2018-07-16 Oral History with Myrtle Ross

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Oral History with Myrtle Ross

July 16, 2018

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Biography

Myrtle Jackson Ross was born in 1929 in Austin County, Texas, where her father worked as a cotton-picker. When she was about eight years-old, Ross’s family moved to Houston, settling on Mason Street in the city’s Fourth Ward. There, her father worked at a hospital and her mother worked as a homemaker. Ross graduated from the Gregory School on Victor Street before attending Booker T. Washington High School on West Dallas Street.

Ross was in high school when she began visiting Houston’s Colored Carnegie Library, which was situated directly behind Booker T. Washington High School. For Ross, the library served primarily as a source of recreational reading materials; and though she did not participate in any library clubs or programs, Ross was one of several Washington school students selected by the librarian, Ms. Florence Bandy, to help process books in the Carnegie library’s basement.

After graduating from high school in 1947, Ross attended Texas Southern University, Johnson’s Business School and Erma Hughes Business School. She worked for the federal census and later in a grocery store. She also married and raised a family.

Ross, who has resided in Houston since childhood, remembers growing up in the era of segregation (ca. 1940s) and recalls several other Houston landmarks, including the Rainbow and Lincoln theatres and the Pilgrim Temple Building (demolished in the 1960s) on the corner of West Dallas and Bagby streets.

Transcript

Griffis: This is Dr. Matthew Griffis of the University of Southern Mississippi interviewing Ms. Myrtle Ross on July 16th, 2018. This is an oral history interview for the Roots of Community Project. I'm sitting here in Hattiesburg Mississippi, in my office at the University; and Ms. Ross is in Houston, Texas. And due to the distance, we are of course conducting this interview over the telephone.
I plan to ask Ms. Ross about her recollections growing up in Houston and, more specifically, her memories of using the segregated library—the Carnegie library there, which opened on the corner of Frederick and Robin streets in the early twentieth century [1913]—long before her time—but permanently closed in 1960.

So, thanks once again, Ms. Ross, for donating this interview and participating in the project. So, my first question: Have you lived in Houston all your life? Are you from Houston?

MR: Most of it. I wasn’t born here. But I’ve lived most of my life here, except one year in Michigan.

Griffis: At what age did you move to Houston?

MR: I think we came here when I was about seven or eight, I’m not sure.

Griffis: Okay. When your family moved to Houston, in what part of Houston did you live?

MR: We lived in Fourth Ward. In the Fourth Ward area of Houston, Texas. They call it Freedman’s Town now.

Griffis: Do you recall the street?

MR: Um… I’m trying to think if I was on the… Well, I’m trying to think right now… I can’t remember right now. [Ross lived on Mason Street.]

Griffis: I understand. That’s fine. So, you’ve lived in Houston for most of your life. At what age did you begin using the library—the old Carnegie library on Frederick Street?

MR: Well, I finished Gregory School, and when I finished Gregory Elementary School in the sixth grade I went to Booker T. Washington High School and the [Carnegie] library was right behind the school. And sometime, while I was going to Booker T. Washington, was when I used to use the library.

Griffis: I see. Did any of the schools you attended have their own libraries?

MR: No.

Griffis: No? Okay. Is it possible to recall your very first visit to the [Colored Carnegie] library, or some of your earliest visits?

MR: Not really. It [was] such a long time ago.

Griffis: Do you remember what you did when you visited the library?

MR: Well, we would check out the books. And then the librarian would let us—would take us down to the basement and we would put the colors—she would show us how to put the pockets in the books and put the numbers in there.

Griffis: Okay, interesting… Do you recall the kinds of books that you used to read when you were that age?
MR: Well, most of the time I would read about traveling and I read—the one I really remember is [Louisa May Alcott’s] Little Women. And most of them I read was history or either traveling… It’s been so long that I don’t remember the names of them.

Griffis: That’s fine. So, fiction and non-fiction. What do you remember, if anything, about the collections? The amount of books: was there more fiction than non-fiction? What was the selection like?

MR: Oh, that’s hard to remember. We would just go up the [front] steps and go inside and… I just don’t remember the kinds of books that were there.

Griffis: I see. Now, you said “going up the steps”: that old building had a very distinctive style about it. Particularly [the idea of] “going up the steps”—there weren’t a lot of buildings in the South that had basements of any kind; it [the library] had a raised basement—

MR: Right. True.

Griffis: Can you remember anything about the layout of the library? What it looked like inside, generally?

MR: Well, we would like to go up all those steps and just walk around in there, look around and look out the window—we could look out the window and look down. And then, when we would go down [to the basement], you know, we couldn’t see much.

