

Recollections of an Old Scrubwoman

Interviews with Bernice Higgs by Larry Redmond (LCR)

Vol. 5, recorded 2.11.84

LCR: This is the beginning of the February 11 session.

That must be a pretty old pocket knife!

I shall tell her that.

Ms. Higgs: Don't you dare tell her that!

It's how old – it's 30-something years old.

LCR: Let me see that knife.

Ms. Higgs: That pocket knife, I might have paid a quarter for it then.

LCR: So what did you do with this pocket knife?

Ms. Higgs: They were coming off of what they call a machine that - a sanding machine, on the table there, and we bundled them. There'd be a roll of twine under this apparatus, this rack that they stacked them on, and you tied them on each end, you tied these bundles together, about 20 in a bundle. I guess they were about this long.

LCR: About two feet, maybe 2 ½ feet.

Ms. Higgs: And we tied them together, with that twine on the table, and we had to have something to cut off the twine with, so everybody had to have a pocket knife. And there was someone on the table that stacked them and put them on this rack for you, and it was called tying out, and there was a truck there, and you'd put them on the truck, that rolled, and there was someone called a truck boy, and that was his job, to go around the room and see the trucks were full, and take them back to the warehouse and bring you back an empty truck. You'd have to steal your truck, so you didn't have to go and find your truck, you'd keep your truck stashed, so you'd have one to work with. Because those things were coming off that machine, and you had to have a place to put them. There always were white guys on these machines, and it wasn't their problem.

LCR: Yeah, they were just churning them out. He's making money, he probably got paid by the piece.

Ms. Higgs: He might have. All we got was \$6.05. No, we got more than that, we'd probably make about \$10-12 a week.

LCR: What was the name of this place?

Ms. Higgs: The Sodor Hardwood Flooring Company. They made parts, at that time, for trucks for the Army. That's what I told you about, I was trying to get into the project and couldn't get in there, supposedly. I went to see Fuller, who was one of your folk, and I told Mr. Taylor, and that's how I got in over there at LeMoyne Gardens.

LCR: Mr. Taylor must have been one of their folks.

Ms. Higgs: Mr. Taylor was the President of Sodor Hardwood Flooring Company. He asked me who was the manager over there, and I told him, Tom Fuller. And he called him up. I had to get some place to stay, because you, I guess you were ...

LCR: How did he get you into LeMoyne Gardens?

Ms. Higgs: He spoke to the manager of LeMoyne Gardens, Tom Fuller.

LCR: Oh, I see, Fuller was the manager of LeMoyne Gardens.

Ms. Higgs: He was a black man. I had gone over there, and he told me I didn't qualify, because Sodor Hardware wasn't supposed to be a war plant.

LCR: I see, you had to be working at a war plant to get into these projects.

Ms. Higgs: I used to go out and clean the office, the boss' office, in the morning. On these jobs, I never was required to do a lot of hard work, somehow just kind of ...

LCR: Skated through!

Ms. Higgs: I asked him, and he said, yes, those parts we make down there are for Army trucks. And I told him, my daughter's husband is in the Army, and she has a baby, and I'm trying to get in at LeMoyne Gardens. They said that I didn't qualify to get in there, and they said, who's the manager over there, and I told them. I went back up to the mill to work, and he just gets on the telephone and calls LeMoyne Gardens, and he sends for me, in the morning, to come up to the office, and I get there and who's sitting there but Tom Fuller! Sitting there patting his foot. Saying, Yessir, Mr. Taylor. [Laughs]

He said, well, you'll hear from me before the week is out. See, I had gone and they wouldn't even take my application. So, before the week was out, they sent for me to come in, in the morning, I guess it was about Thursday or Friday, and Tom Fuller had called and told them that I could come and fill my application out and I'd get an apartment. Then Mr. Taylor sent for me and he gets in his car and takes me over there! When I went over the first time, I was all in my clothes and dressed and everything, and there were all these office workers, and they were all black over there, but anyway I was there with my pants on and work clothes, dusty, the only thing I did was take the scarf off my head and comb my hair. And I went in there and I got in. Because you all were staying over to Ms. Redmond's, and of course your mother was very unhappy over

there, and she wanted to move, so I got my things out of storage and that's where we were. And we were happy there. That's how I got in.

