

**INTERVIEW WITH
MRS. BLANCHE RIVERS
BY
CAROLYN M. BLAND**

This is Carolyn M. Bland. Today is Thursday, May 29, 2008. The time is 4:30 p.m. I am interviewing Mrs. Blanche S. Rivers at 1614 Hazel Avenue, New Bern. In attendance is Mrs. Rivers' daughter, Mrs. Barbara Rivers Morgan.

INTERVIEWER:

Mrs. Rivers, thank you for assisting us with this project. Could you give me your full name, date and place of birth?

MRS. RIVERS

Blanche Lucille Sparrow Rivers.

INTERVIEWER:

Your date and place of birth?

MRS. RIVERS

November 15, 1905, New Bern, North Carolina.

INTERVIEWER:

Could you give us some basic information Mrs. Rivers about yourself, your parents, your siblings, your spouse, and your daughter?

MRS. RIVERS

My father's name was Henry Clay Sparrow. There were two boys in my family. The other one was William Shakespeare Sparrow of Boston, Massachusetts. There were no girls; there were only two boys.

INTERVIEWER:

What was the second boy's name? Charles?

MRS. RIVERS

No. I was talking about my father's family. And he had one brother. Then, in my family, there were three boys and two girls: Henry Sparrow, Jr.; Isaac Sparrow. I was in the middle. There were two girls: Blanche Sparrow (you want my middle name?) and Charles Sparrow.

INTERVIEWER:

Your brother?

MRS. RIVERS:

My brother. And one more, Hattie Francis, my sister.

INTERVIEWER:

And your spouse's, your husband's name was?

MRS. RIVERS:

Bishop Singleton Rivers.

INTERVIEWER:

And the two of you had one daughter, Barbara?

MRS. RIVERS:

Barbara Rivers Morgan.

INTERVIEWER:

How did you meet your husband?

MRS. RIVERS:

I met him at a social affair, a party, okay, at the Rome House.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay

MRS. RIVERS:

And at this party I guess he had heard of me; and he came and spoke to me. And, during the time, he called me queen. He said "How is the queen?"

INTERVIEWER:

Ooh...

MRS. RIVERS:

And I answered. I said: "Well, how is the king?"

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, that's cute, so your relationship started from there.

MRS. RIVERS:

It did.

INTERVIEWER:

Were you out of school at that time or were you still in college?

MRS. RIVERS:

No, I was out of college then. I finished college in 1927.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, I see. And what college did you attend?

MRS. RIVERS:

Shaw University. Barbara, where is one of those slips? That thing I had? Read that to see if that will help you any.

INTERVIEWER:

"The centennial birthday celebration of Mrs. Blanche Lucile Sparrow Rivers", and this was Saturday, November 12, 2005. I remember ... at the Flame Restaurant. I couldn't go but I remember that. Okay, and it does show your birth date and your parents, Hattie Frances Brown Sparrow; and you're a graduate of ... a college degree from Shaw University, of Raleigh, North Carolina. You completed high school at the National Training in School in Durham, North Carolina, in 1923, currently known as North Carolina Central University. That's very interesting, because, for some reason, I thought you finished high school at West Street.

MRS. RIVERS:

No

INTERVIEWER?

Why, because it only went to the 8th grade?

MRS. RIVERS:

Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

I know that was the case with my mother and father. Here it says you were the primary school teacher for the first few years of your career and later taught English to 11th and 12th graders until you retired in 1951, when your only daughter, Barbara Lucille Rivers Morgan, graduated from high school, and how well do I remember that because I was one of the 12th graders. And what a wonderful background you gave me in English. So, when I went on to Livingstone College, I excelled; was far above the rest of the class because of what I had been taught by you. Thank you so much for that.

Can you describe for me the family that you grew up with in New Bern? Some of your memories, or games, or toys, or what you did during those days?

MRS. RIVERS:

Well, now, my brothers ... Henry died at an early age and that was the oldest one.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, I see.

MRS. RIVERS:

The other two, no, one, the next one who was Isaac, okay, also attended the ... what was it ... North Carolina...

INTERVIEWER

Okay; the training school at Durham?

MRS. RIVERS:

Uh, huh. That's right.

INTERVIEWER:

And then, Charles?

MRS. RIVERS:

Well, I'm figuring out where Isaac was located. Isaac went to Montclair, New Jersey.

INTERVIEWER:

Okay. That was Peggy and Grace's father. Okay. I remember that.

MRS. RIVERS:

And then I was the next one, right here in New Bern. And of course I went to where I got my training from .

INTERVIEWER:

And what about Mr. Charles Sparrow? Where did he go to school?

