YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965

Personal Experience

O.H. 1909

LEROY AND ETHEL ADAMS

Interviewed

by

Michael Beverly

on

June 15, 1998

B: This is an interview with Leroy and Ethel Adams for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965, by Michael Beverly, on June 15, 1998, at 3518 McGuffy Road in Youngstown, Ohio.

The first question I wanted to ask, I know it is kind of personal, but I need to know your ages. What year were you born?

EA: I was born in 1931.

LA: I was born in 1929.

B: And your place of birth?

EA: Statesville, North Carolina.

LA: Same. Statesville, North Carolina.

EA: Iredell County.

B: What county?

EA: Iredell. I-R-E-D-E-L-L.

B: What are you both doing now? Are you both retired?

EA: Yes, we are both retired.

LA: Yes. I am retired from Republic Steel, 37 years.

EA: And I retired from General Electric after 23 ½ years.

B: Where were your parents born?

LA: My parents were born in South Carolina. One -- I think my mother -- was out of Georgia.

EA: My parents were born in Statesville, North Carolina.

B: Okay. What year did you come to Youngstown?

LA: 1948.

B: Did you live in any other place before you came to Youngstown?

LA: No, just moved from Statesville to Youngstown.

B: How did you hear about Youngstown?

LA: My father was living here. He worked here for a long time in steel, and so he had been here for I do not know how many years. Then I just moved after I got married. We moved up and we lived with him. And I got a job where he worked.

B: So that was the first place you lived -- with your father -- when you came to Youngstown?

LA: Yes.

B: Did you live in a house, a flat, or an apartment?

LA: In a house. He died five months later, after I had moved in with him.

B: In 1948?

LA: Yes. I was a teenager.

B: When you first came to Youngstown, where did you work?

LA: At Republic Steel, where my dad worked. I got hired there with him. So that is where I worked. That was the only job that I had in Youngstown.

B: So that was your first job as an adult?

LA: First and last.

B: How about you? [indicating Ethel Adams]

EA: I did not work when I first came here. I did not work until after we had moved to this house. We moved here in 1954. We had four children at that time, so I did not work until the children started to school. I did some day work, that is how I started out. And then in 1971 I got hired at GE [General Electric].

B: Did your kids work outside your house while they were growing up?

EA: Yes, all of them did. They worked in car washes, and my daughter worked at Ohio Bell, and one daughter worked at the Woolworth Company, which was up on Belmont at that time. FW Woolworth. I think it is Woolworth.

B: So what was your first job as an adult? Was it the day work that you did?

EA: Yeah. That was my first job.

B: How long did the two of you go to school? What grade did you go to?

EA: I went to the eighth.

LA: I went to the tenth grade.

EA: I got married at the age of sixteen. He was nineteen.

B: You were both young. Very young. You are still together. That is great.

EA: Fifty years.

B: In the workplace at Republic Steel, was it diverse, ethnically? Was it different groups, like whites, blacks?

LA: Yes. It was all a mix of Italians, Slovaks, black. You name them, they were there. Just about every race was in there. Even some Jewish people was in there.

B: Did blacks tend to stay with blacks and Jews stay with Jews, or did you kind of mix in the work area that you worked in?

LA: Well, sometimes they would mix up, but most of the blacks would be together. Not all the time, now, you know. And I had the job that I was doing as a burner. I worked as a helper, and you had blacks and Italians mostly, on these jobs. And then when I moved up to a burner myself, same thing. I was still working with the same people, you know. And then I branched to working on the diesel as a brakeman, and then I moved up as an engineer. And we were still working with a mix of people.

B: So, job advancement was possible.

LA: Oh, yeah.

B: You were not held back because of your coloring?

LA: Well, on some jobs. Some jobs there were no blacks on. You know, like blowing and regulator and things like that, inspectors. At this particular department I was in, I was in what you called the convertor mill. We would take raw iron and convert it to steel. And, of course, when you was the blower, you was the highest paid man down there. We did not have no blacks blowing. Once, we did have a black steel pourer, which he is living today. A young man by the name of Edgar Williamson. He was a steel pourer. So he had to give the job up because

he was a Seventh Day Adventist, and he did not work on Saturday. And, of course, if they scheduled him on Saturday, they was expecting him to be there. So he gave the job up. We did not have another one.

B: Within the steel mill, did the union tend to help blacks out? Were you able to get help from them if you ran into trouble or anything?

LA: Yes, yes. I would not say that they was really too strong at the time, but they have gotten stronger. They did get stronger.

B: So you was involved in the union, then?

LA: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I had to join the union because it was a closed shop.

B: Blacks within Republic Steel, do you think they, generally, worked the best jobs, the worst jobs, or they were somewhere in between?