LCR: How did your things happen to be in storage?

Ms. Higgs: After Marie married, and was gone, I stopped cooking. I didn't want to cook anymore. Working on Sunday. And we were making more in the factory. So, I just put my things in storage and got, shared this apartment with Jessie Mae, and one friend of mine, and her aunt, me and Florence and Jessie Mae. And they were already in the Foote home.

LCR: This had to be in the 1940s, then.

Ms. Higgs: So then ...

LCR: Did you start working for this factory after the Crumps?

Ms. Higgs: Mm-hmm.

LCR: I see.

Tell me something about Big Daddy. You got to tell me something about Big Daddy. I want to know.

Ms. Higgs: [Scoffs] What do you want to know about Big Daddy?

LCR: Look at it this way. This'll be the only time you have to talk to me about Big Daddy.

Where did you meet him?

Ms. Higgs: Where did I – he knew some of Florence's and Jessie Mae's people, and I met him through them. And of course, naturally, he didn't belong to church, and I just didn't bother with him too much, and I told him that. He came around a few times, and then he went on to California or some place, and I never heard from him anymore.

LCR: He worked in the shipyards out there.

Ms. Higgs: I guess he must have, or something.

LCR: I know, because he told me.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, he did?

LCR: Yes, he told me.

Ms. Higgs: And then one Sunday, I never did hear from him, and Florence didn't hear from him either, and I forgot all about it, and one Sunday I was in church, and somebody came in and said, somebody's out there wanting to see you, over on the Lauderdale Street side, because there were two entrances. And who was it, but him.

Then he asked me if he could come over, and I told him yes, he could come over. So he came, and I still wouldn't be bothered with him. And I remember, one Sunday, I had come home, and you and Marie were there, and we had had dinner. And I looked out the window, and who should come plodding down the street but him. And I said, Oh, Marie, there goes John Henry. Just tell him I'm not here. I went in the bedroom, and those apartments didn't have doors to the closet, we had drapes to the closet. So I guess you must have been about two. Marie and John Henry were sitting there talking. You didn't say anything, but you walked in the bedroom, and I could just peek in that hole, the crack in the drapes and see you, and you got on the floor and peeked to see if you could see me. You saw me, and I just held my breath, I thought you would go and say, Mother's in the closet! [Laughs]

But you didn't say a word. You looked, and you just went back. And Marie had gone to see where you were. So he didn't stay too long, he finally left! [Laughs]

You didn't say a whole lot, but you would just look a lot of times.

There were two things you did that I will never forget, after we did marry. We always set the table and taught table manners. And we taught you, don't chew with your mouth open, keep your mouth closed, and don't be smacking, and we showed you how to put your napkin. And you'd always do that. And John Henry, when we were married, he fascinated you. Because one thing, he could pile his plate up with food.

LCR: Pile all that stuff on one plate!

Ms. Higgs: And you would sit there and just look at him, and he'd be just eating, and if he got something in his mouth, like a little piece of bone, he'd just spit it out, and chewing. And so finally you said, Big Daddy, don't chew with your mouth open, close your mouth!

And he got so mad at you! He could have died. Lord have mercy!

So finally, he just ... And he lied! I said, I just couldn't marry you. And he said, I'll go to church, I'll join. But the thing about it, that's a bad thing to do. Brother Washington, one of the deacons, he was my friend, I loved him. He was a good Christian man, he did a whole lot to help me. He said, you don't have any business with him. You know what the Scripture says. Be ye not unequally yoked. You know that. And I said, but Brother Washington, he said he would and he said, he's lying, he won't. If he doesn't do it before, he won't do it after. And he was right, he didn't.