MRS. RIVERS:

Well, he really didn't go away. He stayed here.

INTERVIEWER:

They had high school here at that time?

MRS. RIVERS:

At that time, yes.

INTERVIEWER:

That's very interesting.

MRS. RIVERS:

And Frances attended high school here also; she and Charlie finished high school in Goldsboro.

INTERVIEWER:

And who was the youngest?

MRS. RIVERS:

Hattie Frances

INTERVIEWER:

So Hattie was the name of your mother... Hattie Frances also... that was your mother's name?

MRS. RIVERS:

Her name wasn't really Frances .. I don't know where they got that from; it doesn't matter.

INTERVIEWER:

When you were growing up, did you have a lot of toys ... with which to play? Did you have a special doll?

MRS. RIVERS:

I might have but I really don't remember that because the days went by so quickly. I started school at what they called advanced first because Mrs. Anna Banks Moore was the teacher and she stayed with the family.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, I see.

MRS. RIVERS:

She was from Greensboro.

INTERVIEWER:

That's right. I remember a number of teachers stayed with your father and mother, boarded with them. And also with the fathers and pastors.

MRS. RIVERS:

That was the beginning of it, you know. I got my early schooling from her, Anna Banks Moore and she resided with us while she was here.

INTERVIEWER

When you were in school, was there a particular dress or uniform that you had to wear?

MRS. RIVERS

No.

INTERVIEWER

Ok, but sometimes the schools were made to wear midi blouses and skirts, but that wasn't required of you?

MRS. RIVERS

No; we wore whatever we wanted to wear. And I can tell you some of the teachers ... I said that was advanced first ... now, second grade, I don't remember my teacher ... but I can tell you, in the sixth grade, Mary B. Styron...

INTERVIEWER

Oh I remember Mrs. Styron, yes..

MRS. RIVERS

Yes. That's right. That was the sixth grade. Now, in the seventh grade, I don't remember .. at least I didn't have a special teacher in the 7th grade. And in the 8th grade, that's when I went to Durham, to the National Training School.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe anything that you remember about your family, Mr. and Mrs. Sparrow their involvement with the community at that time?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes. My Daddy belonged to several things in the community and my Mother was more of a home body; but my Daddy was very active in the community.

INTERVIEWER

Was he a Mason?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember the lodge... his membership?

MRS. RIVERS

No

INTERVIEWER

I think they have George B. Willis here and King Solomon.

MRS. RIVERS

I think it was George B. Willis

INTERVIEWER

Was he an Elk also?

MRS. RIVERS

No, he wasn't.

INTERVIEWER

What about the church involvement?

MRS. RIVERS

He was, both of them; my mother and father, were very active in church affairs. My daddy was a trustee for a number of years, a steward of AME Zion.

INTERVIEWER
St Peter's AME Zion Church?

MRS. RIVERS
My mother was a stewardess.

INTERVIEWER
Ok and you were, too.

MRS. RIVERS
In later years.

INTERVIEWER
Did either of them sing in the choir at St. Peter's AME Zion?

MRS. RIVERS
No.

INTERVIEWER
But you were a member of the Sunday school, so you've been a member of St. Peter's for all of your life?

MRS. RIVERS
Yes

INTERVIEWER
What organizations did you participate in at St. Peter's as an adult? You were in the Olive Leaf Club?

MRS. RIVERS
That's right.

INTERVIEWER
Were you a Missionary?

MRS. RIVERS
Not at that time.

INTERVIEWER
Did you head up any fundraising activities? Were you a Captain for any of their special days?

MRS. RIVERS
Yes,

INTERVIEWER

And what was that,,, St. Peter's Day?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes

INTERVIEWER

Are you still active as Captain?

MRS. RIVERS

I am.

INTERVIEWER

You are? That's wonderful. So how many years would you think that you served as Captain for St Peters Day at your church?

MRS. RIVERS

This is 2008. Maybe 60 years?

INTERVIEWER

Since the beginning of St Peters? I think you can safely say 60 years. How else was your father involved with St. Peter's church? Did he help with the construction? Did he develop the design of the present church? Did he design that?

MRS. RIVERS

I don't know; I can't say that he actually designed it but I know he had an active part in whatever was being done during that time.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember the persons who helped him in building the church ... and this is after the fire of 1922 that destroyed the sanctuary. This is the present church that is there now. Do you remember those persons who helped him in building the church?

MRS. RIVERS

Mr. Dawson was one.

INTERVIEWER

The guy who lived next door to []

MRS. RIVERS

Yes. Because he was a carpenter.

INTERVIEWER

Oh, he was a carpenter?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes. And I know he worked closely with my Daddy. And also James Starkey worked closely with him as a brick mason (David Starkey). That was Ethel Bell's daddy.

