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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
ALTHEA YOUNG
LIFE IN WINSTON-SALEM FOR A BLACK PEOPLE
JANUARY 18, 1977

Transcribed by:

R. Herman

May 13, 1977

Interview with: Alethea Young

Wilmington, Delaware

January 16, 1977

Interviewed by: Yetta Chaiken

C = Yetta Chaiken

Y = Alethea Young

C: This is Yetta Chaiken recording for the oral history department of the University of Delaware. I'm interviewing Alethea Young. Alethea, where were you born?

Y: I was born in Wilmington, Delaware. What shall I do? I was born in Wilmington, Delaware, on Thirty Two, West Thirtieth Street, in 1907. I grew up there till I was moved to Twelfth Street, One Ten, West Twelfth Street and there I went to school at Howard High School.

C: Well, let's go back for a moment and tell us what it was like living in Wilmington as a young black girl.

Y: Well, I consider that I lived pretty well because in our neighborhood it was very nice, quiet neighborhood and it was just houses on one side of the street. It was a large house across the street owned by the Jacksons and we used to play across the street there against the wooden wall. We used to play marbles. We used to play horse and we used to have a good time playing over there and I went to Howard High School at Twelfth and Orange Street.

C: What did you study at Howard High School?

Y: Well, I studied...I started from the kindergarten and went up to the I guess, the eleventh or twelfth grade and...

C: You mean all the grades were in one school?

Y: Yes and they also had teacher training in the school I think for

two years after you graduate and then I...

C: Did you take teacher training?

Y: No, I didn't take teacher's training because my last year in school I met a very nice fellow and I married in hopings that I could go back and to finish but then they didn't allow you after you get married to come back to school. So, then we decided to go with my mother. She moved to One Man, West Twelfth Street.

C: You didn't love your own house?

Y: No.

C: You lived with your parents?

Y: I lived with my parents for a number of years and then after we were married we stayed on a day and bought a house at Twelve Thirty Two, Catnull Street.

C: Can we go back to your parents? Had your parents lived in Wilmington all their lives?

Y: No, my parents were raised in Virginia. My mother's home was in Tappahannock, Virginia, and my father's home was in Essex County, Virginia, and they met...they knew each other in Virginia and later they decided to get married and my mother came to Baltimore and lived there with a family as a maid for years till she got married and then when after getting married...she had a wedding and they come to Wilmington. My father brought her to Wilmington.

C: Why did your father come to Wilmington?

Y: He was then helping to lay the pipes in the Brandywine, the sewer pipes up the Brandywine and he...when she first come here she did not like it but after he asked her to stay and until they finished their job and he would take her back to Baltimore. So, she never did get back to Baltimore. They still remained in Wilmington and

raised their family and my mother had ten children and she lost two and so we were all raised up on...in Wilmington.

C: What was it like for a young black girl to be living in Wilmington?

Y: Well, I can say that it was alright for me because of course we couldn't go to the movies, the white movies and we could go to the playhouse but we'd have to sit in the third gallery. So, and then you could not eat in all the eating places so we were segregated there but my mother...we always had plenty to eat and we enjoyed our home life.

C: You moved to Tatnall Street. That was an area that was separated from most of the black community wasn't it?

Y: Yes, when we first bought the house on Tatnall Street, we were about the first family to buy a house between Twelfth and Thirteenth Street and we rented it for two years to a mail carrier then after two years we moved in and some of the neighbors did not like it. They wanted to know why didn't we move...buy some place else. But after living there, the next person was a Mr. Starling. He was a letter carrier. He moved in so it was the second family to buy and gradually the whole neighborhood was black.

C: On the other hand, most of the blacks of Wilmington lived on the East side and you were separated from them.

Y: Yes, I've never lived on the East side.

C: Were you of an upper class?

Y: Well, we thought...my mother didn't like the East side and because soon...she first come here, she said the first Sunday she was here she cried about living down on the East Twelfth Street and she didn't like the way the people acted back of the house there on Sundays and things and she wasn't used to that.

C: What did Wilrington look like?

Y: Well...

C: When you used to walk back and forth, did it have a different look than it does today?

Y: Well, of course the courthouse was at Eleventh and Market and we thought it was very nice because whenever we had the parades we could sit down on the border of the courthouse and wait for the parades and we used to take walks up the Brandywine; that was very pretty and I always thought the West side was real nice part of the town and was some very nice people living around.

C: How many children did you have?

Y: I had five children and I raised them all in Wilmington and sent them to the public schools and I would get up early in the morning and fix them a good breakfast and get them all dressed and ready for school and always if they come home, I would have a little lunch for them and then I always prepared a good dinner for my children and husband when he come in.

C: What kind of work did your husband do?