And I used to tell him all the time about my children's father, I said, I didn't like anybody to gamble, because it was the downfall of my other marriage, because I really wanted to have something. You work together. But he didn't. But I found out, he was addicted to gambling. And he lied about it, and the first time that he lost his money, and had to borrow some to bring home. I didn't find out then, but then it caught up with him, having to pay the money back, and it turned out he had to borrow because he'd lost it. It started from that. It deteriorated.

And I wanted to have - working for the Crumps, you know, Clint – he was like my big brother. He said, Bernice, he knew where a place was, out in Binghamton. He and I went out there to look at it. He said, it's got possibilities. It's a good spot. They got good food out here, we could really make good. He said, let me talk to John Henry, and the three of us talked about it, and we went out there. And Clint said, if push comes to shove, there were living quarters there, a place where you could live, bedroom and bathroom, he said, just until you get ahead, you could enlarge it. As long as Clint was there, John Henry said, yes, that'll be good. And after Clint left we were talking about it and he said, he wasn't going to be going into no debt, he wasn't going to do this, and way out there, he wouldn't go there. If we had to have a loan, working for the Crumps, I could have gotten financial help I needed, from the money I had saved up. It didn't take a whole lot of money then, as it would now. If you had \$500, that was – but he wouldn't do it, so we just ... and that just did something to me. I said, oh, well, maybe by that time Marie had come up to Chicago, and I said, well, he never seemed to want to be able to put the money together and sit down and go over the bills, say this is for this, this is for the rent, having kind of a budget, and save a little something. That's when I decided I would leave, so then I did. And I just left.

I stayed away and finally I did write to him, and then when he wrote and I just sent the letters back, Not at this address, just returned them unopened. And finally I went on back, and I thought, maybe I'll try, he said he was going to do this and the other, so well, he didn't, and then I said, well, after I went back, I wasn't satisfied there, staying up there, so he said he would come, and I said, well, only way – we could get a couple's job, and we could make - because couples were making about \$500 a month. I still wanted this place of business. And he agreed to that. We went and got this one couple's job, at Granite Springs, New York, and I tell you the truth, boy, that was the biggest flop that ever ... [Laughs]

Just like a bull in a china shop, trying to, can you see him going around the table serving dinner?

So then we just separated. And then I went back to him again.

LCR: You were in New York, by this time?

Ms. Higgs: We were in New York then, Granite Springs.

Then we separated, and – we could never, I always wanted to go and put money aside and plan towards something. I like to plan. You can't do anything when you have a limited amount of money, they'd just pick up and do things on the spur of the moment, I have always had to plan what to do. But I always planned, as long as my Mama was living, to see her every year. And I took a month off from work. I had a two-week paid vacation, and I took another two weeks without pay, and I planned that. And I'd always come through Chicago. I didn't stay here, I just came through because the train came through here.

LCR: The City of New Orleans.

Ms. Higgs: No, not the City of New Orleans. Coming from New York -

LCR: Oh, no, that went down south. This was the New York Central line.

Ms. Higgs: I forgot the name, but it was one of the good, comparable to the City of New Orleans, coming out of New York, New York Central. And I'd go on through Memphis to Mississippi, and stay with her, come back to Memphis and stay, and wind up the week here in Chicago, and go on back to work.

Well, that first year we got back together, we went and worked, that year we went up to Prout's Neck, Maine.

I said, when y'all come back, I will go, I want to go see my Mama. And you can go to see your sister in Chicago.

He had \$200, from working at General Motors. And we were rooming at that time, over on 6th Avenue.

LCR: In Mt. Vernon?

Ms. Higgs: So I said, well, ... sometimes ... he would come to the car, and had nothing to show for it, and then I couldn't go.

