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School Hill Oral History Collection

May 20, 2017

Patricia Aden's Talk on George Wilson

Transcribed by David Cardillo

[00:00]

Ms. Aden:

I went up the hill, I went to John R. Downes, I went to Central Middle School, I graduated from Newark High. I am the embodiment of Newark. And I'm so pleased and proud to be here today to talk about George H. Wilson. So, I think my grandfather's story is so much a part of what Newark is about. If you trace his history, you trace Newark's history, particularly the history of the African-American community. So, Poppop (phonetic **00:33**), as we called him, was born in 1914. He was one of twelve children born to Charles and Laura Wilson, and lived over on Rose Street. And of those twelve children, nine survived. We had Roland, who was the oldest, who became a doctor. We had Alice, who became the second African-American nurse registered in Delaware. We had Aunt Mabel who was a social worker. We had Uncle Allen, who was a doctor. We had Uncle Tony, who was the local ice carrier. And we had Aunt Vicky who was a numbers runner. We (unintelligible **01:17**). And then there was Poppop. There was Inky (phonetic **01:23**). People often ask, "Why was he called Inky?" Well, in a time when people were very color-conscious, Inky Wilson was the darkest of his family. And he was lighter than me. But they called him Inky because he was one of the darker siblings. And he was always sort of different because this was a family that was very attuned to achievement, very attuned to education. They're used to... The older siblings would write a question on a blackboard in the house every day, and the younger siblings had to answer. But, being the individual that he was, George Wilson got through the eighth grade, got kicked out of Howard High at ninth grade for (unintelligible **02:14**). So he never went further than the ninth grade. He then hustled. He made his way, he sold apples. He did a lot of different things. And then he went into World War II. He was quoted as saying that the most danger he felt he faced was when he went to Alabama. When he went to Georgia. And then they sent him to the South Seas. He said that was probably safer over there. But he came back as a sergeant, knocked around a little bit. But he came back with a determination that no white man would ever tell him what to do with finality ever again in his life. And he never worked for anyone, let alone a white person, for the rest of his life. He, again, forged his own path. So, he comes back to Newark. By then, he had married my grandmother and started a family. He went to Newark and looked around and said, "Something's got to change." At that point, city services stopped at the railroad tracks, electrical services,

certainly no garbage collection, zoning enforcement, none of that. Stopped at the railroad tracks. So, this enclave, this black community didn't have that same level of services. And this was a time when Newark was experiencing the influx of Chrysler workers. You had some African-American families that had been educated, so we had teachers. We had postal workers. We had auto workers earning a good union wage. But the fact was they couldn't find housing. Brookside was being developed, but African-Americans were not welcome in Brookside. So he determined that he was going to build housing for African-Americans. You know, he had started a demolition company. Started a salvage company. But he didn't know how to build houses. But there were skilled laborers in this community. There were people who knew how to build. There were carpenters. There were bricklayers. And with their help, he started building homes. He built Terry Manor. Terry Manor is named after his daughter, Terry. The main street turn is the combination of Kenneth and Richard, his sons. And that was his first step towards changing the way people in this African-American community here in Newark lived. [05:00] He built a total of sixty-one houses. So, if you look at Terry Manor, if you look at what's left of Ray Street, if you look at where we lived, three-thirty-three and going up, those were all houses that he built. He built the apartment house that's right at the corner down the street. And all of these were part of his vision. Interestingly enough, while he started building for African-Americans, when he built our house, and that string of houses going that way, his vision was an integrated community. So, there was our house, our grandparents' house. Then there was Reverend Bob Andrews' house (phonetic 05:45), the chaplain from the University of Delaware. Then there was the Daredacks' (phonetic 05:48) house. They were Jordanian. They were actually our bookkeepers, but that's fine. They moved into the neighborhood. Then there was the Cowlers (phonetic 05:57). There was a white family that lived in that neighborhood, too. It was the Hendersons. So they were achieving that idea of an integrated community. He initially called it North Paved Knoll, but it never got developed as much as he had hoped. But as he was doing this, he realized that there were a lot of other things going on. He challenged Newark City Council because at that point, there were several rental properties here in the African-American community that were far below code. And he said, "You've got to make up your mind. Do you consider Negroes human beings or beasts?" This is a quote from Newark City Council minutes. And what he's challenging them was that if you are going to have humane conditions, you need to enforce code. Universally. And that wasn't his only fight. If anything, Inky Wilson loved to fight. And if some of you remember him, he was, you know, you can see the picture there. He wore an afro before anybody, he kept his longer than anybody. You know, he strode into a room and he always swung his arm when he walked. So he was this huge, larger than life, take no prisoners kind of guy. But he understood that the issues here in Newark in this community, in this enclave, were just part of the problem. So he

challenged the University of Delaware. At that time, the University of Delaware only had around two dozen African-American students. No staff. So he challenged them. He challenged the Delaware State Police because that that time there were no state troopers, African-American state troopers. So he somehow convinced my dad, who had just graduated from Lincoln University, go take the state trooper test. And he passed. And the Delaware State Police labeled my dad “mentally defective.” He passed the physical, but that was their justification for not recruiting him into the Delaware State Troopers. So Louis L. Redding and others took that and challenged the Delaware State Troopers. And slowly but surely, the troopers were desegregated. There was a practice at that time where local magistrates, if you were picked up, the magistrate would fine you, and the magistrate kept the money. So there is a real incentive to find people and keep the money. Is this now familiar? Can we say, “Mass incarceration?” At any rate, my uncle, my grandfather was part of the fight to change that. And that practice was eventually abolished. So, Inky Wilson left a huge imprint on this community in so, so many ways, and I think he would be so very pleased and proud that this school, where his son graduated, and was Valedictorian of his class year, is now a community center, a place where everyone can come, everyone can gather. I think he would be especially pleased that there’s a pool outside. Whenever my grandfather built a house for us, he built a pool. So the house on Church Street had a pool. Our house up the hill used to have a pool. And anybody in the neighborhood could come to that pool because at that point, black folks didn’t have a place to go. You could go to Bells (phonetic **09:53**), but you had to pay a quarter. But the idea of having a place where black children and white children can swim was his ideals. **[10:04]** So he would be very pleased, very proud, that this community center serves this community in this way. I’m so encouraged that there are initiatives going on right now to preserve this history. The history of Newark is so very special. And my background is in historic preservation. I’ve worked in cultural organizations across the country. And more and more, I’ve learned that our community is really unique. Of course there’re commonalities. But the families here did some good stuff. Some really great stuff. We’ve got ambassadors coming out of Newark. We’ve got professional sports players coming out of Newark. Some high-achieving kind of folk. And something happened here that made that come together. I’m not sure what it was, but it’s worth studying. It’s worth understanding. And it’s worth preserving and celebrating. So congratulations to all of you who are part of that process. Thank you.

**[End 11:14]**