INTERVIEWER

So Ethel Bell Starkey Sampson's father... the Reverend Ethel Sampson now ... that was her father? That's very interesting, very very interesting. So with the Olive Leaf Club at St. Peter's Church, were you an officer in that?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes. I was the Treasurer.

INTERVIEWER

The Treasurer; kept up with the money?

MRS. RIVERS

That's right.

INTERVIEWER

I remember that the Olive Leaf Club used to have outings on the lawn of Mr. and Mrs. A.D. Smith ... what was that occasion .. what was that for?

MRS. RIVERS

Well, That was for ...

INTERVIEWER

Was it like an annual picnic?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes

INTERVIEWER

Was it held during any special time of the year?

MRS. RIVERS

No; that is, it was during the warm season.

INTERVIEWER

The warm weather... I remember hearing about that. I think my mother may have gone several times, as a guest. How do you see our community has changed, Mrs. Rivers, from the time you grew up and the way that it is today?

MRS. RIVERS

Well, I have noticed a change is that during my early years, we were not able to afford a meal in the cafeteria. They were only for whites.

INTERVIEWER
Restaurant?

MRS. RIVERS
That right

INTERVIEWER
What type of transportation did you have during that time?

MRS. RIVERS
Well, at that time, my ...

INTERVIEWER
Did your father have a car or was it the usual mode to walk everywhere you went?

MRS. RIVERS
Now, really, during that time when I was a child, I don't quite remember how we'd get around but I know after I started teaching, I bought a car.

INTERVIEWER
Okay. Do you remember what your first car was? Was it a Plymouth?

MRS. RIVERS
No, it was an Oldsmobile.

INTERVIEWER
An Oldsmobile; okay; very, very good ... what do you remember about the great fire of 1922? Where were you when that took place?

MRS. RIVERS
I was in high school.

INTERVIEWER
You were in Durham. Were any of your family's homes or personal belongings affected by the fire?

MRS. RIVERS
Yes we lost everything we had.

INTERVIEWER
Where were you living at the time of the fire?

MRS. RIVERS
I was in school.

INTERVIEWER

Where was your family living?

MRS. RIVERS

They were living at 721 West St. and that is the home that was destroyed.

INTERVIEWER

Did your father rebuild that?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes. He built a smaller house in our yard because the lot was large enough for him to build a house for us to live in until he built the other house.

INTERVIEWER

Well, that's the large two-story house there now with the beautiful porch.

MRS. RIVERS

That's right.

INTERVIEWER

I remember that house when I was growing up and we went there quite a bit. Did anyone lose their lives that you know of during that fire?

MRS. RIVERS

No I don't remember anyone losing any lives at all.

INTERVIEWER

But there was one fire during that time and they said it [] That's where it started; that was Sam Bryan's family's house. And I remember hearing that from memories of New Bern down there. Do you remember the tent city where people had to live?

MRS. RIVERS

No.

INTERVIEWER

That's right, you were away at school at that time. In talking about your school days, what was your favorite course or activity in school?

MRS. RIVERS

Let's see; I wasn't here too long.

INTERVIEWER

I'm talking about grade school

MRS. RIVERS

That's what I'm talking about. In grade school, I don't remember 4th grade. I don't really remember the 3rd, 4th, and 5th, but I do remember the 6th. That was Mrs. Styron.

INTERVIEWER

Mrs. Styron?

MRS. RIVERS

That's right. And the 7th, I don't remember that. I don't remember who taught me in the 7th grade.

MRS. MORGAN?

Wasn't' that Mrs. McIver?

MRS. RIVERS

And I said, in the 8th grade, that's when I started in Durham

INTERVIEWER

How did you decide to become an English teacher?

MRS. RIVERS

I had a teacher in college whose name was Benjamin Brawley and he was extraordinary in English and I just fell in love with him, his teaching, and of course, that was the time I decided that I wanted to be an English teacher.

INTERVIEWER

Thanks to Mr. Brawley for inspiring you. You said you were a primary school teacher during your first few years. Where did you teach?

MRS. RIVERS

It was.

INTERVIEWER

Did you teach her in New Bern?

MRS. RIVERS

No, I really did not start teaching until I finished high school in Durham and those were the years you could teach.

INTERVIEWER

So you taught here in New Bern for elementary and high school?

MRS. RIVERS

Well not high school, elementary.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember where you taught for those years?

MRS. RIVERS

Elementary ...no primary, because, during that time, there were many teachers around and Mr. Barber really felt that I was too young to teach the children.

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Barber, the Principal of West Street School?

