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2018-06-02 Oral History with Willie Hartwell

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THE ROOTS OF COMMUNITY PROJECT

Carnegie Libraries for African Americans 1908-1924

Oral History with Willie Hartwell

June 2, 2018

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Biography

Willie Hartwell was born in 1942 Glenn, Texas and grew up in Houston, where she lived on Andrews Street in the city's Fourth Ward. There, she graduated from the Gregory School before attending Booker T. Washington High School. Later moving to the Third Ward with her mother, Hartwell attended Miller Junior and Yates (now Jack Yates) Senior high schools.

Hartwell was about seven years-old when she and her younger brother happened upon the segregated Carnegie Branch library one afternoon on Frederick Street. Neither had visited a public library before. Located about seven city blocks from her home, the Carnegie Branch was the only library Hartwell recalls using—or even knowing about—as a child, and it remained her primary source for recreational reading and discovery for most of her childhood.

Hartwell also recalls attending several of Houston's African-American churches, among them Friendship and Antioch Baptist churches, the latter located on present-day Clay Street, then just across from the Carnegie Branch library. She also remembers visiting the Rainbow Theatre (since demolished) on West Dallas Street and seeing Foley's department store on Main Street.

Hartwell later earned an undergraduate degree in nursing from Prairie View A&M and a graduate degree in health education from the University of Houston. Now in her seventies, she still resides in Houston, having settled long ago in Sunnyside, a predominantly African American suburb of Houston that developed in the early twentieth century.

Transcript

Griffis: This is Dr. Matthew Griffis of the University of Southern Mississippi interviewing Willie Hartwell on June 2nd, 2018. We're in Houston, Texas at the African American Library at the Gregory School. And I'll be speaking with Ms. Hartwell about her recollections using Houston's "Colored Carnegie Branch" library which

opened in 1913, closed in 1960 and was demolished in 1961 in the Fourth Ward of Houston.

I first wanted to ask... You were telling me earlier that you attended this school, when it was the Gregory School?

WH: Yes.

Griffis: When it was in this building [1300 Victor Street]?

WH: Yes.

Griffis: So, were you born in Houston? Or how long have you lived in Houston?

WH: I've always been in Houston. I was born in Glenn, Texas—of which I have no memory. I've always been here in Houston.

Griffis: "Glenn" ... as in?

WH: G-L-E-N-N. Mm-hmm.

Griffis: ... That must be a very small place. I've never heard of it.

WH: ... It must be. [laughs]

Griffis: What were your parents' professions? What did they do [for a living]?

WH: Well, my father worked at a grocery store. That's who I lived with. Just my father and my brother. I had a younger brother.

Griffis: Whereabouts in Houston did you live at the time you used the library?

WH: Okay... and I still remember it. It's embedded: 1107 Andrew[s].

Griffis: 1107 Andrew... *Andrews* Street?

WH: Uh-huh, yes.

Griffis: How close to the library was that?

WH: Umm... You know, I'm not good with distances like that. We just had... We were free. We could just go anywhere at that time. And you know, we just walked everywhere. I'd walk from Andrew [St.] to this school all the time. And I walked to that library and found it. It was like an adventure—we used to go on adventures and find things and that was one of the things that we found one day.

Griffis: Just found... Just walking?

WH: We just found it.

Griffis: Had you ever heard of it [the library] before?

WH: Had never heard of it, had never been to a library. Because I came from a house with no books in it. So, you know... We were just looking around.

Griffis: Do you remember how old you were?

WH: We had [reached] elementary age. So, I'd say six, seven [or] eight.

Griffis: Do you remember your first time walking into it?

WH: I do.

Griffis: That particular visit stands out?

WH: It stands out. It was just, "Ooh, look at this. I wonder what this is?" Those [front] steps were different. We'd never seen a place like that. It was like, regal, you know; that kind of place. And so, we started up the steps and got to the door—[a] huge door. And it was summer time, we were out of school. Because I remember the place being dark and cool, coming out the sunshine. And quiet. Just like an echo should be in there.

And a lady met us—a lady. And when you were talking [earlier, before the interview] about the names of the librarians... Her name was "Library Lady." We never knew her name. I don't have any memory of it. And it was quiet. You had to be quiet in those days, in the library. So, she showed us books. And that was just great because we were readers in school, and she told us we could read those books. I don't remember her giving us a card—you know, a library card—or letting us take them home—I just don't remember that—but she said we could read there. She picked the books and told us where to sit. And the only stipulation I remember [was]: "You have to be quiet. You can't be talking."