Y: My husband worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad and he worked his self up from a gate keeper to a track foreman and he was well thought of and he was I thought a very intelligent man because the Pennsylvania Railroad seen that he had taxi service to get the men out for to fix derailments. It was almost a twenty four hour job and he also sent him to Philadelphia to school to take up Italian language and he had about forty men in his group, colored and Italian fellows that thought the world of him and they always said that they never had a boss that didn't curse. He didn't believe in cursing and they always got along very well.

C: Well, your husband obviously was well thought of. During the depression did he always work?

Y: Yes. He always worked during the depression and he was a good provider.

C: Was there jealousy in the city if your husband worked since so many people didn't work?

Y: No, it wasn't jealousy. They had...when they would lay off men when he first started, he never got laid off and he worked for thirty five years for the Pennsylvania Railroad and then after that he tried to retire because on account of his health.

C: What was your religious life like?

Y: I was brought up in the Baptist church at Twelfth and Orange Street from a little girl and we had to go to Sunday school every Sunday and I brought my children up in the Sunday school every Sunday and I was baptized in Shiloh Baptist Church in...I think it was in 1920...no, yeah, 1920. And, I was married in 1920. And so, I had a lot of devotions to the church because my husband was also head of the trustee board there and we worked very hard for our church to try to make it comfortable for everybody.

C: Do you think that maybe one of the reasons your children have all been successful is because they have been devoted to the church?

Y: Yes. All of them are successful because they were brought up in the church and they all lean towards the church and hold positions in the church.

C: Would you tell us about all of your children and what all of them do?

Y: Well, starting with my eldest son, he taught in Howard School for years and then he was promoted to assistant principal and later he

was appointed to principal of Bayard School.

C: And his name is...

Y: His name is William S. Young, Sr. And, oh, he would have been junior wouldn't he?

C: Yes.

Y: Because he's named after his father and Leonard Joseph Young was my second son and he went to Howard School and finished and later went to Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia, to take up vocational work in school and later he...after he went there and finished he went to Tallahassee, Florida, and he was a vocational trainer that went through the counties of Florida and helped supervise their instructors and then later he was made principal of what's that school in...

C: Vocational school?

Y: Vocational school in Jackson, Florida, and then after leaving there, he served for a couple of years and then after leaving there he went to Arizona and later after leaving Arizona...he taught there for a couple of years, he went to the I.L.O. and joined the United Nations and he has served in that part for over twenty four years and he still...after being there, they have sent him...he's a vocational specialist and they sent him to Nairobi, Kenya, for two years to help the people to develop their work and now he's in Geneva, Switzerland, and they are wanting him to go to South America for three years and then he can retire. So, he's trying to decide now whether to do it because he said it would help his pension, make him have a good pension. So, next was my daughter Catherine. She's the third and she finished Howard School and went to Hampton Institute and then after finishing there, she went to the University

of Delaware and after finishing at the University of Delaware, she went to Columbia University and taken up supervision and then she has had extended work in other schools, colleges.

C: What is she doing now?

Y: And now she is principal of Martin Luther School...Martin Luther King School and then the next would be my daughter Sue. Her name was Elaine S. Young. She finished Howard School and we was wanting her to take up nurse training but then she thought she would like to work for a couple of years at Eleventh and Market, Continental Buildings. She run the elevator there and then after that...she taken sick there while she was doing that work and was sick for about a year and a half and she married before she got sick to a fellow by the name of Emanuel Butler and he was a student at Hampton after coming out of the service. So, she lingered sick with rheumatic fever for a couple of years and affected the heart and she died soon after her father, about two years later, and then I had another son, the youngest son, Calvin Young, and he worked on the railroad and he later worked at the hospital, a cook at Delaware Hospital and he sort of taken up catering and cooking work and now he's living in Pittsburgh.

C: Well, it must have been very difficult sending your children to school during the depression and during times when no one had very much money. How did you manage?

Y: Well, I tried to always tried to save a few dollars to help with the children and my husband was a good provider and he had a good job and then I had good friends that would also try to help my children and things. And my father and mother helped me a great deal and my sisters.

C: You mean they helped you by giving you money?

Y: Money, given to help them get through and clothes and things.

C: And did your children work also?

Y: Yes. My children always had a job to work when they come home from school and they helped to take care of their clothing and the hair cuts and things. So, that all helped and I had some very good relatives that also was interested in the children.

C: Well, the fact was that most people during that time had trouble just living and the fact that you could send your children away to college must have been a great sacrifice.

Y: Yes. It was. I tried to sacrifice and tried not to want too much and my father was very, very good to us. If I had told him that they needed anything, he would always see that I would get it to help.

C: Your father was still working?