LA: Some of the worst. Some was between, some of them was good jobs. But most of us are medium, were in the medium range.

B: Was there the possibility for blacks to work in office jobs at Republic Steel?

LA: Yes, some of them worked in the office. Later on. Now, this was a big change between 1948 until the times the mills closed. They was advancing. You had them running the cranes, you had them running diesels and so forth. They had moved into the office. I do not know just what office jobs they were doing in there, but they was working from employment office, filling out insurance comps and things like that.

B: The job you were working, did you feel safe? Did you think it was hazardous? Was it dangerous or anything?

LA: Well, I would not say exactly. It was not all that dangerous. Certain places in the mill was dangerous anyway.

EA: What about when you were a burner?

LA: Well, it was not a dangerous job, burning.

B: So people got hurt at Republic?

LA: Well, occasionally, they would get hurt. Sometimes kilns did. That is why a lot of them got hurt. [They] was not paying no attention.

B: Both of you, do you feel that you were treated the same as any other employees

at your jobs? Did color make a difference, or do you think you were treated the same?

EA: Well, by the time I started, I think we were all treated about the same. I did not see a lot of prejudice at GE. You know, if you were qualified to do a job and applied for it, nine times out of ten, you got it. We had a lot of black people in the office at the time when I was there. But like I say, this was in the 1970's, and I cannot go any farther back, as far as GE.

B: How did your employer treat you?

EA: I always worked for the Jews, and they treated me well. I had one bad experience, and then I just did not ever go back.

B: You felt that you was treated the same as everyone else? [indicating Leroy Adams]

LA: Well, yes. I thought that, under the conditions, we was treated just about the same. Maybe it was in the back of my mind that it was there. I mean, a lot of times you did not really see it, but it was a little different in the treatments of the blacks and whites.

B: It was kind of subtle.

LA: Yeah.

B: How long have you lived in this house right here?

LA: This house?

B: Yeah.

LA: I lived in this house 44 years.

B: Has the neighborhood always been a mixture of people?

LA: Yeah, because Italians lived next door to me when I moved in. I do not know what nationality the people was over there. They could not speak too good of English.

EA: I do not know what they were.

LA: But they did not stay there too long. And then a black family moved in.

B: When you migrated to Youngstown, were the people here more tolerant toward

your race then the people in the South, where you lived down in North Carolina?

EA: I felt more prejudice here than I did in North Carolina because, in the neighborhood where I grew up in, even though we were in the country, you know, we had white neighbors. We did not go to school together but we played together. So I experienced more prejudice when I came here than there.

B: Really?

EA: Yes, I really did. [tape stops]

B: So you think it was a little bit better in the South, the way they treated you?

EA: In the area where we lived, yes.

B: You said you lived out in the country.

EA: Yeah, we lived in the country and we played together and fought together with the white children. [laughter]

B: Did you have to deal with segregation there?

EA: Oh, definitely. Yeah, everything was segregated, but when this is all you know, then we thought it was normal. You went to the black schools. If you went to the bus station, you had to sit in the back of the bus. You would go around to the back to get your ticket and you would sit in the back. You had black and white fountains, water fountains. You could not drink from the same fountain that they drank from. But still we knew, I guess you could say, our place. We stayed in our place. But then when you come here and you think things are different and they do not have a sign up here that says black and white, but you know it is an invisible sign there.

B: So it was like you did not really know who was for you or who was against you when you were here. At least in North Carolina you knew.

EA: Right.

B: How about you? [indicating Leroy Adams] Do you feel the same way? Do you think it was better in the South then?

LA: Well, I guess so.

B: As far as people being tolerant. Were they more tolerant of your race in the South than in Youngstown? Was your experience a little bit different?

LA: No, not really. I do not know just how to answer that one because everywhere we have gone, it has mostly been there.

B: Racism?

LA: Yeah. Like she said, down there we knew where we was supposed to go. They had two of everything. They had a fountain for the black and a fountain for the white. Toilet for the white, toilet for the black.

B: When you moved here to Youngstown, were you denied any public facilities? Could you go anywhere that you wanted to go, like the swimming pools. I heard in the 1950's there was a swimming pool controversy.

LA: Yeah, they had up on the north side, on Belmont, they did not want any of the black kids coming in there so they used something like a picket. They protested. I think they had a picket line. It was not a picket line. It was a demonstration.

EA: They had a demonstration to try to get the blacks in. And then when they did let the blacks go in, the whites would not let their children go, you know. So, it ended up being a black pool. You know, they would just go to the west side, go someplace where we was not allowed to go.

B: How about hospitals, when you had your kids? Was there any difference made, like as far as doctors? I also heard in the hospitals, usually when they have rooms, they will put blacks with blacks. Did the two of you find that to be true? Or did you have rooms with white people, too?