Griffis: When you say “go down,” do you mean in the basement?

MR: Basement, uh-huh.

Griffis: Okay. If you couldn’t see much, did you have any knowledge of what was in the library’s basement?

MR: No. We were just down there and sitting at the tables, putting those pockets in those books.

Griffis: That’s interesting. You’re the first former library user that I’ve interviewed for this project that’s described being kind of like an assistant or helping the librarians or library staff. What else can you recall about the librarians? Do you remember any of their names?

MR: Well, Ms. Bandy was one. And I can’t remember the other lady—if I do, I’ll write it down and tell you later on.

Griffis: Okay. What can you recall about Ms. Bandy?

MR: She was a very nice lady. She was always quiet and concerned… and kind.

Griffis: So, you found her approachable?

MR: Yes. She was kind.
Griffis: Her name has come up in other interviews and certainly in my archival research. I understand she was sort of the branch librarian... I mean, for you to get to know her that way, I assume that she was out helping users in the stacks—that sort of thing—and not necessarily always locked in an office in the back somewhere...

MR: No, she always came out there with us and that’s when she would, you know, take us downstairs...

Griffis: I see.

MR: … we didn’t ever go down there alone.

Griffis: Okay. Can you remember any specific moments when you approached the librarian with a request for help—what that was like?

MR: Well, she was always nice and helpful. I don’t remember anything that we ever asked her for or about that she didn’t stop what she was doing and, you know…

Griffis: Can you recall anything about the library’s services? Obviously, you could go in and browse books, borrow books. But were there any services or programs or any clubs…?

MR: No, not that I remember. I’d always go in and check books out and take them home. Or either go down in the basement, you know, and work on the books down there.

Griffis: Now, when you were working on the books [during] that period… How old were you again?

MR: Oh... [laughs]... I can’t hardly [remember] how old I was then. But I was in high school.

Griffis: You were in high school... okay. So, you were maybe about nine or ten when you began using the library, because you were eight when you moved to Houston...

MR: No, I was at Gregory [elementary school] then.

Griffis: Oh, I see. Okay.

MR: I went to Gregory until I was in the sixth grade.

Griffis: Okay.

MR: And uh ... [thinking, counting grades] ... I might have been thirteen [years-old]. I don’t know, because they kept us there at Gregory for the first six grades there. So, we didn’t get to go to high school...

Griffis: I see, okay. So, I’m guessing that the decade that you probably used the library most was... the 1950s?

MR: More than likely... Uh, no. Because I graduated from high school in 1947.
Griffis: Oh, okay. So, the 1940s then?

MR: The library… In either ’45 or ’44… or ’43, or something like that; ’43, ’44 or ’45—maybe ’42, something like that.

Griffis: So, after you graduated high school, did you continue using the library? Or did you move to another part of Houston? Or—at what point did you stop using the library as regularly as you were in those years?

MR: I guess after we got out of school—after I got out of high school. After I got out of high school, I didn’t go there anymore.

Griffis: Did you continue using public libraries throughout your later life, or libraries at any colleges or universities that you attended? …Are you still a library user now?

MR: Well, I used to use the library out here. Sometimes I used to go—when I was real active, we would have meetings at the library, but… Over the years, you know, instead of going to the library, you would get a job and go to work. So, I didn’t use the library unless I was particularly looking for something historical.

Griffis: What line of work you eventually go into?

MR: Well, I first took the United States census and then I worked at a grocery store—[I was] one of the first black checkers at Minimax grocery store.

Griffis: Mm-hmm.

MR: That’s most of it. We didn’t…. [There] wasn’t much work we could do. Worked in private homes…

Griffis: So, your formal level of education ended at high school?

MR: Well no, I went to business school. And then, I started going to college… You know, we did have a… [The] first state black college [was] here, in Houston. They started… Texas Southern University started in the Jack Yates High School. So, we would go to college there.

Griffis: Okay.


Griffis: And so, was your career then in business?

MR: Well yes, uh-huh, in business most likely. I did not really have a “career”—I mostly was at home.

Griffis: Okay. You mentioned earlier about black colleges—and of course, I’ve been asking you questions of what you can remember about going to what was a segregated library… When you were younger, and you were using that library for the first time, did you or did users in general have a sense that that [the Colored Carnegie library] was the “library for black people” and all the other
libraries in town were only for whites? How aware were you of the segregation policy?

MR: Well, I was aware because Booker T. Washington [High School] was first a colored... It said “Booker T. Washington Colored High School” [on the building]. So, naturally the colored people had their own library, their own stores and, you know; we had our own everything. Because, you know, it was very, very segregated and we knew that.

