

Recollections of an Old Scrubwoman

Interviews with Bernice Higgs by Larry Redmond (LCR)

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LCR: Okay. Memphis and Aunt Irene.

Ms. Higgs: I thought we finished with her.

LCR: During the telephone interview? You want to move on? We can, sure.

Ms. Higgs: Cut it off there. Don't just leave the thing running.

LCR: I got it running now. Take as much time as you need. Don't worry about it running.

Ms. Higgs: Well, all right, then what do you want, about Memphis now?

LCR: We covered when you went to Memphis. You went to school in Memphis, right?

Ms. Higgs: Yes.

LCR: Where did you go to school?

Ms. Higgs: Georgia Street School. Later known as Porter School.

LCR: Named after?

Ms. Higgs: I don't know.

LCR: Maybe Georgia Porter.

Ms. Higgs: Georgia was the street that it was on.

LCR: I know, but maybe there was somebody –

Ms. Higgs: Perhaps. I don't know.

LCR: So what about, were there any people at school that you remember? Students, teachers?

Ms. Higgs: Yes, teachers.

LCR: Tell me something about them.

Ms. Higgs: I remember, two teachers I remember very well. Mrs. Cooper. She was a Christian, and she would always ask you questions. They would tell a story about the Bible during –

we didn't have, there were about 30 minutes in the afternoon, after you would study, and before we were dismissed. We had finished all our classes. We had one teacher for all our subjects. We didn't have separate teachers for every subject in grammar school. And she was the first person that used to tell stories, the first time I ever knew, she asked this question I shall always remember: How many people were saved in the Ark, in the floor?

LCR: How many were?

Ms. Higgs: Eight. And there was only one girl in that class that knew that, and her name was Mary Money, and she was from Cenatobia, Mississippi.

LCR: Wait a minute. When you say "saved," do you mean who didn't drown, or who had accepted Christ in their lives? Or did they both mean the same thing?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, no, that was – do you know the story of the flood?

LCR: Yes, I know the story of the flood. I don't know how many people were saved on the Ark.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, they were the only ones, all the rest of them were drowned. And Noah and his wife, and their three sons and their wives.

LCR: And all them animals and bugs. And caterpillars and worms.

Ms. Higgs: Everything.

LCR: Do you remember what she looked like? Mrs. Cooper?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yes. She was tall, one of these tall yellow women, with gray hair. She used to wear it parted down the center and then carried in a ball at the back. And she wore eyeglasses, and she would take her glasses off and put them up in here, and now I know they were her reading glasses.

LCR: Women wear sunglasses like that now sometimes, when they're trying to be slick. Put them up in their hair like that.

Ms. Higgs: Well, we didn't have sunglasses then, it was 60 years ago.

But anyway, she would forget she had put them there, and she'd be looking all over for them, and the kids would start snickering, and finally she would remember they were in her hair. But she knew how to keep order in a class. No one talked back. Of course, children in those days did not talk back to teachers. There you had very few problems with children in the school, because they came out of homes where you just didn't talk back to your parents, so you didn't talk back to your teachers, and if you did, if they had to send a note home to your parents or your parents had to come to school, it was a bad day for you, so that was rare.

And she – I guess I must have been in the 6th grade then, and then Miss Ida Stevenson. She was a tall woman, tall with dark brown skin, very good teacher. Of course I always got along very well with teachers because they always considered me smart, and I always –

LCR: You were an eager student.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, so I – and then Miss Stevenson, in those days we had 6 1A and 6 1B. That was just a part of the 6th grade, and when you finished 6-1B you were promoted to the 7th grade, 7 1A and 7 1B. And then you went into high school in the 8th grade. That's as far as you could go at Georgia Street. But Miss Stevenson, we used to have, on Fridays, we had a spelling bee. Sometimes we'd have it in the class, and once a month they had it, they had slide doors to divide the classrooms between the 6th and 7th grades, and they would push the doors back and there'd be competition between those two classes. The girls against the boys.

LCR: And the girls always won, didn't they?

Ms. Higgs: Yes, indeed. There'd always be Bernice Minnis –

LCR: You were a speller!

Ms. Higgs: Yes, indeed, honey.

LCR: Spell "antidisestablishmentarianism!"

Ms. Higgs: And then they would choose them, they'd choose the one they thought could spell, and when you missed a word, then you could be turned down. You know what I mean by that, don't you?

LCR: You'd sit down in your seat.