EA: No, I had black roommates. But, like I say, you did not really notice it because it was so subtle. You felt more comfortable being with your color anyway. So, it really did not bother me. Yes, but I had a black roommate when I had my babies.

B: How about in the theaters? Were they segregated here in Youngstown, or did everybody go to the same theaters?

LA: No, they was not segregated.

EA: We all went to the same theaters.

LA: And you had about five or six downtown. You had what, six?

EA: I do not remember now, but I made them all.

B: And everybody sat together, then?

LA: Oh, yeah. The Warner, State, Paramount, Palace, and the Regent. You had six theaters downtown. Plus one burlesque there, too. All of them right there together. [laughter]

B: During the 1940's and 1950's when you first came to Youngstown, if you had the money, did you feel you could live anywhere in Youngstown that you chose to live?

LA: No. No, some of them, like they are now, they do not want blacks moving into their neighborhoods. I do not know if it is worse, but blacks can move just about where they want to live now. If they can afford it.

EA: But you did not know blacks that lived in Liberty or Boardman or, you know, places like that. They were mostly in the inner city.

B: Was that true in Youngstown? Did blacks live on certain parts of the east side or the north side, or did they live anywhere?

EA: No, mostly within the inner city. I did not know blacks, anyway, that lived outside of the city, you know, like even our more affluent blacks now that live wherever they want. They was living places like the south side, lower north side. It was in the inner city.

B: So you really do not feel that you could have lived anywhere that you wanted?

EA: No, I do not, not at that time.

LA: Most of the doctors, they would accept them, more or less.

EA: But they did not. All of your black doctors lived in the inner city. At that time, Dr. Landers, Dr. Burrs, Dr. Burrowes, they all lived inner city.

B: So blacks mostly just lived right here.

EA: Right.

B: Even if they had the money.

EA: Right. And they made them pay it. But they still stayed in the cities.

B: So the real estate people kind of got together, do you think?

LA: I do not know. [phone rings and tape stops]

B: So you think that is just the way it was? Blacks just lived in the inner city?

EA: I think so.

B: And just stayed with people that they felt comfortable with. How about when you moved here to Youngstown? Were you accepted by other blacks? Did they treat you differently or act funny because they lived here all their lives? Did you feel accepted by the black community?

EA: I did. When we first moved here, my father-in-law was living on Miltonia Avenue, and I am still friends with some of the people I met when I first came to Youngstown. As a matter of fact, the child that just left here -- my daughter-in-law -- her grandfather is the one that picked us up from the train station when we came here in 1948.

B: Oh, really?

EA: Yes.

B: That kind of leads me to my next question. Did you get any help from people in the community, like church or organizations, like the Urban League? Did they help you out when you moved here?

EA: What type of help?

B: Like if you needed help or material help. Like if you needed blankets or whatever?

EA: No, we did not experience that. For one thing, we were fortunate enough that we did come to my father-in-law. We moved here in April, and he got a job in May. So by us living with our father, you know, we did not have to worry about rent or food. You know, it would not be like we came here, did not know anybody. So we had a blanket to hold us. And then after he passed, we moved with his cousin to Covington Street. This was our first experience with paying rent.

B: So your help came from family, then.

EA: Yeah.

B: How about neighbors? Did the neighbors help any?

EA: No.

LA: Well, we did not really need any help, you know, because my cousin, where we rented, she gave me the lowest rates of rent that she could give to help us. And that was a help there because we was only paying like six dollars a week, something like that, just to help with the lights and gas. You know, she was not

really making anything on it. What she was doing was to help me to get straight. So I think we lived there about five years and I was able to buy my own home.

B: So it was your cousin that helped you get settled here.

LA: Oh, yeah.

B: And your father.

LA: My dad, yeah.

B: If I can ask both of you, do you feel like you did the right thing by moving to Youngstown?

EA: I think so. I think it was a good decision.

B: How about you? [indicating Leroy Adams]

LA: [laughter] I believe so.

B: Did you raise your standard of living? Were things better?

EA: Well, we would have to say yes. Even though we were children when we left, yes. What was your salary when you started out?

LA: Here? $1.09 an hour.

EA: He probably would not have made that in a day down there, at that time.

LA: Yeah, we had been paid by the week down there, you know. I was doing restaurant work in a hotel. I worked in the kitchen at the hotel. Not no bus boy or anything like that. That was about it.

B: So you think you made things better for your family by moving to Youngstown.

LA: Oh, yeah.

EA: Definitely.

LA: Then, see, when I come here, when I got hired in the mill, then I picked up benefits. Insurance and retirement and stuff like that. And all I was doing down there was just a weekly job. No benefits or anything.

B: I would like to thank you for the interview.

EA: Thank you.

End of Interview