was in Cleveland, we had a block party and we had a president, secretary and treasurer. So I called the police department and say, 'Can we have a block party — you know, this block down here, block off at Calloway.' The people from everywhere could come to it. There were professional dancers on a big bus from California. I called the police department to get clearance, and they said, 'What did you say? What are you talking about?' I said, 'Never mind, but thank you anyway.' You know I I tried to describe what was happening and that it was a religious group but everybody could come. All our neighbors was invited. Later on we went up to Biltmore Hills and gave them dinner.

I asked one of my friends whose father was in horticulture at North Carolina State, Mr. Barry, and asked his son to go down and tell people to go around the blocked-off street, and then I have somebody else to block off up there. And everybody came, and we had an international

party.

We always were always inviting people to come over. What else did we have? We had neighborhood picnics with the people across the street. I'm sure the people up at Boaz had some things too.

At that time, I did some subbing for Fuller School because I couldn't work full time because my parents were ill. So I would go up there.

JT: So at the time were there homes on both sides of Bailey Drive?

BT: Bailey always had home on one side on the right when you are coming in from Garner Road, houses all the way down and around. On the other side there were all the trees and the creek.

JT: Did you all ever use that space on Bailey?

BT: No. We couldn't because it was just trees and bushes.

One day a friend of mine,(I don't know if I should tell this on here or not), but we went over to State because I was trying to get a minority scholarship to work on my Masters at State, well it ended up that somebody else got the scholarship that wasn't a minority. Somebody told me that and it was a reputable person, so I said, 'Okay.'

Anyway, while I was over there, I went to some office and they said that we have a drawing called a wetlands on the drawing board that was going to be in Rochester Heights, and I said 'This is my neighborhood, so I want to see it.' So they showed it to me, and it was the same as what is up on the corner of Peterson now.

They hadn't even built anything. Years later they finally built the center there.

What has changed over the years? Most significant change? Um okay.

Like I said, I been going to the meetings forever, for 40 years when it started. At one time we had pink lights; nice cozy type lights, and it was nice. And then after a while, some things started happening, people started moving in, and then we requested they take those lights down and put some real bright lights out here. So we could see everything that's going on in our community. And so the city did that. And I think that was through the help of A.J. Turner who lived down on the corner. He was a city councilperson. And I would go. It's just certain people that would go. It's like now — you don't see many people coming to the meetings. Mr. Turner would come sometimes and his wife and the man over on Charles Street, he used to be the principal of the school not too far from here.

So the lights was a successful story of asking for and getting a change, and then we asked for a good bus route to come through here. So we got the State Street bus coming through, and one time it came off the Garner Road and turned on Bailey and it came right by our house. It would start right down here on Hadley Road and past our house. Sometimes, before my parents got real sick, if there wasn't anyone on the bus, the bus driver would stop right there, and we would get on and go all the way downtown. One time we could stay on that same bus and go all the way to Crabtree Valley! And after a while someone changed it, and we had to get on a different bus. And we would go over there and exercise before they got real sick. But that bus route — that was good because if we didn't want to drive our car..... I have had about five different cars. Long story. I had one we drove to Philadelphia to see my people.

Yeah, that bus route was good, and for people that didn't want to drive, they just get on and go ahead on downtown shopping and come on back. That was very nice, but somebody said something, and then they changed the route. And even now the older people be saying, 'Well I wonder why it didn't come through here,' but I found out somebody had it changed — called down there and so. But now it goes straight up the Old Garner Road, past the cemetery and nobody there. Then it stops up by where there used to be an A&P store. It stops on the side of the road, people wait on the side of the road. But that's not beneficial to us because all these older people don't want to walk from here all the way up there to catch a bus. I'm 80 years old, and I couldn't do it, but back in the day, I could. But that State Street bus helped a lot.

JT: In terms of challenges the neighborhood faces, if money were no object, what would you like to see done here in Rochester Heights? Any particular projects or effort?

BT: I would like to see that bus come back. The older people have asked me about that. I go to different churches, but, you know, they say if there was a bus and people did not have time to take them places, they could just get on there. I think it's free bus rides now for senior citizens. So that would help out here and through Biltmore.

JT: In terms of the Bailey Drive Gateway space down the road, are parts of that you are excited about or would like to see happen?

BT: Well as I have said in many meetings and I was talking about the art things — my major was elementary education music because I played for different churches, and the Stephenson Music Company in Oberlin gave me free music lessons on the organ, and I played for the church. I used to belong to Martin Street but I am Baha'i now.

But I used to play at Young's Chapel across from the Motor Vehicle Department. It's called Young's Missionary or something now. I got lessons since the church was buying the organ.

But anyway, as far as the arts and elementary ed, in college because they advised me to put my art and music together. And so when I go to the meetings, I ask about local artists, because there are some good artists around here, and I am sure they are younger people and they don't

have a chance to display.

Now I went downtown to Art Exploris, when they first opened it up on Davie Street, I believe it is. And they had some nice artwork in there, local artists, but I don't see any now. Kids don't have an outlet. I mean they have some very good artists.

JT: I know that the project designers and Parks with Purpose program are getting ready to do a call for artists and incorporate these stories into some sort of art installations. The first thing to do is put a call out there, so if you do run into anybody or know anybody, let them know to contact me and I'll pass them on to Design Workshop. So that's something that will be happening over the next couple months - to round up candidates who want to show their art and look at what their proposals are.

BT: Well that's good because I have been saying for years and years but it fell on deaf ears. But that was my project that I have always been talking about because I'm one of the local artists because that's my manner. I changed it from there. I have three things going — to make a long story short.

JT: So I've gone through my list of questions, but I just want to ask if there is anything else you wanted to say about the green space or how it is tied together with the street or the cemetery or St. Ambrose.

BT: I've talked about it for a long time — beautification of the neighborhood. It's azaleas that I have seen on TV for years that different organizations can get those free, not individuals but organizations can and have them planted in different places. So I would like to have some planted in my yard to set an example and a lot of people around here that take care of our yards. I'm sure that they would like to see the beautification of the neighborhood.

I worked in a florist over by St. Augs. I don't know the name of all the flowers but they do give away to organizations. And if we could get flowers to beautify this neighborhood that would be great, and then maybe others can join in. This is what I would like to see. Okay so we're doing a good job on keeping the grass cut and everything like that, but it would look beautiful to see azaleas or whatever flowers or annuals that would be beautiful all summer.

This would be something as an organization that you can get done easier than one person trying to say something.

JT: Any final words?

BT: Well I'm just so thankful that you were here and for Lindsey, for Christy who comes to pick me up for meetings. I'm thankful for people like you all that are really listening and paying attention to the neighborhood, because when I am gone, there's nobody else around here that's going to say something. I hate to say that, but that's the way it is. They don't see anything, and

that's the way it's gonna be. I'm sure you all understand that.

JT: Well we want people to know that we are listening if they want to reach out and that they have the ear of some people now that maybe they didn't have in the past. Hopefully that will make people feel more confident.

BT: But that's my legacy that I would like to leave, you know.

JT: Do you have children in the area?

BT: No, I have a son. He's a biotechnical person. He's one of the frontline people with the pharmaceuticals. He's worked 30 years for ___ as an auditor and 15 years as a biotechnical person down there.

I just have that one son born in Cleveland, Ohio. His father is Ozzie Tidmore. I had married again — Thompson.

Yeah, he's a very good son and he works all the time and his family, they come to take me out at different times. Since it's so many people that don't have jobs now, he'll say, 'Why didn't you call me?' And I'll say I want him to just keep on working because I'm just so glad and proud he has a job.

Thank you so much.