

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

African American Migration to Youngstown

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1922

HERBERT ARMSTRONG

Interviewed

By

Michael Beverly

On

May 6, 1999

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: HERBERT ARMSTRONG

INTERVIEWER: Michael Beverly

SUBJECT: African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965

DATE: May 6, 1999

B: This is an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program with Herbert Armstrong, regarding the African American Migration to Youngstown, by Michael Beverly, on May 6, 1999 at 3414 Kingston Lane in Youngstown, Ohio and the time is 2:30 P.M.

What year were you born?

A: 1919.

B: In Youngstown?

A: Yes, I'm a native.

B: What was the birthplace of your parents?

A: My mother was born in Virginia and my father was born in North Carolina.

B: What year did they come to Youngstown?

A: My father came here in 1915 to open up a business. My mother stayed in Cleveland to give birth to her first child and then she came in 1916 to Youngstown to help my father run his business.

B: Do you know how they heard about Youngstown?

A: My father left North Carolina after he graduated from college and went to New York. After New York he went to Cleveland. He heard that Youngstown was the perfect place to open the kind of business he wanted because the steel mills were doing quite well in those years. He thought that it would be a great opportunity to

- open a men's haberdashery at 424 West Federal Street in Youngstown. He stayed in business for 10 years until the KKK drove him out of business. They drove his white customers away. I was born in the apartment over the store he owned and operated.
- B: You said that your mother came to Youngstown to help your father with his business; did she have any other employment?
- A: My mother was a schoolteacher in Virginia for seven years after she graduated from the Virginia State College. Both my parents graduated from Virginia State College in the class of 1910.
- B: In your household, were there any other children?
- A: There were seven children in the Armstrong Clan. There were four boys and three girls. Two of the girls are now deceased. I am the only one living in Youngstown. Two are in Illinois and two are in California.
- B: Did you work outside your home while you were growing up?
- A: I was quite an industrialist. I always had an eye for business and wanted to make plenty of money. I always wanted to go to college. My father said that I had to work my way through college just as he did. Due to the Depression, he could not afford college tuition for me and that I would appreciate the effort upon completion.
- B: You lived close to the Monkey's Nest?
- A: No.
- B: Do you know the history of the Monkey's Nest?
- A: It was in the Vindicator not too long ago. A storeowner had some monkey he kept in the store window or something like that. There were a lot of nice families that came from that neighborhood. Some people made something of their lives who grew up there, both white and black.
- B: You said that you worked in the Youngstown Towel Company?
- A: Well, when the Depression hit my mother had a beauty school and my dad was a waiter. My family lost everything. We had a great family friend that helped us. He moved us into a house on Rayen and North Avenue. At that point, my parents and their friends would not see us down and out. People aided us so we would not have to go on welfare. My father got a job in the dining room of Republic Steel and stayed there until he retired due to disability and subsequently passed away. My mother had a beauty shop and kept it going through the Depression to

- keep money coming in. We had really been blessed by friends, who stood by us because of who my parents were.
- B: Was the neighborhood that you grew up in ethnically diverse?
- A: Yes. The north side as well.
- B: Tell me a little about your family.
- A: My uncle was the first black detective in Youngstown. There were other black cops before his time, but none were detectives. My mother was the first black licensed beautician in the whole state of Ohio. She held license Number One.
- B: What was your mother's name again?
- A: Maggie Harth Armstrong, but her business name was Madge Armstrong. She manufactured her own products. She wanted to be another Madame C.J. Walker and then the Depression hit. The day before the Depression hit she went down and withdrew everything from her bank account but one dollar. She said that she had a premonition that something was going to happen. I was about 10 or 11 years old at that time. My mother and father always taught us about the black pioneers of Youngstown. My mother belonged to many civic clubs in the area. I became civic minded because of her.
- B: Have you ever heard of the Roberts Deliberating Committee?
- A: I've been a member for over 40 years. We just gave a \$15,000 donation to the Minority Scholarship Fund for Youngstown State.
- B: What was your first adult occupation?
- A: I worked at the Towel and Linen Supply from age 14 to 20. I left there and went to Republic Steel but it wasn't for me. I was there for one year. I also worked at the Republic Rubber Company on Albert Street.
- B: What was it like at Republic Steel as far as the different ethnic groups? Were you placed with only blacks?
- A: No, it was mixed. Foreign born and African American all worked together.
- B: Was advancement possible for blacks there?
- A: No. We were just laborers.
- B: Were you a member of the union?