Ms. Higgs: No, well, you'd have to go – on a Friday you could do that, when you had those classes, the two rooms combined, you'd have to sit down. But when we were just in the room there, they would, if you couldn't spell a word, and I could spell it, somebody was always at the head of the class, the spelling line, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 – you see. It was how you ranked, if you were first or second, they could turn you down until you got to the foot.

LCR: I see, the back of the line.

Ms. Higgs: Well, we called it the foot of the line.

So anyway, on Friday, when we were with two classes, then you went to your seat and who'd be there standing, one on this side of the room, one on the other side.

LCR: Spelling back and forth.

Ms. Higgs: And another thing they would do, they would do arithmetic, a girl against a boy, to the blackboard, and you would stand with your back to the blackboard, and the teacher would give out a problem, say, some fraction, $20 \frac{5}{8} \times 30 \frac{4}{5}$ or whatever, and when she said that, by the time she finished it, you and the boy were supposed to turn simultaneously to the board, and start figuring it out. And when you finished, whoever finished first, you turned around. And they would always pick these, they had a couple of smart boys there, Augustus Sturtevan and Albert Green, and every time they would turn around, they'd be looking in my face – (Laughs)

LCR: (Laughs) I know you just loved that, didn't you?

Ms. Higgs: I suppose, in those days, there were a lot of, I don't care what they say now, people go around saying, Black is beautiful, but in those days, honey, it was so true. If you were white, you were right. If you were yellow, you were mellow. And if you were brown, you could stick around. But if you were black, you got back. You just didn't get anyplace. And so maybe, I don't know it was because I thought that, before I was even able to think about that, I just always to read, I was always smart. I had a desire to learn. That's why my father, why I was sent to a Catholic school in the first place, because –

LCR: In Little Rock.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. I think Mama was going to send Sammy too, but Sammy wasn't old enough.

That was at Porter School. The principal of the school, Lee Brown, and then I had another teacher, a man teacher, the only man teacher that I had, S. S. Brown, and his niece, she was Grace King, we used to exchange Christmas cards all this time. She is in Memphis now. She's the only one that I can remember, that I know about how now. The others I knew are dead. This girl who knew how many people were saved – she's still alive. She was older than I was. I guess Marietta has to be, I think she probably is about 82, I imagine. She was a good-looking girl, a pretty girl.

Then there were no high schools then, except one that, I guess whites had moved out of that neighborhood, and we got Kortrecht High School, and that's where we went until Booker T, and I guess the, well, they were building it then, they were building Booker T, and they must have finished Booker T maybe in, sometime in the 20s. Your mother went to Booker T. And she went to that same school as I did. They had built another – Georgia Street was one of those schools that whites had had too, and then they built a new one around on Laurendale, and that's when they named it Porter School. But you could just walk right across the lawn and some children still went to the old school. But Marie went to the new one. She might have started there. I think she did, at the school that I attended, then they finished that other one and she went to that one. But I was never forcing her to go to Booker T. The one time I went to Booker T was when I took you, when your mother was there and your dad was in the Army, and my teacher that I had in high school saw me coming with this little boy, and she knew me. I guess teachers see a lot of children. Her name as Alzora Hayes. And she looked at me, and she said, Now don't tell me your name. I know you. I could never forget you. And finally she said, Oh, Minnis, and I told her Bernice, and she said, Is that your

little boy? I said no, that's my grandson. Your grandson? I said, That's Marie Campbell's. She remembered me. She said, I tell you this, you're not going to send him here. I refuse to teach your grandson!

LCR: Two generations is enough!

Ms. Higgs: Yes!

There was going to be a war picture showing there that night, and so I went and took you.

But she's still, when your mother went to a family reunion here not long ago, I mean to the class reunion, she saw Miss Hayes. She was there, and Marie said she was looking good, and had a boyfriend, was dancing like the breeze.

LCR: That lady must be up there, too!

Ms. Higgs: She is! When you look back on it, I don't suppose she's more than, you know how teachers, some of those teachers were teaching, and some of the students were not many years younger, and I think that must have been her case, because she couldn't be more than five years older than I am.

LCR: Which would make her about 85, thereabouts.

Ms. Higgs: Mm-hmm. But she was a nice-looking, brown-skinned woman. She was an English teacher. And she was the one who said, Now this is your first (this was when we had teachers for different classes), now that you are in high school, you have to enlarge your vocabulary, because you are going to be known by the way you speak. And the first thing she did, one of the first assignments she made was, she gave us 100 words to find the meaning and make sentences.

