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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
African-American Migration to Youngstown Project
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INTERVIEWEE: ISADORE BLAKENY
INTERVIEWER: Michael Beverly
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Be: This is an interview with Isadore Blakeny for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the black migration to Youngstown, Ohio by Michael Beverly at the Wick Building in downtown Youngstown on April 29, 1999.

I would like to get started with your age?

Bl: I'm eighty-one years old as of last January 7, 1999. I was born January 7, 1918.

Be: Where were you born?

Bl: I was born in Meridian, Mississippi. I should have been born here but my mother went back home to be with her mother when she was pregnant. My father was here working for the Youngstown Sheet and Tube. They came here in 1916, my mom left then returned when I was born to Struthers, Ohio.

Be: So Meridian was the birthplace of your parents too?

Bl: In that area yes.

Be: Why did your parents come to Youngstown?

Bl: My mother was a school teacher she graduated from Tuskegee University and her instructors were Dr. Carver and Booker T. Washington. She stayed in a house down in Quitman Mississippi and the people she stayed with had a big, handsome son who worked in the field there. He heard about the great things that were happening up east in Youngstown, Chicago, and Detroit. So they moved here to

get gainful employment. He first came to Akron, Ohio to work at the rubber plants but he didn't like the smell of rubber. That's when he sent my mother back to Mississippi and said he'd send for her when he relocated himself to Youngstown. So he got on the trolley in Youngstown and he went to the end of the line which ended up in Struthers. So we stayed in Struthers.

Be: Akron was the only other place they lived before they came to Youngstown?

Bl: Yes, they went to Akron then to Youngstown.

Be: Did your mother ever talk about what it was like being taught by Mr. Carver and Booker T. Washington?

Bl: Yes. She said both of them were brilliant men. She said Booker T. Washington was very aggressive and wanted her to go on and get more than a teaching degree. She had her doubts about Mr. Carver because he paid attention to the peanut and the plants. He was really engulfed in his work. He later went to the University of Iowa to develop his interests in scientific projects.

Be: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Bl: Yes I have one brother and four sisters that are all still living. There are fourteen years between us from the youngest to the oldest from eighty-one down to sixty-seven. Except for one we're all living in Youngstown. One sister lives up in Hempstead, New York where Hoftra University is. She's a graduate of Hoftra she got her Masters Degree in Education which is in the same town of Hempstead, New York. She started to school in 1948 and got her Masters Degree in 1951.

Be: Are you the oldest child? When you arrived here did you mother continue to work outside of the home teaching?

Bl: No. She couldn't get a teaching job here. She did instruct a lot kids that came by the house so when they went to school they already knew their abc's and how to count. My mother was an accomplished music teacher too in fact she was the first musician for Shiloh Baptist Church in Campbell. She was a charter member of Shiloh Baptist when they built that church.

Be: Did you and your brothers and sisters work outside the house when you were growing up?

Bl: My father died when I was fourteen years old so we all worked. This occurred during the heart of the depression in 1933-1944 when Roosevelt came into the office and Hoover left the office. We planted the gardens and lived off the land. In the summer time we picked lots of blackberries and cherries along with collard greens and my mother would can them.

Be: I'm surprised you didn't go back to Mississippi.

Bl: No she was really entrenched here. She was well liked. In fact she did do a little teaching here when the WPA came in. She didn't teach in a school but taught adult education at night at a white church.

Be: Going back to when your parents came to this area how did your parents hear about it?

Bl: There was a family that left Mississippi years before named Moses' around 1912 or something and came up this way around that time. When you leave home and make it, immediately you're doing good. So word traveled back and people saved

enough money and got on the train. They'd send one and that one would come back and get the other one. For the first part of the century between 1912 and 1923 there were all Mississippi people in Struthers. Then people out of Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina came in. There are still a lot of Mississippi people, the Wilsons' and Moses' up on the north hill now.

Be: What was it like growing up in Struthers?

Bl: If I had to do it all over again I would do it. We knew there was some racial difference at that time but it wasn't apparent because the people that we were dealing with just came over from the old country from Italy or Czechoslovakia. There are a lot of Slovaks and Italian people that still live in Struthers. They had different names that they called them at the time so we'd get into name calling contests. They would call us by the derogatory name of the time. We had three titles back then. We were negros and colored which was respectful but we didn't liked being called niggers. The same was true with the Italians. The Italians didn't like being called waps or dagos. The Slovak people they would call dumb hunkies. I haven't seen a dumb hunky yet. They claimed that they were bad for the economy because they never bought anything on credit. They paid cash for everything and the merchants didn't like that. They like for you to buy something on credit so they could charge you interest and sell at a higher price. The Slovak was a hell of a negotiator.