- A: The unions started in 1936 and were in the process of unionizing all workers. I was not there long enough to be approached for membership.
- B: Could you go to anyone if you had a problem?
- A: The foreman was a very fine gentleman to talk with. I didn't have any problems or any need to talk with anyone.
- B: Did the blacks get the worst jobs at Republic Steel?
- A: A job was a job.
- B: Didn't you go to the service?
- A: Yes. I went to the service from Republic Rubber in January of 1942. I was there for four years. I went to North Carolina. It was there that I met with racism. I didn't believe there was any such thing. I came face to face with it there.
- B: Were you in a segregated unit there?
- A: Yes.
- B: Was it in the town or just in the camp?
- A: The camp. The camp had separate water fountains for the white and water fountains for the black. I drank from any fountain I wanted. I wasn't going to fight for this country and be treated like that. I was taught at a young age never to fear anyone and to this day I don't.
- B: When you got out of the service did you finish your education?
- A: When I got out of the service I went back to the Towel and Linen Supply and started all over again. They let me schedule my hours around my schooling.
- B: Did you go to Youngstown State?
- A: I went to Youngstown College. That's what it was called at that time. The people at the Towel Supply were wonderful. They stood behind me in everything I chose.
- B: These were Jewish people, right?
- A: Yes. They were my friends, my mentors. I think very highly of them. I decided that I wanted to go to the School of Business at Youngstown College. I enrolled and was accepted into the program. I changed jobs to the Republic Rubber Company. When I worked the day shift I would switch with someone on the

- midnight shift so I could go to school in the morning. I would get off work at 7 and run home to change and get back to school by 8.
- B: How was it going there during this time?
- A: We had to fight racism there as well. I became a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity that was on campus in May of 1946.
- B: Was this an all black fraternity?
- A: Yes, it was all black. I got involved with campus activities. I was the first black to be the secretary treasurer of Pan Hellenic Council. I was active in other clubs on campus. I became the first president of the first scholar club of Kappa Alpha Psi on campus. I graduated and became president of the Youngstown Alumni Chapter. I was always in a position of leadership. That's just the type of person I am. I want to be first in everything.
- B: Did you experience racism from the professors, also?
- A: Maybe one or two. I fought for this country and no one was going to degrade me.
- B: During this period, did you feel like you could live anywhere in Youngstown?
- A: No, you couldn't. There were red lines. Parmel Avenue was as far north as a black could move. Belmont Avenue West was where the blacks congregated. The earlier blacks lived on Grant Street. My family lived on Belmont and Arlington. Belmont East was white. We lived on the east side of Belmont Avenue before the Great Depression.
- B: Did real estate agents and bankers do this?
- A: It was done by design. Anything of this nature was done by design. When I got married 44 years ago, I was looking for a place to take my bride I couldn't find a good place to live. No one wanted to rent to blacks.
- B: This was in the mid 50's?
- A: Yes. We had a lot to overcome.
- B: What was the nightlife like at that time? Were there bands?
- A: The bands would come to New Elms Ballroom on Elm Street. Clarence King promoted these bands. He lives around here. He should be up in his 90's now.
- B: So, anyone that was someone at that time came from around here?

A: Yes. All these young famous musicians were here.

B: So you really experienced a great nightlife in this area then?

A: As it goes. There were plenty of nightclubs, but I didn't want that kind of life. I was still a teenager.

B: Were you permitted to go to all of these places?

A: Well, at the Palace Theater we were only seated in the balconies. At the Liberty Theater in Girard, Ohio my wife and I went and sat in a middle row and an usher came running up telling us we had to move. I refused to move. I paid for my tickets. I wasn't going to take it. I sat there and watched the movie.

B: What about Idora Park?

A: We went and rode all the rides, but we could not swim in the pool. They had a day set aside for the colored folks. People would come in from Pennsylvania, Warren, wherever for this day.

B: When did this end?

A: I don't recall when this ended.

B: Besides the special days, could the blacks go to Idora Park?

A: Yes, on a limited basis.

B: During this time, you became an educator, right?

A: I got my first degree in Business Administration. I couldn't get a job in the field in which I had a degree so I thought about going back and getting a degree in education. I entered the School of Education and got my teaching certificate. I was told that there was a job at a high school teaching business education. I went there and they told me that there was no such job because I was Negro.

B: What year was this?

A: 1953. I went back and took up Elementary Education and got my certification. I went to see the superintendent. He said that he wanted someone with experience. I told him that everyone had to get experience somewhere. I was qualified. I trained. I was just as qualified as anyone else that came out of Youngstown College. Two weeks later his secretary calls me and told me that there was an opening at a school on the northeast side of the city.

B: When was this?

A: I sent away and got my elementary teaching certificate in 1953 so it was around the same time. No, I started teaching in 1952 at the elementary level. I was going back and forth college so that I had enough hours to get a degree. So, in 1953 I got the degree in elementary education.

B: You weren't the first black schoolteacher in Youngstown were you?

A: No, I was about the seventh.

B: You ended up becoming a principal, right?