LCR: That lady was serious, wasn't she.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. And I shall never forget, she started alphabetically, and "adroit" was one of the first words. You know how some things just stick in your mind? And I never say the word "adroit", rarely, unless I think of that assignment we had. She was a stickler for English. That's one of the reasons why, you've always heard me correcting you, how you speak.

Oh, but then, after that, even now, it's such a thing, after all these years, I don't even like to talk about it, and I push it as far out of my mind as I can, because it's a thing that hurt, when I had to stop school. That was one of the things that hurt me. I had these very same children, one of them came here last summer. Anna Mae was here last summer, for a couple of days. They were Aunt Irene's, Annie's husband's sister's children. And she raised those children.

LCR: Annie did.

Ms. Higgs: School was out that summer, and I got a job so I could get some clothes to go to school. And I was making \$5 a week, and I would bring the money and give it to Annie to keep. She could sew, and those were the days when girls were wearing middy blouses and skirts, and gingham dresses, pretty dresses, and when the time came to go to school, she didn't have the money. She had spent it on those children, and she brought me a few things, and I went to school for about a month, then it was getting cold and I didn't have a coat, so then I had to quit and go to work, and I cried, I shall never forget. It's so silly after all these years, when I think about how I cried. I don't know why. It just hurt me that bad, I wanted to go so badly.

So then I just stopped. I couldn't. I didn't have anything to wear. So then I went on to work, and I shall never forget, Miss Culper, our music teacher, she lived on Ioka, in our neighborhood, and she saw me up at the store, and she said, Minnis, why aren't you at school, and I told her I wasn't going any more, and I told her why, and she looked at me with such pity, and she shook her head, she said, Such a pity, such a bright child. Couldn't you get a job out in the rural, teaching, to make you some money, so you could finish – but I had nobody to help me. I shall never forget how Miss Culper stood there and looked at me and shook her head. She was an excellent music teacher. She went from room to room every day and gave music. Piano lessons.

So then I worked for a couple of years, then I met your grandfather.

LCR: What were those first jobs you had? Do you remember what you were doing?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yes, I was a maid, washing and cleaning, domestic. The first one I had was at 122 North Evergreen, I worked out there for a while. Then after that, Albert and I married, and I didn't work anyplace then. In those days, women just didn't work if they had a husband. They just stayed home and their husbands took care of them. What he brought, they made do. I can recall, and I was having babies, too, you know, and I guess I wouldn't have gone then, because my babies were still little, if Albert had, was just throwing his money away. We got read out, he wouldn't pay the rent, they'd come and read you out, you know, give you ten days to pay, pay two dollars for the man to come out and read you out, and if we didn't pay within that time, they'd come in and break into your house and throw you out in the street. That's what they did with our house, just put you out in the street. By that time, I was working at the Memphis Power and Light Company then, and was making about \$18-20 a week. That was a lot of money then! Negroes weren't making that kind of money then. And he was being trifling all along, and I just kept on staying there, and not having anything, and when we didn't have it, I'd just tell Mr. Will, and Mr. Will would give me some money, and I'd go and buy groceries, and he jacked Albert up, and then sometimes we'd be sitting there with nothing, the last we had to eat, and I wouldn't eat, I'd give what I had to the children and put them to bed, and just wait. And he hadn't come home, and he'd come in, about 10 o'clock, higher'n a kite, "I ain't got nothing." I just, whatever I had, I got up and I'd start hitting him. With whatever I had. Then he got to thinking that he'd hit me back, he hit me, and some time the doctor said, maybe I'd get a look in my eye, maybe, I don't know, but he hit me in my eye, and it was all swollen up. I was going to kill him then. He ran out the house, ran on up to his daddy, what'd I do? I hit him with something, I must have grabbed a knife, something and cut him on the arm, I can't

recall, but anyway I got up there. He had run to his daddy's, because his daddy lived up the street. And I was right behind him. Josie, she came out and I just pushed on aside and went on and Mr. Will said, he just met me, and he said to Josie, I guess he could see my eye was all swollen, and he said, take her in there and put something on her eye. I'm going to take Albert here. And I said, Let me alone, I don't need anybody to put anything on my eye, cause Annie didn't live in there then, she had gone to Mississippi. I didn't have any relatives in Memphis then. I didn't have anybody in Memphis. And I just went on back home. At that time I was, he had taken the money and doing so - I had, well, to keep something for the kids, I had gotten a job over at the Memphis Furniture Factory at that time -

LCR: About what year was this?