Y: Yes.

C: Well, then everyone helped you.

Y: Yes.

C: And so you were able to do this with relatives helping, your parents helping.

Y: Yes.

C: Did your husband live to see your children all reach these roles of importance?

Y: He lived to see the first three. Didn't he? The first three children. That's my son William S. Young and then Leonard Joseph Young and Catherine.

C: Were there any activities you were involved in the community besides the church?

Y: I used to be...help at the Y, across the street, Y.W.

C: What did you do?

Y: Well, I used to when some of the secretaries or some of the people were off, I would go over and take care of the building at Thirteenth and Tatnall.

C: Was that where the building was?

Y: Where it was started.

C: And who started that?

Y: It was...

C: This isn't the Y.W.C.A.?

Y: Yes.

C: The Y.W.C.A.?

Y: The Y.W.C.A. was started at Thirt...

C: For black women.

Y: For black women, was started at Thirteenth and Tatnall and Mrs. Clara Gilbert and one of the duPonts helped to start it and she was very active in it.

C: Because the Y's were segregated?

Y: Yes.

C: And you couldn't go to the Y.W.C.A....

Y: On King Street

C: On King Street.

Y: Yes.

C: So, a separate building was...

Y: Provided.

C: Provided.

Y: Um hum.

C: But the same people worked in both?

Y: Well, later. We started oh when we gave the Y to Brown.

C: Fletcher Brown?

Y: Yes, Fletcher Brown helped to give the Y.W.C.A. to the colored women on Walnut Street...I just forget. What is it? Eleventh and Walnut? Tenth and Walnut.

C: So that was one of the activities that you were involved in.

Y: Yes. And then the church; I was active in the church.

C: What did you do in the church?

Y: Well, I was on the pastor's side and then I was on the committee that helped to provide things for the church if they needed upholstery done or anything like that or maybe I would help with the dinners and we'd have at church to raise money and I'd help in the Women's Day and we also kept on of the ministers at my mother's.

C: You mean he lived at your mother's.

Y: Yes.

C: What did you do for fun in those days? How did you have a good time?

Y: Well, we used to have a record player.

C: A what?

Y: A record player.

C: Oh, a record player.

Y: And we'd have music and we loved to sing.

C: Your whole family sang together?

Y: Yes and we would have the...every Thanksgiving or Christmas we'd have the family together and have dinners and then we'd always celebrate everybody's birthday. We'd always have a little party, serve ice cream and cake and punch and we...At Eleventh and Orange we used to have a movie. We used to go to the movies there in the Odd Fellow's Hall at Eleventh and Orange or Tenth and Orange and I

had done quite a good bit of traveling, my husband and I, and I also in...

C: How could you afford to travel?

Y: Well, my husband could get passes on the railroad and we wouldn't have to pay our fare and we'd always try to save up a little spending change to have to use and in 1959, my sister Helen and I went abroad to see my son, Leonard Joseph Young and we stayed six weeks over there.

C: Where?

Y: In Geneva, Switzerland, and we traveled from there to France and Germany and then we also went to Italy while I was there and also went to visit the place where he was stationed while in the service. So, I really have had some lovely trips. I've been to California, been to Miami, Minnesota, New York, Chicago.

C: Well, you were very fortunate.

Y: Yes.

C: Because most people didn't have that opportunity.

Y: But the railroad helped afford it for us and my mother would always keep the children for us.

C: Did your children never go on any of their trips.

Y: Well, he used to take the boys and Catherine on trips. They went to the World's Fair in Chicago; what was it in nineteen what? '33. And they went to New York often and everybody got a graduation trip to California.

C: I don't think...were other black families in Wilmington living the way you were? At that time?

Y: It wasn't many. It wasn't many lived like that because they didn't have the opportunity to do a lot of traveling as they do now. We

didn't have the tours and things.

C: Do you like what's happening to Wilmington now? Do you like what's?

Y: I really think that Wilmington certainly is growing and I...when I go downtown as I call it, I really hardly know where I am.

C: Is it an improvement?

Y: It is a big improvement and I think after they finish it's going to be beautiful.

C: You showed me a picture of the...of old Wilmington, the covered bridge crossing Eighteenth and Market. Do you remember that?

Y: Yes. I remember that crossing Eighteenth and Market.

C: Where was your husband born?

Y: My husband was born out on Market Street. It was a little place called "Shell Pot" (?), and they used to have a park there, amusement park, and he...there was a little row of houses, looked like about six or eight houses and he was born there but his mother died when he was very young and his grandmother raised him.

C: And black families lived there?

Y: Yes. And there's one there. It...

This is the end of the Alethea Young
tape. There is no side two. The
first side just runs out of tape..