A: Well, yes. I was involved in the Helping Teacher program of the Board of Education which selected outstanding classroom teachers to go into the elementary schools and assist beginning classroom teachers and teachers new to the system helping them to become established in their assignments. I worked in the program for two years. Upon completion of this tour of duty, I went back into the classroom as a fourth grade teacher. I had taken the examination for Principalship earlier in my career and passed. There was no position for me. During the summer of 1964 I was called to open Covington School and get it ready for the fall session because the principal there had fallen ill. I filled in as the substitute and in March of 1965, due to the death of the principal, I was appointed the first Black elementary school principal in the school system. I stayed there for eleven years. I was transferred to be Principal of Monroe Elementary School for the 1975-76 school year. I was there for five years when it was closed by Board action, to be merged along with the closed Grant Elementary School into the former Hillman Junior High Building thereby creating the Hillman Elementary School of which I served as its first principal from 1980 to 1986 when I retired. I received my doctorate in Education Administration from Akron University in June of 1974.

B: When you became principal were you accepted by the teachers at Covington?

A: One teacher I had when I went to school there came up to me and said, "Boy, you're not going to boss me." I told her that I was the principal and that I was going to be the principal and that if there was cooperation there will be no bosses. We ended up becoming the best of friends.

B: While you were teaching do you recall any students coming from parts of the south?

A: Oh, yes. I received a number of students that moved up from the south. They were nice people.

B: Did you get along with their parents?

- A: Oh, yes. The parents were lovely. I might have had one or two parents that were from here in Youngstown that gave problems, but I straightened them out. The people from the south were very nice and cooperative.
- B: I heard that some of the people that moved here were slower.
- A: No. That may have happened when I was a kid, but during my ten years as principal, no. They were educated in the south. They may be a little behind us. Educators help people from where they are and bring them forward.
- B: So, there really wasn't a problem.
- A: With me there really was no problem. A child will be educated. A teacher teaches children. It wasn't the student's fault that the former school wasn't where we were. That's how I created the relationships I had with the parents. Every child in the building was my child.
- B: Students from the south weren't really that different then?
- A: No, they really weren't that different.
- B: Are you glad that your parents moved here to Youngstown?
- A: I don't know any other place than Youngstown. Yes, I am very glad. I worked through the Youngstown City Schools to become a teacher here. This is my home. Why should I go away to do the same things I could do right here? I wanted to stay right here and become somebody.
- B: Do you feel that your parents helped you become the person you are by moving here?
- A: Yes. There were a number of educated blacks that moved into Youngstown that faced racism. There was a pharmacist and medical doctors that made it good here. Others had left. We lost a lot of good people that left to become someone somewhere else because the community was so racist. My parents were involved in everything that was civic in the area.
- B: When you were growing up did you trust the police?
- A: Oh, yes. They were good to us. My uncle was a police officer.
- B: How were the mayor and other political figures toward the blacks?
- A: Henderson was too good to be mayor. He was an honest man. Jack Hunter was outstanding in my eyes. I didn't get too involved as far as politics were concerned. Yes, I voted but that was about it.

- B: During this time did you feel that the black community was unified?
- A: The people that were pushing for civil rights were very active and helped pull the black community together. They were involved in the black women's clubs and served as role models for the whole community. The Robert's Deliberating Club organized in 1920 involved community minded men of the Black race.
- B: Would you say that Youngstown had a strong black community?
- A: It depends on how you describe strength. As a child, we don't see what the adults are going through to help bring about change because to us we are just put there having fun not knowing what the conditions are until we grow up. Then we learn what others have done. As far as civil rights are concerned, the young renegades think that they are responsible for civil rights when they really aren't. The civil rights movement didn't begin here in Youngstown. People ahead of us paved the way for what we had to maintain and achieve us our civil rights. To say what point in history this came about I can't say. You continually fight to bring about change. Sometimes you made progress and sometimes you took two steps back.
- B: Don't you come from a long line of educators?
- A: Yes.
- B: Your grandparents were, right?
- A: Yes. My maternal grandparents, mother and father. Grandfather was a lawyer as well as an elementary school principal in Virginia.
- B: Your family was pretty prominent in the towns that they lived in, weren't they?
- A: They were for being professional. I had a paternal aunt and a cousin that were teachers in North Carolina. My mother's side of the family was in the school system in Virginia, my mom's sister, who is now deceased, was a principal in Louisville, Kentucky.
- B: Where do you see Youngstown in the coming years?
- A: Looking down the road, I can see Youngstown coming back in a different type of format than it was in the past. It may not be in my lifetime, but I definitely see something happening.
- B: Do you see anything starting to happen already?
- A: I believe we have started by getting the government buildings downtown. They are talking about opening up the square. When that happens I see people moving

back into Youngstown because traffic will be moving east and west instead of north and south.

B: Do you think that this is going to be a long process?

A: Definitely. It will be long and slow.

B: Well, I would like to thank you for your time.

A: I hope that I have been of help to you.

B: You definitely have.

A: I could say so much more, but you'd get tired of listening. I believe that education is the key to success. Know what you put in your head and know what you are taking out. Use it and apply it then you will find that everything will open up to you. Progress on and don't let any man turn you around. Keep moving onward and upward.

B: Thank you. I will.

End of Interview.