And see this is, bad business. I don't know why people do things like this, when they can't read nor write. But see, I got the mail. And he had thrown all his money away, anyway he had this \$200 laid in the drawer before we left, but he had gone to Beneficial Finances, a loan company, and got that money, and the letter came, and -

LCR: For the payments due.

Ms. Higgs: I want to know what he was thinking. Didn't he know I was going to see the letter, or did he think he would get the letter before I saw it? But anyway, that's what he thought, you know, with his limited brain. So then I asked, and he told me, he hadn't saved a dime, he had borrowed this money. So. That was that. I just went on my way and let him go on his way. And I guess I went back, he'd always come back and seemed like he'd going to do so much better, and I always think, because I have this way of speaking out, and saying things I shouldn't say, you know, so I said, I don't have to be right all the time. I said, Lord, maybe I was wrong. After all, nobody's perfect, and maybe I'm expecting too much, so maybe it was my fault, so I'll go back. Then I went on back.

I was living down in the Bronx, where Smitty and I, I was still working, but I had got me a room, because we just had a room over in Tuckahoe, me and Rebecca, me and Willa Mae, and Jessie. Just a place to go in case we lost our job.

LCR: So you wouldn't be on the street.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah. And since we were all from Memphis, and we had all gone to the same church, so we stuck together like family.

So, but then, Willa Mae has always been a doozie. She's a goodhearted person, she really is, but she's always had to fight that bottle. But she would do anything for you, she really would. And she was one of those people who have just an insatiable appetite for gambling, just like John Henry. She just loved to gamble, like playing the numbers, and playing Pokeno, she'd stay up all night doing that.

Pkeno! [Laughs] Lord have mercy.

Ms. Higgs: Anyway, I –

You remember Pokeno?

LCR: I think I remember, but I don't know how to play it. It's like Bingo, but with cards. You have a board that has different cards on it, and you just flip over a deck, and the card that comes up, you cover it up. And when you get Pokeno, you win, like getting Bingo.
.
Anyway, it's similar to that.

And Jessie and I were on the same order, we'd leave the place clean, we'd leave the dishes washed and empty all the ashtrays, and leave the bed all made and the kitchen, and mop the floor. So Jessie and I would never come out, during the week. But Willa Mae was always this kind, she would always find these people who would love to do these things, and she'd call, [imitates low, scratchy voice], Let's go and play Pokeno, and they'd go and play Pokeno. And they drank, you see. Well, almost every Thursday when we got there, we'd and open the door, there was a card table set up, bottles everywhere, and there was a pile, ashtrays piled up this tall, and well, she'd say [imitates voice again], I pay rent here too, ya know!

So after two-three, the straw that broke the camel's back, was when Rebecca and I had been there, when the Cleveland Indians first got Larry Doby, and we went to see, Rebecca was going with some fella. And we had a car and went to Yankee Stadium to see the Yankees and the Cleveland Indians play. We came on back that night, they put me off, and they went off to take [name unintelligible] on to Scarsdale, and I got out. We had ate, you know, after the game. And it was about 11:30, quarter to twelve when we got out of Tuckahoe. I got out, and I walked on and I heard all this talking, and I opened the door, and it was a basement apartment, why, I couldn't even get down, and the niggas were sitting on the steps, with boards on their laps.

LCR: Playing Pokeno!

Ms. Higgs: [Imitates scratchy voice again] Well, we just havin' a little game here! Come on down!

I just turned around and walked on back. At that time of the night! So I walked on to Bronxville. It wasn't that far, Bronxville was right on Midland Avenue, it was the little village, not far from, Tuckahoe and Bronxville run right together, and Avon Road was

right down the hill from Tuckahoe. I said, this does it. I won't be, I'm leaving, I won't be staying there anymore. So I went and got a room at Smitty's. That's how I happened to be down there with Josephine. I didn't have anything there anyway. See, I had that, John Henry and I had first been there, we were first there.