Be: So there were a lot of ethnic groups?

Bl: There still are!

Be: Were there many blacks down in that area?

Bl: Down in Lowellville, Ohio right out of Struthers there were a lot of black people down there because that is where the first steel mill was. It was a black and Irish town but the Italians who are the dominant people there now used to live in Hillsville, Pennsylvania. The reason the black people moved to Struthers from Lowellville was because they built the new steel mills and there was no transportation, nobody owned cars. The streetcar was the main form of transportation.

Be: From your recollection did you father work close to where you lived?

Bl: Yes, walking distance. In fact my mother would pack his lunch and hand it to him over the fence. I don't know whether you know the make up of Struthers. Struthers now is way up on top of the hill by Lake Hamilton but down in the center part which is industrial was still industrial back in those days and everybody lived right next to their job.

Be: What was your first adult occupation?

Bl: When I became an adult it was right in the middle of the Depression and I got a government job. When Roosevelt came in he established the CCC Camps and the guys that were eighteen and nineteen years old then were sent over to the camp. That was the prelude to the army. Then they established the NYA for the younger kids that were sixteen and seventeen years old. That stood for the National Youth Administration and I worked there. The seniors who were out of work built roads and worked for the WPA or the Work Progress Administration. They also had a CWA which was called the Civilian Work Administration. That occurred during the Depression which was between 1933 until they started the war economy

around 1938 when Hitler began taking over Europe. That was also when the steel mills were booming due to the war effort and people began buying cars.

Be: How long did you go to school? How far did you advance in your education?

Bl: I've been to several schools. I went to Wilberforce University on a basketball scholarship in the forties and then was drafted into the army. When I came back I went to Youngstown College and law school from 1946-1951. I had less than one year to graduate but a real estate boom had started and those guys were making so much money that I decided to leave school. I thought who needs law. I got a real estate license and started selling real estate. I did fairly well. I also got an insurance license. I had a debit collection. I did that for about six years. Then I got a job based on my business and college experience in the State Auditor's office. I became a state examiner and worked there from 1964 until I retired in 1983, almost twenty years.

Be: That was here in Youngstown?

Bl: Yes, but my job carried me all over the state of Ohio. When I was going to law school I worked for the Youngstown Water Department for ten years. I had thirty years in retirement credit and I have a substantial pension coming in from the state of Ohio for thirty years of service.

Be: About the time that you were in college you were married right?

Bl: I married in 1947 yes.

Be: When you got married and you got your job did you feel that you could live anywhere that you wanted to in Youngstown?

Bl: If you had the cash but they had a mortgage situation. The real estate people wanted make a double commission. They developed a thing for the black people called a land contract. If the white person's house was worth five thousand dollars they would sell that home for ten thousand dollars to the black person and take that money and build a home in Austintown or Boardman for the seller. Back in the forties and fifties Austintown and Boardman were cow pastures. Those ruthless real estate people in order to make a buck would have sold to anybody because they got a double commission. They would get a commission from the seller and the buyer. A lot of the rich in Youngstown are those that got in on that land deal.

Be: So you think it was based more on money than race?

Bl: I'm not going to discount the fact that race was involved. I think the black people were just grateful to have their own home. Don't forget that if you bought a home that was thirty years old it's only down hill from there. The galvanized steel waterpipes started busting and had to be replaced with copper and that's when the asphalt and vinyl siding came in. Race played a big part but a lot of it was economics. That's what America is all about. Even your brother would take advantage of you when there's a buck involved.

Be: So the neighborhood you lived in was ethnically diverse?

Bl: Yes, when I lived in Struthers. When I moved to Youngstown we were called block busters. That was a conversation piece to some guys. They'd go down to the tavern and say "Man I'm the only black person in that block. There isn't

anyone living around me but white folk.” If you went back there six months to a year later it would be an all black street.

Be: I heard there was a big controversy about swimming pools in Youngstown.

Bl: That happened all over.

Be: Was it as bad as they say?

Bl: Yes. The Kids got along but the parents didn’t want their kids integrated. Don’t forget all parents’ black and white wanted to do more for their kids. “My kid is not going to work at the iron house (steel mill), my kid is going to be a doctor or lawyer.” This was especially true of the people that came over from Italy, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

Be: So you think it’s more the parents than the kids.

Bl: Yes. Right now it’s the same way. If you see a kid acting all wrong he got that from home. He didn’t hear that word on the street. That can cause a whole lot of controversy. Some kids find out that what their parents told them wasn’t true.

Be: You were coming out of the military during this time?

Bl: Yes.

Be: How did you feel about all of this coming out of the military?

