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## **Iron Hill School Oral History Project**

### **Interview with Edith Beatrice Miller Lewis**

Date of Interview: June 8, 2006  
Interviewer: Roberta Perkins

Also present: Mrs. Sandra Johnson, Mrs. Lewis' daughter

Roberta: This is Roberta Perkins and today's date is Friday, June 8, 2006. I am here in Newark with Mrs. Sandra Johnson and her mother, Edith Lewis. We are interviewing Mrs. Johnson concerning her experiences as a student at Iron Hill School and she will be helping with the questions that I will ask her mother due to the fact that her mother does not hear so we will be writing the questions down and having her answer them. Mrs. Lewis has a long history in the Iron Hill area. She was born in 1917 and she has some memories and remembrances of what it was like living in the area. I am going to have Mrs. Johnson write down the questions and just have Mrs. Lewis start talking about her experience and we will go from there. Mrs. Lewis' full name is Edith Beatrice Miller and we will start talking with her now.

**Mrs. Lewis:** My first school was at Iron Hill when I was six years old and my teacher was named Minnie Ryder. No, my last teacher was named Minnie Ryder. I was born at Iron Hill September 21st 1917. When I was six years I started at Iron Hill School. I went there for a few years and then I went to a new school that they built for us way down in there called the Bethesda School and that's where I ended up at the Bethesda School. Then I used to go at different times to Howard High School for different things. I went to Howard High School to recite and do different things like that at certain occasions, certain things that went on at the school, I like to recite and I

recited. I recited a lot of poems up there and a boy came in first and I came in second and I thought at that time I was getting money but I got a little blue ribbon. They pinned a ribbon on me and that's what I got for reciting. I spoke a real comical poem called 'Lias. Have you heard of that? I must have been about fourteen. 'Lias, 'Lias, blessed de the Lord. Don't you know de day's erbroad? Ef you don't git up, you scamp, dey'll be trouble in dis camp 'cause I've got something else to do 'sides a cleaning up after you. 'Lias don't you hear me when I call? Don't you turn toward the wall because I can hear the mattress squeak don't you hear me when I speak? 'Lias. I came in second.

Roberta: So the school was very different at that time?

**Mrs. Lewis:** I was about eleven or twelve years old at that time. I was in the first grade at Iron Hill School. I wasn't there more than two years and my mother and father moved right on a big farm here. I wasn't more than seven or eight.

Roberta: Tell me about living on the farm.

**Mrs. Lewis:** My father moved here, I must have been about fifteen years old because I got married when I was seventeen. I know it sounds silly to say but me and my boyfriend run off and they had a booth for marriage licenses. They didn't check your age in them years but him and I got married. We ran off and got married and out of this marriage we had nine children. Oh my goodness I was seventeen and now I am eighty-six. No, now I am eighty-eight and I will be eighty-nine in September. I got married right at a little place down here. You can get your license and get married right away if you want to. I got married in Elkton, Maryland. My mother and father was born in Dover and they moved here to Delaware to get on a farm because my father liked to farm. He had a great big farm of 450 acres in Glasgow. He tilled it. We stayed on the Divine Farm until I was about sixteen. I got married when I was about sixteen or seventeen.

Everything was done with a horse and wagon. We had to hoe, we had to do everything. Cutting wood by ax, my father, cutting wood for the stove you know. We didn't have no coal stove, nothing like we do today, no electricity or nothing. We had lamps, you know what I'm talking about lamps? I washed the clothes and cut the wood sometime and oil stove and we had to do all that. He cut wood with an ax and when the cold weather came we had to pick up all the chips, put them in a box and put them in a shed in the kitchen. We had a kitchen shed in the kitchen in our farm house and it was nice you know. My mother was a good housekeeper you know and she was a good worker. See all these houses up next to me now? All over. My father owned. That's what my father owned. He bought it. During them years things was cheap. About every two years I would have a baby. Nine children. They are all still living. My oldest son graduated from college, high school. My oldest son, Ernest Lewis, Junior. He went to high school, four years of college – got all his degrees. I had two sons, Ernest Lewis, Junior. I've got four sons and five daughters. I put them all through school. How did I get this house? I was quite young when I moved on this property.

**Sandra:** She told me who owned the land before and I think they had it for sale so she and Daddy paid like \$200 for the land or something.

Roberta: So this piece where she is now was not part of her father's farm?

**Sandra:** No it was not part of the farm.

**Mrs. Lewis:** I forgot how we got this property. Me and my husband we was quite young and we bought this land from a man in Maryland. We didn't pay much for it like about four or five hundred dollars. Two acres. My father used to work for him plowed his ground with a horse and wagon right there on Delancey Road in Maryland. His name was Delancey.

Roberta: So this piece is right next to or near where the family land is?

**Sandra:** Yes, right next door.

**Roberta:** Did you learn to drive?

**Mrs. Lewis:** I learned to drive when I was quite young. I got married when I was like sixteen, my husband was about nineteen.