And [there] wasn’t anything to do but accept it. That’s where you were living and that’s where you were going to school. And the white school out there in River Oaks, we knew we couldn’t go there. But we didn’t bother about it.

Griffis: Did you ever try using any of the other libraries in town, during that period?

MR: No, I never went to the library downtown until I was an adult.

Griffis: And that would... If I’ve done my research correctly—and if I recall correctly—the Houston Public Library system officially desegregated in 1952-53. That would have been after you finished high school—and, from what I understand you weren’t using the [Colored Carnegie] library much anymore. But do you recall anything about that process of desegregation, in the early fifties?

MR: Well yes, I knew about it and heard about it because I had gotten married and I had children. And my children went to the same schools that I did. Then they tore the school down [after integration] and put the freeway through there. And they tore the [Colored Carnegie] library down, too.

Well, you know, naturally I was an adult living out there and I would hear about these things and read about them.

Griffis: Now, when they put the freeway through: Do you recall anything about that project at the time—about the feeling in the community about putting the freeway through?

MR: Well, we... we didn’t like it. We weren’t excited about it because it wasn’t helping us. Because the school [Booker T. Washington High School] was right there on West Dallas [Street] and then there was the Pilgrim Temple [building] that was owned by black people. And it [the freeway project] was just displacing a lot of black people.

Griffis: The church across the street from the library managed to survive...

MR: Well yes, it’s still there. Antioch Baptist Church. It was there a long time.

Griffis: Were you a churchgoer—or your family? Did you regularly attend church?

MR: Yes, but I was a Methodist. I went to school—I went to church further up from Antioch. Antioch was almost “the downtown.” I was up there, closer in Fourth Ward, on West Dallas [Street].

Griffis: Do you remember the specific name of the church? There were a number of Methodist churches [in the area] at the time.

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MR: I was at Bebee Tabernacle [Colored Methodist Church.  

Griffis: Church back then… Obviously, it served a religious function and—from what I understand and what I can remember from attending church myself, when I was younger—it also served an important social function—?

MR: It did. Because there were a lot of places that black people couldn’t go to. We did most of our going and socializing with our church.

Griffis: And, when it comes to thinking about places… Other than churches, do you remember [there] being places or organizations where [black] people socialized? Or [places where] you could go and bump into people and ask them how their day was going—that kind of thing?

MR: Well, we used to have teas and things at the Pilgrim Temple. It was a black business down there. And they had black businessmen; they had the Pilgrim Temple there, upstairs. And they would let black people use it, because it was owned by blacks. We couldn’t go to none of the white places, like we do now.

And then we had the Rainbow Theatre. It was right across the street from the church. But that was just for blacks. And they had a… We had a theatre downtown, but we could only go there on weekends and then set up in the basement, way up high. So, [we’d go] to the white theatre—one white theatre, downtown. And we had another black one, the Lincoln Theatre, downtown. It was a black theatre and we had [the] Rainbow Theatre in Fourth Ward.

It was real segregated. I came up during the segregated time.

Griffis: Getting back to the [Colored Carnegie] library: When you visited the library, did you tend to go alone? Did you go with friends? Did you go with siblings?

MR: Yes, and we went to school together. [And] when we would go to school, [my classmates and I] would go to the library together.

Griffis: Okay. If you can think back to the visits where you weren’t putting stickers and pockets into [library] books—let’s say you were going just to find books to read—how long would you usually stay at the library?

MR: Oh, I didn’t stay too long. Because, you know, we had certain times to be home. And I would have to get my books and go home and sit on the porch and read them.

Griffis: I see… What can you recall, if anything, about the other library users? Were they people that you knew? Did you recognize them from church, from school or… were they all mostly strangers?

MR: I really never visited any other library until I was an adult, when I went to the library downtown to look for some historical information. But then, when I came out here to where I am now, I would go to the library for different things and see people that I knew, and I’d speak to them.
Griffis: So, there was a social element to using the library. But it wasn't the main reason you were going there.

MR: Right.

Griffis: Just getting back to your memories of Houston and [of] living in the African American community in the Fourth Ward... Just to explain a bit about my background: Obviously, I'm living and working here in the southern United States [but] I'm actually originally from Canada, and—

MR: Really?

Griffis: ... yeah. And moving down here, about five years ago, I realized that to do the kinds of research that I wanted to do I was going to have to learn a bit more than what I knew from high school about American history. I was certainly aware of the history of segregation and Jim Crow laws in the South. But it still... as I'm learning more and more about—and hearing first-hand, from people, what they remember—about living at that time... I'm always interested to know more, and certainly you've gone over much of what you remember about that...