Ms. Higgs: It must have been 19 and, let me see, 2 - , not that long. I remember I had to take Marie up out of the bed and carry her. It must have been about 26. And they were paying \$6.05 a week.

LCR: Let me ask you this, before we get to the furniture company.

When did Granddaddy start drinking? Do you know how he got into that drinking?

Ms. Higgs: When he was working at the Memphis Power, he wasn't drinking when Marie was born, because I almost died when Marie was born. When he started working for Memphis Power and Light Company, he got tied up with some woman there, and he got in with this bunch of fellas up there, and sometimes he wouldn't come home. He didn't drink before, he might have taken a drink, he wasn't -

LCR: But he wasn't a drinker.

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh. Like Jerry, and John Aubrey and them, you know how the fellas come and take a drink, with friends. And we liked to play, because there was no card playing in our house, in my house and not in his house either. People were, my family was a Christian family and they just didn't play cards, and drink like that, especially, I guess there were some families who did, but our families didn't. There have always been families who did that. But there were certain families who just didn't, and they didn't do that with their children, they went to church and Sunday school.

But then as you grow up, you see others do it, then you start doing it, you get away from that. The Scripture says, Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it. You'll go back to it, you see. I went out right enough, but I came back, you see, because it was the way I was brought up.

But anyway, he started working up there. For the first, I guess, 3 or 4 months, he brought his money home, and we were making these plans in our mind, for the children, that we were going to move off of that, across the railroad where white people had lived in those houses over, there were some nice houses over there, and we had thought we would buy a house. Of course, his father lived up there, and Aunt Vivian. White people lived in those houses. White people lived on one side of the

street and we lived on the other side. That's what we would do, but he just got tired of that and started gambling. I really just could not believe it. I could never think, I never thought the day would ever come that we just wouldn't be together. Then he went from bad, they took our furniture, set it out in the street. First the furniture man came and took the furniture, if we hadn't paid or had missed the payments on it.

LCR: They just repossessed it.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. And then what was left in the house, if we didn't pay the rent, they would set it out in the street. That was embarrassing. That lady across the street came over and told me, she said, Bernice, I just came to tell you that they putting your things out in the street.

LCR: Where were you at that time? At the furniture company?

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh.

LCR: She came from across the street at the furniture company to tell you what was happening at home?

Ms. Higgs: Yes, she walked way over there to tell me. Aunt Delia. So I didn't go home. The children were down the street at Miss Helen's. That dear old lady. I went on to the Memphis Power and Light Company. And I told him, I said, you better go and get something and find somebody to put my things. So I don't know where we stayed that night, I can't remember. I might have stayed at Miss Helen's, because Annie wasn't there. I might have stayed with Miss Hattie Parks, some of the friends the children had, because it didn't make so much difference – we could have stayed at Mr. Will's.

So we went and found a place, and got some money and moved up there, moved the things up there.

Even that, all of that, that didn't stop him. Then the man on the job came, and I don't know what he had been telling them, but the man came to our house, and asked was Albert there, what time did Albert leave for work this morning because he hadn't got to work. I told him I don't know, because he hadn't been home, I hadn't seen him. So he just went on and fired him.

And before that, see, I had been getting these bills, bills coming from where he had this charge account and had these women's clothes, the bills were coming to the house. So I went up the place.

To the store?

Ms. Higgs: The man was asking me, and I said, listen, I want to know because I am his wife, and I want to know, I didn't get the things, I just want to know. So I guess I was running off, and he said, well, yes, he did get them. And then he got a dun from some loan company he had borrowed some money, on Beale Street, one of those loan shark places. So after we moved up there, and the man fired him, Mr. Will had stopped

working on the railroad, and he started working there at the Royal Feed Mill, so he got Albert a job over there. And that's where he finished going to the dogs.

LCR: Before we go to that, do you know what he did when he was at Memphis Power and Light? What kind of job he had? Do you remember that offhand?

Ms. Higgs: I really don't remember, but Albert was, he must have been doing some kind of maintenance. He was good at fixing things. See, he went on that job, he applied there when they were building that place, and the people on that job were contractors. Somebody in personnel saw him, how handy he was. Albert was smart. They gave him a job there, because the contractor had finished that job.

LCR: So they just hired him on at the company. And then when he went over to the feed mill place? What did he do there? Still maintenance, probably, given that he had the background.

Ms. Higgs: I suppose.

That's where he –

LCR: Finished going on. Gone to the dogs, you said.

Ms. Higgs: That's when I left him, that winter. Mama came and got me and I went to Mississippi then.

[END]