

Voices of 1968
Oral history interview notes

November 10, 2018
Audio-recording studio, Morris Library
University of Delaware Library
Newark, DE

Interviewee: E. Poppa Rogers, Sr.
Interviewer: TAHIRA
Notetaker: David Kim
Technical Assistance: Nico Carver

Additional notes: Rebecca Johnson Melvin

- 00:40 Background: Mother was Ida Mae Rogers Kellerhan Stallings. She had 15 children. Was a civil rights activist known as one of the mothers of welfare rights movement in Delaware.
- 01:32 Need to drop other names as well: Helen Chambers, Manny Culp, Cathy French, Emily Young, Elizabeth "Tiny" Henry, Betty Brown. These were the mothers of the welfare rights movement and the beginning of Rogers's own knowledge. These women were in the forefront
- 02:25 There were men as well: Howard Brown, Wem ? , William? Eunice ? , Bill Young, Kamal (was Albert Parks). Rogers came up under these folks.
- 03:11 There was a need for family to be part of the movement. Mother became involved because of need to make life better for her kids. She first volunteered in 1966.
- 03:50 NECA – North East Conservation of America Association. Set up in each community: East, West, North, South side hubs to join
- 04:30 NECA helped the communities. There were many marches: Wilmington, Dover, Washington. Mother was active, sincere.
- 05:05 Remembers incidents: sister was private secretary to Mayor John Babiarez. News Journal printed a photograph of some event that had mother [Ida Mae Rogers] with her daughter, looked like mother and daughter were "going at each other" on opposite sides but each doing their job.
- 06:23 Remembers 1967 incident in Dover. Demonstration about welfare rights. At end of day, about 4 or 5 pm, they were told it was time to go, state police would be sent. Police arrived. Grandmother was thrown down the steps. Will

[can't remember last name] caught her. Emotional for Rogers to remember. Brutal times.

- 08:05 Lived at 11th Street Bridge, North East section. Born in Millside near Dunleavy Road. Found out later these were first housing projects. Family moved to 11th Street Bridge and mother's career in activism began out of need to boost the family.
- 09:11 At about age 10, became aware of the movement. Mother was basis of activism. She was a single mom. Grew up doing what mom said. She was like the mother duck with her ducklings.
- 10:15 Community respected her.
- 10:38 4-4-68. Remembers he was up the street from his house. Went outside and felt the impact. All hell broke loose. "Got to get 'um!" The powder ket had finally burst. Whole of Wilmington was a keg. Police brutality was real.
- 12:00 Folks sick and tired of that. One of the biggest family fights with police happened in his neighborhood.
- 12:17 That was prior to December 1967. Richards family. Caused a riot. Folk tired of way treated.
- 12:51 April 4 was a dark day. Things happened fast. Stores going up. Businesses going up. Cars overturned. This was before the 495 freeway when there was only one way in and one way out of Wilmington.
- 13:19 Two big industries – Electric Hose and Rubber Co. and Delaware Barrel and Drum Co. Sat adjacent to the now Gander Hill Prison. Had 300 people exchanging shifts and leaving the factories. They were locked in. It was volatile.
- 14:25 With his mother, grew up not to look at one's color, look at how you were treated. On the street where he grew up, it was mixed. Didn't see a lot of mess on 11th Street Bridge unless you went to other side of 12th Street.
- 15:32 That was the location of clubs: Tahiti, the Jungle. Police put emphasis on that area. Won't forget that day. All stores but one (Shelly Black's) were burned down.
- 16:05 She was left alone because she always seemed fair. Had store bills for people. All the rest [of the stores] were burned.
- 16:48 Rogers was affiliated with the Black Hawks in the neighborhood. Big brothers were Falcons, then Junior Titans. Black Hawks were finding their identity,

was just a gang but became a club under leadership of Hicks Anderson (who the center on the West Side is named after).

- 18:02 Anderson took them in and mentored them, taught them how to be, not a gang, but an organized club. Appreciated that in teaching them, Anderson spoke things into their existence, spoke truth to power.
- 18:44 Anderson taught business approach. Black Hawks were first youngsters to bring a variety show to the King Center, remembers the show. They had Chee-Chee and Peppy, and another group, the Futures. Anderson would follow up on them.
- 19:40 Black Hawks were youngest group, then the Titans. The Hornets were under tutelage of Maynard Jones.
- 20:24 Blackie Blacks were on the West Side. Governor [Charles] Terry called the National Guard. Remembers the Guard in the streets. Remembers taunting them. They were all young. Compares to [current] images of the West Bank, kids throwing rocks at soldiers.
- 21:40 Thinks the world saw what was happening. Saw Wilmington against the mighty giant. At that time, America was fighting two wars, one was in Northeast Asia, the other war was here in its own infrastructure. It was a bubbling point of now or never.
- 22:38 Did not feel protected by the National Guard, not in his neighborhood. Always had a handle on their own neighborhood. His family was respected. The children respected the adults. Adults taught children. Didn't need protection.
- 23:33 Believes the Guard was there to protect white folks. Remember the blockage of the city – only one way in and out. White folks had to come to work. There was maybe one black working in those plants [Electric Hose and Rubber, Delaware Barrel and Drum]. Curfew was lifted in the city but not in the state.
- 25:25 Was aware of the length of the occupation. Had to watch your back. Terry not an ideal governor, perhaps one of the worst the state has ever had, to this day. The scene that plays in Rogers's mind after all this time is seeing his grandmother being thrown down the steps in Dover. Terry had a Southern mentality and that speaks for who he was.
- 27:40 In the city, young people, students were required to walk in single file, couldn't walk in more than a group of two. That would be considered a gang.
- 27:57 With his mother, brothers AC and Buster, left in May 1968 and joined the Poor People's Campaign, led by Rev. Ralph Abernathy. This was Martin