LCR: In the apartment that you and Willa Mae -

Ms. Higgs: So I went on down there and I was down there when John Henry and I got back together again. And when I was down there, Beulah was from Memphis, she and Anna, they had been sleeping in too, so they had got an apartment, and so they said, Bernice, instead of rooming over there with Smitty and Josephine, why don't you come here and we'll get an apartment here.

So what I get, I got that very bedroom set I have now. And I don't know what else I got, a chair, a coffee table, and that's what I got when I went back to John Henry, I already had that. That's when I moved to 135 S. 12th Avenue. I had that when we got back together. That's where he left last time and hasn't been back since. Which was good riddance to bad rubbish!

He had a sister, relatives here, I don't know where they lived.

LCR: I think they lived on the west side.

Ms. Higgs: Larry, do you remember, I came here one time, I think you all were living on May, and me and you and Madeline went to his sister's house, we walked from you all's house?

LCR: I remember going by his sister's house much later, because I was grown.

We walked over there when you all were on May Street. That year I hadn't seen Mama, and I hadn't seen you all either. And he didn't want to go, he didn't want to go anyplace. I said, I'm going to see my children, I haven't seen them and I haven't seen my Mama. So I asked him did he want to see his children. She had all those children. And I said, if you send me \$25 I'll give them \$25. So we walked over there, and I remember taking the camera and we took some pictures. I sent them back to her. We had them developed. He never did come while we were together. And I don't guess he's been there since 72, the first year I was here, or 73. I came here in 72.

LCR: It must have been that trip that you remember, because it was that trip we went to his sister's house.

Ms. Higgs: Over on the west side. Susan.

His sister had a son who was a policeman. I don't even know his name.

I told you, he had glaucoma, didn't I?

LCR: Big Daddy? No, wait a minute, I guess I did know that. He's had it for some time, because he had drops when I was there. I had forgotten that.

Ms. Higgs: I was talking to Elizabeth. Now, you remember her? She called me in December, I guess, right before or after Christmas sometime, and she's an uninhibited kind of a soul, you know? Sonny, her husband, said, I saw John, he asked me about, had we heard from you. He wanted to know, had we heard from you. He went on with something else that John Henry said, and Elizabeth took the phone, [imitates high voice] now, listen here, I'm not going to take up my time talking about John Henry! Just give me the phone!

LCR: Sitting there wasting his money –

Ms. Higgs: I asked, does he ever come to church? Sonny said, no, he doesn't come to church. I saw him when he was picking up his numbers!

So that's all.

LCR: That's Big Daddy's story.

I remember once in, I guess it was in Memphis, and I guess the two of you were together then, though my recollection of it was kind of fuzzy. He had an accident on a truck, a cement truck, in fact he used to drive a cement truck, and I have this recollection of him sitting around the house, barely able to move, because he had his ribs taped up.

Ms. Higgs: In his house?

LCR: I don't know whose house it was. That's kind of vague.

But the more I think about it, the more I think you two were together, because I see flashes of you walking around. Did you two ever stay together in LeMoyne Gardens?

Ms. Higgs: Mm-hmm, that's where I married him, in LeMoyne Gardens.

LCR: Then this was where it was. Because I remember –

I have some recollections about that place, too. Because there was a store down the block where I used to go and pick up bread and stuff.

Ms. Higgs: With somebody.

LCR: No, sometimes I went alone. And it must have been in in LeMoyne Gardens that I was run over by that bicycle. I was going to get ice cream, a popsicle. I still have scars from that, too, somewhere, though I can't remember where. Might have been my knee or my elbow.

Ms. Higgs: Larry, I know you would have to remember, I mean, I believe you would remember, because I sit and think of the things that I remember and how old I was when I recall

those things. And there are some things that I can remember, and I know I wasn't more than five years old. And they're just as vivid!