Bl: I was taught by my father years ago that “words don’t hurt you only sticks and stones.” He came in one time and two of us were fighting and he asked “what are you fighting about?” This kid had said something about my mother. My father said “he may have been talking about your mother and my wife but regardless I’m the one buying those clothes. Walk away from that stuff or it will lead you to an early grave.” He knew what he was talking about. He said avoid all fights as

much as possible. That's the principle that I've been using all my life. If somebody thinks they are so bad and everything I'll just let somebody else get them.

Be: How about Idora Park? Is it true that they had black days during that time?

Bl: That's right, that was accepted. The commercial people and organizations looked forward to it because that's when they could make money. They had one to three black days a year. The Masons out of Farrell or the Masons here would rent that day at Idora Park. The park manager made money and the organization also made money but they did shut the swimming pool down.

Be: Ok blacks weren't allowed in Idora Park? (*Addendum "They weren't allowed to swim in Idora Park." They were allowed in the park.*)

Bl: That was just a common thing accepted by the blacks. After a while some militants came in and they had to shut the pool down completely.

Be: How was the night life during that time?

Bl: The night life was when the blacks and whites got together. We had several top black clubs when I was in college. I managed the finest club in town called The Cotton Club.

Be: What year is this?

Bl: This was in 49', 50' and 51'. I have a picture of Ella Fitzgerald down there. She appeared at a white club called the Merry Go Round on the west side of town but afterwards she came to our after hour place around two-thirty and stayed until six or seven o'clock in the morning. Also the Ink Spots came in there and Tony Bennett.

Be: Any great jazz musicians go in there?

Bl: That's where the integration was! All the musicians would come down there. They appreciated playing with each other. The saxophones and trumpets would have jam sessions and play all night long. When they left their club in Trumbull County and New Castle they'd come down to the black club and they'd jam all night long.

Be: I heard a lot about the New Elm Club.

Bl: That was a dance hall. All the big bands would stop by the New Elm. Like Duke Ellington, Erskine Hawkins and Noble Sissle and Cab Calloway. They'd all stop and play songs. There was a guy that used to come here and sing a song "I'd work for you I'd slave for you I'd tear down the stars in the sky for you if that isn't love it will have to do until the real thing comes along." Andy Kirk! That was his name he came out of Kansas City. Most of the music came out of New Orleans and Kansas City and places like that.

Be: So it was pretty exciting around here then?

Bl: Yeah. Youngstown didn't take a back seat to the night life for anyone. We had a hell of a good time with no killings. Everything was opened. West Federal Street you could go down there around three or four o'clock in the morning and people were walking the streets. Can you imagine buying a beer for fifteen cents a double shot of scotch cost twenty-five cents.

Be: So the people got along pretty good?

Bl: Everyone got along fine. The whites would quit for the night and go back to their abodes and the blacks would go home and everyone would look forward to the weekend.

Be: During this period there were a lot of blacks that migrated to Youngstown from the south in the forties and fifties do you remember them?

Bl: There were stops in Cleveland and Pittsburgh but Youngstown was nice because it had a small hometown atmosphere.

Be: So that's why they came to live in Youngstown?

Bl: Yes. They'd go where their friends were. They'd send mail and tell you how they were and all the money they were making. The best job I ever had was when I was working one summer down in Dayton, Ohio. I made sixty-five dollars a week. That was good money and you could do more with than you could with the high rate of pay you have now. The people on the lower level are still suffering, making minimum wage. Then some people are making five times as much because they have the right connections. That's were the disparity is.

Be: Were you tolerant of the new people that came to Youngstown?

Bl: Yes we appreciated the new people because there was plenty of work. You could get three jobs in one day if you didn't like your job. If you didn't like the Sheet and Tube you could go down to the Republic. If you wanted to work right then they'd put you on the three o'clock shift.

Be: So were whites accepting of the new migrants?

Bl: Yes if people stayed in their place they would accept them because it was a black mans job. Our society was built on waiters and bellhops. They were the top of

society. They were ahead of the steel mill workers because they were around the white people all their lives giving them service and getting tips. They would listen to what the white people were talking about and go and buy stock. They were the informants to the people out here. They stayed there until after the war until we all went to school through the GI Bill of Rights. There was jealousy between the waiters, bellhops and college students.

Be: Do you think your parents did the right thing by coming to Youngstown?

Bl: I think so yes.

Be: So by coming to Youngstown you did raise the standard of living for your family then?

Bl: All of my nephews, my sisters kids got degrees some place else. I have one nephew that graduated from Cardinal Mooney at fifteen and graduated from Georgetown University at nineteen. You might know his father up at Youngstown University a man named Dr. Homer Warren.

Be: Yes I know him really well. This concludes my interview. Thank you for your participation.