So, that became a place for us to go. And you know, we spent a lot of time there. And I was thinking, if my daddy was still living—if somebody asked him "Did you know your children were going to that library?" he would not [have known].

Griffis: No?

WH: No. When I said [earlier] we were free, we were *free*. You know [laughs]... I think like free range chickens. We just could go anywhere we wanted to. Nobody bothered children in those days.

And so, the library became a place for us to go. It [the library] was cool in the summertime and we just started going. We didn't mind having to be quiet. We didn't mind being quiet for that time. If we wanted to talk, we did it on the way home.

Griffis: Was there a library at the school you attended?

WH: I don't remember... I don't remember there being a library here [at the Gregory School]. I don't remember ever seeing or even knowing what a library was.

Griffis: So that [visiting the Carnegie library] was your very first library experience?

WH: I think it was.

Griffis: So, you attended the Gregory School for elementary [school]...

WH: I did. I graduated from here. Mm-hmm.

Griffis: Where did you attend secondary school or high school?

WH: Okay. I started at Booker T. Washington [High School]. It seemed like at that time, they decided to make it a senior high school. And at about that time, I moved with my mother, because my dad got sick... Okay, so I moved with my mother and that put us going to the Third Ward area. So, I went to Miller Junior High and then [Jack] Yates Senior High, and that's where I graduated from.

Griffis: Did you attend college at all?

WH: I did.

Griffis: Whereabouts?

WH: I got a primary degree in nursing, a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing from Prairie View A&M and then on to [the] University of Houston for a Master's in health education. And I'm sure the library [there] had something; studying never was a problem for me because I liked reading. That was my first hobby, by the way: reading.

Griffis: What kind of books did you like?

WH: Umm... any kind of stories. I would say stories. And [they] could be about anything. I was the type of student that... There weren't any books in our home, except for... we used to call them "funny books"—they were comics—and we would read those. And I've always been a proponent of making children learn how to read [by giving them] a book they like. A funny book has the same words as a textbook in it but they're learning [from the] funny book.

So, we would read any kind of... We could buy funny books. They cost a dime. So, you know; we had that amount of money. So, we just read it... And my brother too. He's about the only man that I knew that always had a book. Because my husband doesn't read [laughs].

Griffis: You said that you were "free range" [growing up]. Very free.

WH: Mm-hmm.

Griffis: Didn't your parents know that you were going to the library?

WH: I don't think so. That's why I was thinking [earlier]... I wondered if someone had asked my daddy "Do you know where your children are?" He didn't. He was at work.

Griffis: It sounds to me like Houston—or at least the Fourth Ward, the part of Houston you were living in at the time—was relatively safe.

WH: It was. And I think it was pretty much safe for all children then, you know.

Griffis: What was Houston—or the Fourth Ward [specifically]—like to live in, back in those days? What do you remember about the community?

WH: Well, the community was... Everybody helped. You know, like a village raising the children—everybody helped. On the way from school, for instance, there were ladies that would sit on the porch and make sure that children went home.

There were no fights because they [the ladies] knew everybody and would threaten to call your home or call you up on their porch and give you a spanking. And you know, that would happen [laughs].

Every place was pretty much safe for children. And there were, I think... in the white neighborhood and the black neighborhood there were parallel businesses. We [blacks] went to the cleaners here and there were white cleaners there. Things like that. It was parallel.

Griffis: At what age did you begin to notice a separation or a separateness between whites versus blacks?

WH: You know, it wasn't so much that I noticed it. I heard about it. You know, you kind of *heard* about things like that. I didn't go into a place and they'd say, "You can't come in here because you're black." Nothing like that. No overt racism did I face. [Because], you know we didn't go too many places. Like you take children to all the places to eat now? That wasn't done. We ate at home.

Griffis: A very different time...

WH: It was. And one of our amusements was going to the movies. If we could scratch up nine cents—that's what it cost—we would go to the movies, just over and over. See the same thing. It didn't matter.

Griffis: Do you remember the name of the theatre? Was it the Lincoln?

WH: [The] Rainbow on West Dallas [Street].

Griffis: There's a picture of that one downstairs...

WH: It is. It sure is.

Griffis: ... in one of the [African American Library's] exhibits. That's where I saw that.

WH: And we walked every place that we went. We could walk the town and look in the windows. We would walk out West Dallas [St.] and go right up beside Foley's—that was one of the major stores.

Griffis: Did you know about other libraries in Houston? Or ever try using any of the other libraries?