MRS. RIVERS

That's right. Have you talked with Dorothy? I know when I was teaching a class, to teach at West Street Elementary ...

INTERVIEWER

Mrs. Rivers, do you feel that you received an education in high school and at Shaw that well prepared you for your profession?

MRS. RIVERS

I do.

INTERVIEWER

Did you go to school beyond Shaw to work on additional degrees or certificate renewal?

MRS. RIVERS

No I had intentions to do that but never did do it, and I had made a plan to go through the summer and take Barbara with me because she was a real young child then. But I never did.

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell us now about your type of involvement with the funeral home?

MRS. RIVERS

I did not do much with the funeral home. After I retired, I did work as the treasurer but that was all.

INTERVIEWER

When did Mr. Rivers first open his funeral home?

MRS. RIVERS

It was in 1929 it think.

INTERVIEWER

Did he own it totally by himself or was his father involved?

MRS. RIVERS

No, his father was dead at that time but he had a brother who had a funeral home in Kinston and his name was J.B. They called him J.B.

INTERVIEWER

I remember them calling him Doll Rivers.

MRS. RIVERS

That's right.

INTERVIEWER

So it was Rivers and Rivers at that time.

MRS. RIVERS

That's' right. But later on, Doll was a little bit ill or something and he went to New York but he did not stay long; he came back to Kinston and he did have a funeral home by himself for a while.

So the first establishment was on West Street?

MRS. RIVERS

That's right.

INTERVIEWER

When did you move to Broad Street?

MRS. RIVERS

It was on the corner of Broad and Miller Streets. Maybe in the 40's. I don't remember exactly what year, but it was in the 40's.

INTERVIEWER

And that was still Rivers Funeral Home? But when you built the present establishment on West Street, which was Rivers- Morgan Funeral Home, what year was that?

MRS. RIVERS

I don't remember.

INTERVIEWER

You remember, I think you said Rivers-Morgan Funeral Home was opened and dedicated in the 1970's, and Lee was the Principal at that time but also in the funeral home.

MRS. RIVERS

I don't believe he was in the funeral home at that time

MRS. MORGAN

When he moved here, he came here as a teacher and soon became a teacher-principal over in Duffyfield School .

INTERVIEWER

Mrs. Rivers, what year did you retire?

MRS. RIVERS

1961

INTERVIEWER

What have you done since your retirement from teaching?

MRS. RIVERS

I think I did more in my church at that time.

INTERVIEWER

And you were treasurer in the fun home? In talking about your church, St. Peter's, what do you do here at home that involves your church? Still Captain at St. Peter's Church of St. Peter's Day?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes

INTERVIEWER

How do you carry out that responsibility here at home?

MRS. RIVERS

Well, I bring home a list of members who work with me, contact them by phone and Barbara helps me.

INTERVIEWER

When you were growing up in New Bern, what were some of the activities that you participated in? Did you go to the movies?

MRS. RIVERS

My brother Isaac loved baseball.

INTERVIEWER

Did they have a special area where they played baseball?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes

INTERVIEWER

Tell me about Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

MRS. RIVERS

I think it was 1956. I was a member for 50 years and received an award.

INTERVIEWER

Were any of your family members, Mrs. Rivers, in the military?

MRS. RIVERS

No.

INTERVIEWER

Do you recall the civic league when it was organized here?

MRS. RIVERS

I remember Henry; was he a member?

MRS. RIVERS

Yes he was.

INTERVIEWER

What about their activities, were they instrumental in [.....](unclear)

Were there any persons that you remember becoming involved in [.....](unclear)

MRS. RIVERS

Bobby Perry played softball.

[]Unclear

INTERVIEWER

Does anything stand out in your mind about New Bern? Do you recall any demonstrations.... 910 through 921 is garbled,

How would you describe the health services, doctors and nurses, African American?

MRS. RIVERS

I had no trouble with doctors, Black doctors ... Mrs. Carrie Fisher's husband.

INTERVIEWER

What other doctors were here?

MRS. RIVERS

Dr. Mann and Dr. Moore. The pharmacist was Dr. Hill.

INTERVIEWER

Was he the only Back pharmacist here? Do you remember where you were when you heard about the assassination of Robert Kennedy?

MRS. RIVERS

No, I sure don't.

INTERVIEWER

Mrs. Rivers, is there anything that you would like to add that we have not talked about before?

MRS. RIVERS

No.

INTERVIEWER

I think you've done remarkably well.

MRS. RIVERS

I'm getting worse with my memory. I hope I have been able to be of a little help. [] unclear.

INTERVIEWER

You have. Thank you so much, Mrs. Rivers.

This concludes the interview