LCR: I know, because I remember a lot of things. It was in LeMoyne Gardens that I used to go bumblebee hunting. We used to capture these bees and put them in a jar. Except I always killed mine first. Some of those souls were intrepid and they'd sneak upon the bee with the jar and the cap and clap the lid over them, and keep them in the jar. And he'd be in the jar flying around. But I'd be scared of the jar with him in it! So I always stepped on mine and said they were asleep.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, I tell you, I know you can, because when you told me you were going to, you told me about sitting on the back porch, there were those high steps, going down there.

LCR: It was in that house that you used to trick Big Daddy with margarine instead of butter.

Ms. Higgs: [Laughs long]

LCR: You remember that?

Margarine used to come like lard, it would be white, and you'd sprinkle this orange powder on it.

And I remember one day he was sat up there, he was eating margarine, spreading margarine on bread and enjoying it as much as anything could be enjoyed, and you messed around and told him it was not butter. And the man almost gagged on the bread in his mouth.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, Larry, I would have never - as long as I live - how could you know that?

LCR: You don't remember that?

Ms. Higgs: No, indeed, I tell you, I don't remember that.

I didn't know you remembered margarine ever came white?

LCR: Yeah, I remember it. Margarine came white. And you mixed it in.

Ms. Higgs: Of course it did! With that little pill. You made that butter yellow.

LCR: You made that goop yellow! Ask Big Daddy if it was butter. He swore he could tell the difference between butter and margarine, until you caught him with a mouthful.

Ms. Higgs: That's as bad as Mr. Crump. He - honestly, he was one of these kinds that didn't want nothing but pink meat grapefruit, did I tell you that?

LCR: I don't think you did, no.

Ms. Higgs: He was a doozie, I tell you.

It seemed that anything you couldn't get, he was determined to have it, if you had to go to the Mississippi River to get it!

There was a little store down the street, Mr. George, it was just, one of those neighborhood stores, and Mr. George tried to have anything that he thought Mr. Crump would eat, that he could sell, he would have it in his store. But he didn't have any pink meat grapefruit that particular day. That meant Clint had to go over on Union, to Cecil's store, or somewhere, to find some pink meat grapefruit -

LCR: Cecil's must have been a bigger -

Ms. Higgs: Cecil's was one of these places where you could get, sort of, I've never been in Dominick's, but I suppose -

LCR: Almost like a gourmet store?

Ms. Higgs: They had pastry, and a deli in there also, they had all kinds of meat, it was sort of like a gourmet place, but it was in the rich neighborhood and they catered to them. Something like, what was that store down here, that went out of business?

LCR: Stop-n-Shop.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, Stop-n-Shop.

But anyway, Clint was running all around, and I said, well, just never mind. And I took some - you get food coloring, that cooks used to make to color ice? And that's what I had, and to color lemonade. I took that grapefruit - he said, I couldn't find any, and I said, I'll fix that old codger, and I took the grapefruit and cut it up, and sectioned it off, and just put a wee little bit of that dye, made sure to get it to the rind, exactly the correct shade, you see?

LCR: Got to be right!

Ms. Higgs: And they always had to have sugar on it. I don't like sugar on my grapefruit, but that's what he wanted. And I put that cherry in the middle, put it on that tray, because they ate every meal upstairs, in their bedrooms, Clint carried it upstairs, and he sat there, slurping, Don't nothing taste like pink meat grapefruit!

LCR: While he's sitting up there eating white meat grapefruit! [Laughs]

Ms. Higgs: Clint said, his pet word was "Old Bastard." Old Bastard, I'm going to tell him he ain't eating no pink meat grapefruit! [Laughs] I said, that's so, Mr. Crump!

And he was slurping and slurping, swearing he had pink meat grapefruit. And all he had was grapefruit I had painted for him!

So that was like John Henry, with that margarine. I guess he knew the cow had gave the milk and churned the butter, I suppose.

Yes, indeed, I tell you the truth!

LCR: Let me ask you this. How did you happen to first get to New York anyway? I guess it was one of the times you broke up with Big Daddy, you left and went to New York. But why New York? Why not California, why not Chicago?