WH: No. [As] I told you, that [the Carnegie library] was just a discovery: "A library? What is that?" We didn't even know what it was when we walked into it.

Griffis: You mentioned earlier that sense you had going up the steps and going through the large, front doors. And you'd said it was the kind of place you'd expect [to hear] an echo—it was dark, and it was cool...

WH: Mm-hmm.

Griffis: What else do you remember about the look of the library or the layout of the building?

WH: Long tables. And I think, maybe, a couple of people. There wasn't that many people in there. Because if we hadn't been so adventurous, we might have turned around and left. Because it would have looked like a place where grown people came. There was a distinct difference in children and grown people. You know, like my daddy smoked. But grown people smoked, children didn't. That was enough for us.

Griffis: Do you remember seeing a lot of adults there when you visited the library?

WH: Never.

Griffis: So, it was mostly children?

WH: No, it was just us. There wasn't hardly anybody in there.

Griffis: If I remember our conversation on the phone yesterday, you told me that you began using the library in the late 1940s and in the 50s?

WH: Yes. That was when I was a child. I was born in '42.

Griffis: Okay, I'm learning [from archival records] that that was around the period when use of that library was declining. There weren't that many people using it. So, what you're describing really corroborates that.

WH: Oh, okay. Yes, because we didn't know anybody that had ever been to the library and we heard talking. This was all discovery.

Griffis: It was almost like a little secret.

WH: It was. It really was. And I don't remember us talking about it with other children.

Griffis: So, when you say "*our* secret" or "*our* discovery," you're referring to yourself and your brother?

WH: That's right.

Griffis: Did you always go to the library with your brother? Or did you go on your own or with friends?

WH: No, always with him. When we was walking at that time and looking around, we were together. We were always together.

Griffis: So, [you saw] none of the people you knew at school? You never saw them at the library?

WH: Never. And we never discussed it with the teacher.

Griffis: Oh, wow. Interesting. Very interesting... Now, you said earlier that you didn't know the name of the librarian, [that] you knew her as "Library Lady" ...

WH: The Library Lady.

Griffis: Was that how you addressed her?

WH: Well, I'm just trying to think... We maybe never... never addressed her. When we were talking about her, the Library Lady.

Griffis: Were you ever in the lower level of the library, where the auditorium was? Or in the meeting rooms?

WH: [No.] I didn't even know that was there.

Griffis: Interesting... Well, at that time it was probably being rented out to an organization or something.

WH: ... Maybe. She [the librarian] didn't tell us to go there. You know, [when] I grew up we did what the adults said. That's how my daddy left us at home. Because you would have a sitter with children that age now. We didn't have a sitter. And so, she [the librarian] told us where to sit, and she would bring us the book and that is what we did.

Griffis: Do you remember there being any library clubs—reading clubs—or any programs like that?

WH: [No.] Nothing.

Griffis: What else can you recall about the layout of the library? Do you remember where the librarian's desk was?

WH: Yeah, kind of. That's what... She was behind that. When she got through helping us, she went back there. And it was like she was watching everybody—watching us so we wouldn't talk [laughs].

Griffis: Did that make you feel uncomfortable at all?

WH: No, no. We liked her because she let us see these books! And we were readers. We got books at school and we just read 'em. So, when the teacher would say whatever lesson we were on, we'd [have already] read that.

We didn't have a TV. Not at all. And when I tell people that, they say "Well, did you ask your daddy why you didn't have a TV?" No. He was an adult. We didn't deal with him. Whatever he wanted us to do, he told us and that was it.

Griffis: So, in the absence of TV, reading was...

WH: ... reading was it. And to find a place with all those books that we could read? And I don't think she let us take them home.

Griffis: Okay. Maybe you had to be a certain age to have a borrower's card.

WH: ... Maybe. Mm-hmm.

Griffis: Do you remember there being any exhibits, or anything [like that] inside the library?

WH: Nothing but the tables, the chairs... and the books.

Griffis: ... and the books. Okay. What other places in town—in the Fourth Ward, or anywhere else African Americans lived in Houston at the time—what other places would say were popular meeting places or community spaces for African Americans?

WH: Okay... Across the street from where we lived—and they say it's still there—there was a Masonic Hall [at 1102 Andrews Street]. And there were people that went there. And the churches—the churches. There seemed to be a lot of churches.

Griffis: Did you attend church?

WH: Sometimes. Not much.

Griffis: ... Would you say you went to the library more than church?

WH: Mm-hmm, yeah. Mm-hmm.