**Sandra:** You were almost forty-five when you learned to drive.

**Mrs. Lewis:** No I was much younger than that. I must have been about twenty-six years old and I drove till about five years ago.

**Sandra:** She didn't have a license then when she first started. I remember when she got her license.

**Roberta:** Was that an experience?

**Mrs. Lewis:** I had cataracts and I lost my license when I didn't pass. But anyway things wasn't like it was today. You know what I'm saying? Otherwise I got to do everything I tried to do but now they tighten up on everybody. I've gotta have a lot to say. It was nice when we was riding to school. We would walk. We walked four miles to school, okay? It was tough for the black children coming up. Cause they would ride the bus and we would walk four miles one way. The white children would ride the bus and pass us along the road. They would say "nigger, nigger, nigger" out the window you know. All that kind of stuff but we were hard on them though. They didn't get nothing off of me and my brother. No, me and my brother and two sisters. They were scared of us because my father was well known by white people and he was well liked because he used to do their garden, big old cemetery there in Glasgow he used to cut the grass by pushing a plow that big old cemetery there in Pencader. Glasgow Church cemetery. That's where my father worked for a man named Brooks. He had a big store and he was crazy about my father, we walked past there. So his grandson called me one day, got in my face one day

when we was going to school and he said, “nigger, nigger, nigger” and I hauled off and punched the boy. He wore glasses and I broke his glasses but I was sorry I did that but I did. They was scared of me and my brother because we said if you called us nigger we were going to get you. You know what I’m saying? So anyway they got friendly with us. But they were hateful. They would call you nigger in a minute. We used to call them crackers. Ernest Miller, he didn’t have no middle name. Just Ernest Miller, my brother. But we were tough, me and him we didn’t take no stuff off of nobody. So anyway when the little boy come out there on the steps by the road in Glasgow because that’s where they lived right in front of the big old church and cemetery in Glasgow but anyway he came running out saying “nigger, nigger, nigger” and I took and hit him and broke his glasses. He went back crying, “Grandpa, she broke my glasses.” He brought that boy back to me and said good enough for you I told you to stop calling them children names. He got on his little grandson. Well anyway that ended that. So anyway, me and Ernest everybody knowed that we was tough – the white children and they respected us. They would go hello or hi, you know. Yes they would everybody all over Glasgow. If you had to go through Glasgow, the little side road that would come up by the Presbyterian Church and cemetery and then we made a left and go all the way down and walked four miles one way, rain, sleet or snow, we didn’t miss no time out of school at all. No we didn’t. My mother knew a lot of white people and she would see that we had boots, shoes, snow and clothes. She gave my mother a lot of clothes. We would go to school sometimes and be soaking wet and the white children would be riding the bus and we would be walking. They would be hollering out the window, “walk nigger” or something like that. You know what I mean? Anything, they didn’t care. We would do like this, oh yes, me and my brother. After we beat that boy and what they did they started liking us. Well they grew up bigger and we grew up bigger and the neighborhood, Glasgow til the finished and they respected us. My father was well known because he

used to plow with the horses – two horses and a plow. Everybody's property. All white people's property. He would put their garden, in, cultivate, make rows, plant potatoes, whatever, everybody. My father was well known when it comes to the farmers and we knew everybody too. We wasn't scared to do nothing', me and my brother. We was tough, we was tough.

Roberta: I am asking Mrs. Lewis what her chores were when she lived on the farm.

**Mrs. Lewis:** On this farm I do almost like I try to do now but I am too old now. I would weed. Weeds would come up in the corn and everywhere where. We had to keep all the weeds out of the corn with a hoe. Pull the weeds up that's what we did on the farm. I did a little bit of everything. I was as tough as my brother. What was it like being married? Oh, I liked that. That was nice. My husband's sister lived in a house, just him and her and another brother. When I married him she moved out and she said, "Edith I am going to let you and my brother have the house so she moved out, okay. Then a man used to come and bring cans of milk and put that on a big ? in the ground. The Baptist Road, there was a little side road with a Baptist Church right there over a little bridge, I am speaking of near Newark. So he used to bring his milk cans down and set them on a bench. So I said next time I see that man down there I said I am going to ask that man does he want somebody to work. So when the man came and put the milk cans on the stairs – you know what an old milk can is? I went down there and talked to him and I said "good morning" and he said "good morning" so I said do you know a man named Isaac Miller? He said "yes." I said that's my father. At that time I was about sixteen or seventeen and I said well I came to ask you would you like someone to work for you on the farm? He said "oh yes I need help bad." I said, "well my husband would work for you. I didn't tell my husband at that time but when he came home from work, he worked at National Vulcanized Fiber for near thirty-five years. That's where he was. He was driving a forklift

truck. That's what they let him drive in the plant. National Vulcanized Fiber plant. That's what he was driving. So I went down there to this man, the farmer, did he want somebody to work my husband said he would rather be on a farm than be working driving that old forklift truck so don't you know the man came and talked to my husband after he came home from work and he hired him. We went up to the tenant house up near the Iron Hill School right across the road from Iron Hill School. We moved right in that tenant house actually it was empty. He brought me a table and chairs and saw that I had everything. Yes he did, in that empty house and we went there and fixed it up. My mother, she helped me. How long did I live there? Oh boy, we stayed there till all of you all went to school. Didn't you go to Iron Hill?