Ms. Higgs: I had been to New York, I had been through New York, at the World's Fair. I spent three – I spent the whole summer at Lake Placid, you know, where they had the Olympics last year, was it in '80? I spent the summer up there with these people, because as I told you, nobody stayed in Memphis.

LCR: The Hallidays.

Ms. Higgs: The Hallidays. I was still working for the Hallidays, but that summer I didn't - they went to some other place. She went to Santa Monica, and he stayed at, naturally he didn't go anyplace, he stayed home and worked. He was a workaholic.

Instead of me going to the hotel that summer, one of her friends, Mrs. Elijah G, her sister who lived in Short Hills, New Jersey, was going to Lake Placid, and so they asked, Mrs. G asked me if I would go, she said to Mrs. Halliday, Caroline, if it's all right, because we'll be back before you get back, because of course I had planned to go back to Mrs. Halliday.

So that's how I got to go to Lake Placid, and to see Whiteface Mountain.

LCR: What year was this?

Ms. Higgs: In '39. Then, see, Willa Mae – then I met this Betty Martin. Everybody came that could, that was anybody, and they had these two houses in Placid (no black folks lived in Placid at all), they had these two houses there that these women rented, to take care of the help that came up with people, if they didn't have room to sleep in. This woman, Ms. Carter, was where I lived. Then there was this woman across the lake, I don't know where she came from, but anyway, that's where I, because there wasn't room in our house to sleep in. That's why I stayed at Ms. Carter's. Ms. Carter took care of all those people who worked at these, who were mostly men, and then there were about four couples who came up, they came from Spartanburg, South Carolina and places like that. They were people who followed the seasons too, and these men from Texas, they followed seasons too, and West Palm Beach, Florida, people who worked in hotels. And Ms. Carter took care of those, because that house had, the whole basement was, what you call a French basement, with a porch, a walk-in basement, and the second floor was the living room and the kitchen, and up on the upper floor was bedrooms, and the women stayed there, and no women stayed in the basement.

And this Betty Martin, she just came up, she was from Harlem, and she came up because she could afford to come up. And she knew Ms. Carter. And then she invited

me to come, because the World's Fair was going on. And she said, when you come back, going back south, stop in Manhattan and I'll take you to the World's Fair. And she did! I have a picture of her and Ms. Carter and all of them, in my scrapbook.

LCR: Are these white folks?

Ms. Higgs: No.

LCR: Ms. Martin, the one from Harlem, she was black? And Ms. Carter, who ran the house, she was black? How did she happen to be living there?

Ms. Higgs: I don't know, but they were the only two black people there. I guess they let them rent those houses to take care of the overflow of black people who came up.

LCR: The only two black folks in Lake Placid in 1939 were these!

Ms. Higgs: And they tell me, I never saw it, but those fellas who worked there said there was a sign outside of the house that said, No Jews and dogs allowed!

But anyway, how I finally came to go to New York. Willa Mae and Rebecca came to New York to work for this couple, Ms. Wheedle. Her mother lived in Memphis, and her daughter had married this man who was a Dane, and he was a baron. He was from Denmark, he was a baron. He never was naturalized because he never lost his title. I guess he must have been an importer or an exporter, something like that. They came up, and she put an ad in the paper. She asked her mother to send her up two girls from the South. And Willa Mae and Rebecca came up.

So, well, they were paying \$45 a week!

LCR: Heavens to Betsy!

Ms. Higgs: Boy, that was unheard of.

I never slept in – well, I guess I had slept in, nursing Madeline Perkins. I gave that up because I said, and they got mad at me, I had my own children and I wasn't sleeping in, taking care of someone else's child. So I left and went to the Hallidays.