- Luther King's last campaign. Came back to Wilmington after being away, so it was like getting a free pass.
- 29:40 TAHIRA: What happened to the movement? Did leaders of the movement sell out? Were they given better place or a job? Did they turn their back on the masses?
- 31:54 Seems like that's what happened. People were hungry, thirsty for change. Would do anything for the change. Clumped up under folks they thought were sincere, folks who would make things happen.
- 32:41 How did they quell the people? That's how drugs came in, came in free.
- 33:02 People came back from "power meetings" with duffle bags of drugs, gave them out in the community. Look at sensational movies like "Superfly" – it was easy to hook the people, to get hooked on a new feeling. Had a hand in 1968 in what is going on today, to keep the uprising at a minimum.
- 34:24 Drug epidemic of today was planted in our community. Now that other communities have this problem, they care.
- 35:00 What he wants great-grandkids to know in 50 years: for a while he lost his way, but always had mother to connect him. Wants them to understand her work, what she stood for, wants to show them who she was. Wants for them [the future] to connect to the ancestors, connect to his mom, her work.
- 36:35 His mother stood for community, for the good of all. She wasn't selfish. Remembers that one of his best friends in school was a Caucasian and he brought him home. The kid grew up over the bridge, Eastside. A neighbor said, "Miss Ida Mae, get that white boy outta here." His mother replied, "says who and what army? There are 15 of us." Big brother told the neighbor to go away, "You know what day it is." Rogers respected his brother for standing up for them. Even if he was young, he was the man of the house.
- 39:19 It was who we are as a family.
- 39:36 Question from Kim about legacy of 1968 to the city as a whole. How was the community galvanized?
- 40:38 Business-wise, until the city becomes more balanced, it won't have the necessary cohesion. Look at what is happening. There is a gerification movement and it may reflect what happened in 1968. Old people haven't got much, but what they have is theirs. Grandmothers and grandfathers have invested so much in what little they have. There is a movement of developers trying to push out the old folks who worked so hard. They don't want problems, they just want to live.

- 43:01 People are afraid to come into the city. Trying to understand: some folks are just trying to steal, housing codes are pushing decent folks out. Sooner or later, the old powder keg is going to ignite again.
- 43:46 Young folks aren't afraid of anything. They will take their rights. Things are waiting to happen. Look at 50 years ago and equate it to today. Waiting for the same thing to happen.
- 44:25 Seeing the same thing now, only out of different eyes, older eyes.
- 44:49 Anything to add? Appreciates the opportunity to reflect and summon up what he needs to say. Would like to see people in an honest way, not in a deceitful way, especially in the city of Wilmington.
- 45:48 Why are young people so at arms? What is causing them to be the way they are? So hateful, so willing to be destructive?
- 46:10 Believes 1) they were taught that act and 2) simple fact that we are painting them into a corner. We don't listen to them. It is time to start listening to them, especially the older folks.
- 46:28 We don't have all the answers. What used to be our world is now their world; we need to start teaching them to govern themselves in their own world.
- 47:14 Father used to say: "Son, every morning you wake up, you have more time behind you than in front of you, and for each day, live your life like it's the last day on this earth. Enjoy yourself, enjoy people, and love God. That's it."
- 47::50 Thanks for the interview. Very important to be here for all the people who can't be here. Not all the black people made it through.
- 49:05 Glad that we're doing this [the interviews]. Hope is that you can get into the community and get people to tell stuff.
- 49:50 It is most gratifying when you run into a brother or a sister and talk old times. Wife says, "You are stuck in the Seventies." Likes Seventies music, talks about stuff that happened then, those were best days of his life. Even though he went through a lot of stuff, parents shielded him.
- 51:00 Recalls Joe Babiarz, brother of the mayor. He had a store and beer garden at 11th and Thatcher Streets, Kozy Korner.
- 51:52 Mother had the heart of a warrior. Around 1969, she went into the beer garden, which was still not OK at the time. Was told, "Now, Ida Mae, you better get out." She said, "Put me out, I ain't going no damn place."

53:00 Joe [Babiarz] called his brother John, who called Rogers's sister and said, "Your mother is at it again." They lived two blocks from the beer garden. The reality of segregation set in for him: they could go buy all the Ballantine beer they want at the corner store, but they can't go in there [to the bar] and sit. Kids can go in, but not the adults. This incident brought it home for him.

54:26 His mother was not just an activist for the people, she was an activist for what she wanted. She integrated the bar. Joe gave in. But the whites moved on to Prinz Grille at Gov. Prinz and 14th Streets, across from the gas station. Blacks could go in the back door to order but couldn't go in their front door.

55:40 TAHIRA: People always think it was down South but it was here, too.