Griffis: When did go to church... Do you remember which church you attended?

WH: We attended Antioch at one time, Friendship Baptist—both those were Baptist churches—and any other church that anybody would invite us to, we could go.

Griffis: Okay, so churches and the Masonic Temple... Do you remember a lot of the businesses? You mentioned [earlier] walking around... What kind of businesses—?

WH: Yes, there was the grocery store. And they were owned by white people, the grocery stores. There was an Asian [grocer] on one corner; we went to that store. Then there was a white man... I don't know, just a white man... on another corner... Then there were beer joints that children were not allowed in at night.

Griffis: ... These were what again, sorry?

WH: Like a... we called them a "beer joint."

Griffis: Oh, "joint." Okay.

WH: Yeah, a café. Yeah.

Griffis: Like a club...

WH: But children were not allowed there at night. Because that's when they actually operated. And, let's see... There was a drug store—I remember a drug store on West Dallas [St.]. And of course, a barbershop and a beauty shop. Those kinds of businesses. Like I said, there were parallel businesses.

Griffis: Do you remember anything about when library services [in Houston] were desegregated?

WH: [No.]

Griffis: Do you remember at all when the [Carnegie Branch] library closed in 1960?

WH: No. I was living in [the] Third Ward then, when that happened.

Griffis: Okay, I see. Do you remember precisely where the W.L.D. Johnson branch [library] was? Because I have the address in my notes. But [I'm unsure] where it fit within the overall map [of Houston], and in which Ward...

WH: Well, you know when you mentioned that [earlier, in a conversation before the interview], I thought that was near the University of Houston somewhere. Because now, let me see... Now, I live in a part of the city called Sunnyside, which has always been a black area. And maybe that [W.L.D. Johnson] is the name of our library? I went to it several times [but] the reason I stopped [was] because when I wanted to read a book, they never had it. And so, what I do [is] go buy the book and I'd finish them really quick, and [then] I would donate it to the library.

Griffis: ... I see. Well, Sunnyside was one of the areas where, as I'm learning, as early as the thirties and forties there were letters written to the [Houston Public] Library, [asking] "Can we have another segregated branch but in the Sunnyside area?"

WH: Mm-hmm.

Griffis: And which Ward was that?

WH: Now, that's not a Ward. That's [Sunnyside is] like a community.

Griffis: I see, okay. Now, you've gone over a number of specific memories of visiting the [Carnegie branch] library and the things you did there. Is there any one memory that stands out as maybe your favorite memory of visiting the library? Or something that happened to you there that made an impact?

WH: Nothing. Nothing happened there. Nothing. We would just go and read and when we got tired of reading, we would leave. [There was] not too much interaction with the Library Lady. We just sat there and read and, you know [laughs], like you'd get up and say, "Well, I'm going home now."

Griffis: And you stopped using the library eventually—

WH: Let's see... Yeah, we did. Because we probably... *maybe* found another place. Or we stopped running around so much... I don't know why we stopped [using the library].

Griffis: Maybe it's just something people grow out of.

WH: Yeah, more like that. Maybe we just grew out of it.

Griffis: My last question for you is: Were there any questions that you were hoping that I would ask that I didn't ask? Or [are there] any last memories you wanted to share or comments you wanted to make?

WH: Well, no... It was just like a jewel, just finding something with all those books because we didn't have money to buy books. And it was just great that we could find a place that she [the librarian] would let us come in and sit down and read. That why we didn't mind being quiet [laughs].

Griffis: I understand. That's how I felt about the public library—I was eight when I started using the public library. And it was somewhere that my sister and I went with our mother, but still it was... There was such a feeling of calm when I'd enter that building. I'd feel away from...

WH: Yes. Just calm, and...

Griffis: ... not that the outside world was so scary to me. But it [the public library] was just... a space... to be. I felt so safe around those books.

WH: And there wasn't anything about *my* growing up that was scary... Like I said, children... Nobody bothered children. You know. And when my brother and I would have a fight, there was somebody always looking at us. And I have one daughter, and that's what I tell her: there is always someone watching you. Always. Because the neighbors that did not work watched us.

Griffis: There was that "front porch life" that you were describing earlier...

WH: Yes. It was very active. They were out there when we went to school. And we would pick up children along the way and drop them off on the way back. That's how a group went to school.

Griffis: Oh, that's interesting. You walked together as a group?

WH: Mm-hmm.

Griffis: All right. Those were basically all my questions and you've given me really great information. I thank you for your time and for donating this interview [to the Roots of Community project].



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