But if I could ask a broad question—and there's no right or wrong answer to it: Throughout the fifties and sixties... If you're looking at a history text book, it would seem as though the gradual desegregation of institutions and services and public spaces in Houston pretty much came and went in the fifties and early sixties—then, boom, by the 1960s everything was integrated, and it was as though segregation never took place. That's the impression I get [from text books]. But I'm just wondering, since you lived through that...?

MR: No, it was never a time when you felt like there wasn’t any segregation. Because, it was not as... You know, we were under that Jim Crow law. That was Jim Crow. So, that Jim Crow still kept you under segregation.

Griffis: Do you remember following say, in the newspapers, or hearing from other people about any of the activism work going on in Houston at the time, to push for desegregation?

MR: Yes, that “Brown versus...”—I couldn’t say the name of it now—that got the schools open. This girl...?

Griffis: Yes... It wasn’t Brown vs. Board of Education; that was in the Midwest. I think what you’re thinking of is the case that actually predates Brown vs. Board of Education, which happened in Houston and had to do with the founding of the college—?

MR: Right, uh-huh... I'll get his name—Heman Sweatt? I don't know—

Griffis: Yes, that's it.

MR: They didn't want him to go to that... They didn't have a law school for him; [they] didn't want him to go to that white law school. So, they organized Texas Southern and put a law school here for him.
Griffis: I see. And that was something you remember hearing about and following in the news?

MR: Yes, I did.

Griffis: When it came to news sources: the white community had their newspapers, but there were many black newspapers—and a lot of those have been lost to history—

MR: Yes.

Griffis: Do you remember any in the Houston area that were primarily for African Americans?

MR: We had the Houston Informer, and right now we have another one... the Houston Informer and... the Houston Defender. The Defender and the Informer [were] the black newspapers that we had, then.

Griffis: Okay, last question. Just to go back to when you were talking about helping out in the [library’s] basement—and I can’t remember if you explained this earlier—but how did you end up getting involved in that?

MR: Well, I don’t know. I don’t remember. But when we would go there, and... She should just be explaining things to us. And she would take us down there and explain to us how the jackets got in those books and let us do it.

Griffis: Oh, I see. So, it was mere curiosity. It wasn’t, “When I grow up, I want to be a librarian!”

MR: [laughs] No, not like that. It was just an activity that Ms. Bandy had us doing.

Griffis: I see... So, I guess my last question is: If you used the library mainly to get books to read, were there any other kinds of clubs—like youth groups or clubs, or Girl Scouts, or anything like that—that you were involved with around the time that you were young, or when you were using the library?

MR: Well, we had Girl Scouts. There was a Girl Scouts. And... I’m trying to think... There was a health—not a health club, but... Girl Scouts was the only thing that we had, at that time. Girl Scouts and Girl Reserves—Girl Reserves for the Y[WCA] and Girl Scouts for our school.

Griffis: Right... the [Colored YWCA].

MR: You had a [YWCA]; you had Girl Reserves—that’s what we had before we had black Girl Scouts.

Griffis: Where was the [Colored YWCA] located?

MR: In Third Ward.

Griffis: In the Third Ward? Okay.

MR: Mm-hmm.
Griffis: I assume [that], back in those days, you weren’t old enough to drive. So, you got around by walking?

MR: Yeah, we walked everywhere. While everybody stayed in Fourth Ward, you could walk to town. Everything was so close, and you just walked everywhere. I had a brother and we used to walk to school all the time together. And we had friends we walked to school with. And [when] my children grew up, they walked back and forth to school with their friends. Everybody in the neighborhood looked after everybody.

Griffis: … And—I realize I said earlier that I was on my last question—but if I could ask you to expand on that: this idea of “everybody looking after everybody.” How did that work?

MR: That was just a neighborhood thing, from your church to you house. And, you know, the school. We lived so close that everybody knew everybody. So, if something was going on, wrong or right, they would call down and, you know, let us know and look after our children.

And we expected them to look after our children. It’s not like it is nowadays. In those days, if someone said something to your child, you didn’t mind. Can’t tell them anything nowadays. You can’t say anything to them because the parents are not like that, nowadays.

They took the prayer out of schools, and that’s why they have so much killing going on in there. If they had left the prayer in school, you know, all these different things wouldn’t happen.

Griffis: I understand… [Note: At this point in the interview, the connection between my telephone and digital audio recorder began crackling badly, stopping the interview. I have removed several seconds of this abrasive noise.]

Griffis: … So, I’d like to thank you again, Ms. Ross, for your time and for sharing your memories of Houston at that point in history, and your memories of using the [Colored Carnegie] library and what you did there. And again, for donating this interview to the Roots of Community project.

MR: You’re welcome.

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