Willa Mae and Rebecca went up there, and they knew other people who needed help. We didn't really know each other very well in Memphis, we went to the same church, but we just didn't know each other very well. So I said to Willa Mae, if you know anybody that wants anybody, let me know. It just kind of passed over Rebecca's head like water off a duck. But the thing about Willa Mae, she would go out of her way to let you know. And if you needed money to come, she would send you money. But by the same token, she would tell everybody that she did it! That's just the kind of person, you accept her like that. The good things about her override there. There are some deeper things about her that override those other things that I know about. So anyway, she told me about this woman, this Ms. Kiggins, who lived in Scarsdale, and she asked me, as a matter of fact she called me. I left the Crumps anyway, and this woman, she

didn't know, when I went to ask her about going, when I went to interview her about the job, and she found out I worked for the Crumps, boy, I thought she was going to jump out of her skin. Because she knew, oh, it would be bad for her husband's business, if her husband and Mr. Crump knew that she had anything to do with getting some of his help away from there, he could make it bad on his business. And see, he wasn't beyond doing that, either. He used to boast, I have a list as long as from here to the Mississippi River. Of course that wouldn't mean anything to you, unless you knew how far it was from 1962 Peabody to the Mississippi River. But anybody who you said that to in Memphis knew it was a pretty long way. It was a long list.

LCR: List of what?

Ms. Higgs: List of names. Of everybody in business in Memphis, and everything about them. And if anybody crossed, in some kind of way, he had a way of getting back. You talk about computers and everything like that, it was old hat to Mr. Crump, he had it all in his head. That's how I got that job in Richdale Road in Scarsdale, and she was going to pay me \$40. She would give me \$45 if I qualified. And I tell you, this old lady brought everything in the book.

LCR: To see if you could cook it, or just because she wanted it?

Ms. Higgs: To see if I could cook it.

I got \$45 the first week, baby! [Laughs]

LCR: So you made that money!

Ms. Higgs: Yes, I made that money. I had that Fannie Farmer cookbook in my grip, and what I had in my head, and they taught you, they ate through their eyes. Those people in Memphis, that was how they did it. You didn't just put food on the table. You didn't just put food on a platter. It was decorated, you know? I mean a dessert, if I had a charlotte russe, it wasn't just put on a platter, it was surrounded by leaves and flowers. It would just entice you to eat it. If you had pork with mashed sweet potatoes, and orange peel rind, you put the orange peel all around, pile it high with sweet potatoes with nuts on them, and top it with marshmallows.

LCR: Now you're making me hungry!

And I had a meat loaf recipe, and Mr. Kiggins would say, I came home an hour early because I knew we were having meat loaf! And I got that meat loaf from Cecil, that cook in Cecil's, now you know you're not supposed to give out your recipes, but he knew I worked for Mr. Crump, so I got that recipe! I got Cecil's recipe for meat loaf.

LCR: Only somebody in Memphis who had that recipe!

Ms. Higgs: I loved that recipe, and I had that recipe, and anywhere I cooked, wherever I would go, they loved that recipe. They loved that meat loaf.

And one old woman, she was real nice. Ms. Jackson. I fixed it and she begged me to give her that recipe. I said, all right, are you going to give it out? She said, Bernice, I swear, I won't give it to a soul, if you'll just give it to me! [Laughs] I gave it to her.

I don't know whether you were there, but when you were ready to go away ... I was sick that day. I was in bed the day you left. Were you there when that white woman came? I guess you had gone that day.

LCR: I don't remember.

Ms. Higgs: She came the same day that you left.

But I finally did get back to the Wheedles, though. He was a baron. That's a place where I worked that I got to see the king and queen of Denmark.

LCR: And you worked for whom?

Ms. Higgs: The Wheedle's.

LCR: That's the first people you worked for, then, when you went to New York?

Ms. Higgs: No, I worked for the Kiggins'.

LCR: How long did you work for the Kiggins'?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, guess I might have stayed there a year. I didn't stay there all that long. She was a ... she was all right, but ...

[Recording ends here]