**Sandra:** Yes I did.

**Mrs. Lewis:** I think I had about six children born in that house. Iron Hill School. That's where I stayed for years in that house. Me and my husband. My husband worked right on that farm. What was the name of that farm? His name was Albert Folks (Salvatore) Farm but he didn't own it but that was the name of the man my husband worked for on that farm. It wasn't far away. You know where it was? It was right in front of Iron Hill School. I could walk down the road and see the school from the leaves in the trees.

**Sandra:** How long did Daddy work at National Vulcanized Fiber?

Roberta: End of tape 1, side 1.

Roberta: This is tape 1, side 2.

**Mrs. Lewis:** My husband worked there for thirty six years.

Mrs. Johnson. He retired from there.

**Mrs. Lewis:** I think he worked there over 35 years at the National Vulcanized Fiber plant in Newark. He went there when he was real young. He made good

money at that time he was getting about \$125 every Friday. At that time I only had about three or four children. More than that?

**Sandra:** Yes, because I was born.

Roberta: She said he made \$125 a week.

**Sandra:** Probably when he first started.

**Mrs. Lewis:** How old are you now?

**Sandra:** I'm fifty five so that was before me, Marva and Ritchie and Ritchie is forty eight. It had to be like in '45

**Mrs. Lewis:** Are you talking about your father? What year did he die in?

**Sandra:** What year did he make \$125?

**Mrs. Lewis:** He made that money a week. I don't know what year it was but my husband stayed there for years. 1980? I wouldn't know.

**Sandra:** He passed away in 1982.

**Mrs. Lewis:** Twenty some years ago, right? I've got his death certificate. He died in 1982. My husband died in 1982. I've lived by myself for years. That was my first marriage. I didn't get married no more.

Roberta: Was your Mom involved in activities at Iron Hill as a parent?

**Sandra:** I really can't remember.

**Mrs. Lewis:** No, I didn't do nothing at the school. Like what, you mean outside, inside or what. No, at Iron Hill School I didn't – did I work at the fair at the school? No, I didn't do nothing at the school. I don't remember doing nothing. I didn't have no special job at the school. All the girls I went to school with are all dead and gone. I am about the oldest one that is still living and active in everything I do in church work. I do a lot of church

work. I don't work in the kitchen no more with the lady. Do you know where our church is?

Roberta: Is St. Thomas off of Route 40?

**Sandra:** Frenchtown Road.

Roberta: Glasgow, okay.

**Mrs. Lewis:** When I was young I used to help my sisters work in the kitchen setting tables and stuff. We always have a lot of things going on. I had a program there a Miller and Lewis Day program. Every week we would have something big going on. We had a nice time at our church.

**Sandra:** That's where they went to church too when they were little because the church has been there since – it's been there 178 years.

**Mrs. Lewis:** My father used to take care of the cemetery and do a lot of work, when he was young. They are all buried out there. Nice place. Nice for poor people. They've got a beautiful church. They have nice dinners every month. They have bake sales.

**Sandra:** We all belong to this church.

**Mrs. Lewis:** She does all the typing. We have something big going on every week Miller and Lewis Day. I had a special day every year and the church was crowded upstairs. It was nice. I know one thing, I had to walk to church. From where we lived to our church, four miles and our school was like right on the corner from there. The Bethesda School? That's where I went. Well listen you pass our church and make the first left and there was the school. You seem so young to remember all that.

Roberta: Why did you go to Bethesda School?

**Mrs. Lewis:** That was the nearest school we had at that time. Where did I live at that time? I lived right on this farm with my mother and father and we walked from here.

**Sandra:** Why didn't you go to Iron Hill?

Roberta: She went there for one year.

**Mrs. Lewis:** Listen – after I came out of Iron Hill School what I did? Then I started going there to Bethesda. Tell me where I'm wrong because I forget.

Roberta: So she said she went to Iron Hill for one year I think.

**Mrs. Lewis:** Seems like Iron Hill School was closer. I lived right in front of Iron Hill that's why I went to Iron Hill. From Iron Hill School I moved right here and then this was the closest school. I'm mixed up. Tell me where I am wrong. Right now.

**Sandra:** They came from the Maryland area so I don't know where that would figure into what school they went to.

**Mrs. Lewis:** I didn't go to Iron Hill School long. I don't think I was up there too long. I had a Maryland address.

**Sandra:** On the farm.

**Mrs. Lewis:** When I lived here they had a Maryland address, Elkton, Maryland but they changed it to Newark in some kind of way, just like it is now. Years ago my address right here was Elkton, Maryland. And then I don't know what happened but anyway they changed the address somehow.

End of tape 1 side 2 and end of interview.