

Beatrice Sims revised by family

INTERVIEWER: Good afternoon. Thank you so much for inviting me into your home, Mrs. Sims. My name is Shirley Guion and I am going to be your interviewer for today. Today is March 10, 2009. The time is 5:00 p.m. Ms. Sims, could you give me your address?

MRS. SIMS: 3000 Westminister Drive, Apt. D, New Bern, NC.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. Ms. Sims, the purpose for me being here today is to talk to you about *African American Voices Between Two Rivers*. This is a project that we are doing about Afro Americans around and in New Bern and I thank you so much for your participation. Ms. Sims, would you state your full name, and the place of your birth?

MRS. SIMS: Shirley, I was born Beatrice Moline Bell on September 5, 1916, in New Bern, North Carolina. My parents were Ruperta Beatrice Bell and Herbert David Bell. My mother died when she was 21 years old. I was told she died giving birth to a son who died with her. My mother's doctor was a black doctor, named Dr. Moore. I've forgotten his first name, a very kind colored doctor. Dr. Moore was given permission to admit my mother to St. Luke's Hospital where colored could be taken. I was told that my mother fell from her cot and died. I was 19 months old.

INTERVIEWER: Ms. Sims, do you have any children of your own, any brothers or sisters? Would you like to tell me a little about your children, and your brothers and sisters?

MRS. SIMS: No, I had no brothers and sisters in my family. I had a half-brother but he died some time ago. He did not live in New Bern. He lived in Manhattan. [I had four adopted children. My oldest daughter Cathy died a year ago.]

INTERVIEWER: All right, thank you dear. Can you tell me a little about the family you grew up with in New Bern?

MRS. SIMS: Oh, yes. My maternal grandmother was Ms. Peggy Ann Simmons.[Mrs. Hettie Ann Fenner] Her husband was Rev. Cicero Simmons [Fenner]. My guardians were my grandfather and my grandmother. My grandmother, the Rev. Simmons [Fenner], was also a 33rd degree Mason and that was considered something in his day. My maternal grandmother and great-grandmother were tailors of men's suits. They worked for my great-grands'

brother-in-law, Mr. Munsterford Holley. He owned a tailor's shop on East South Front Street. He's listed in the directory in New Bern in the library.

INTERVIEWER: Oh good! All right, thank you so much for that. Do you have any preschool memories here in New Bern? Where did you start your schooling?

MRS. SIMS: I started my schooling in West Street Elementary School here in New Bern. I was 6 years old. I graduated from West Street High School in 1935. I excelled in Home Economics, won awards for my sewing designs. My teacher was Ms. Carrie Fisher who recommended me to attend Pratt Institute for Fashion Designs. There was no money available to further my education. Ms. Charlotte Rhone was supervisor at that time. She was supervisor of Craven County. She suggested introducing me to a manager of a dress factory here in New Bern. He took one look at me and said to Ms. Rhone, "You know I don't hire no (N-Word) in my shop." I ran all the way home.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Ms. Sims, what kind of games did you play when you were a child and how did you dress?

MRS. SIMS: Well, I did not play sports. I was awkward; I couldn't run very well and for the pastime I played Whist, card games. However, most of my time was doing sewing, preparing me for my life's work. [I designed silk Lamp shaded in my shop at home in Raleigh, NC.]

INTERVIEWER: Even when you were a little girl, you didn't play games?

MRS. SIMS: Even when I was a little girl. I was given a doll to dress by my great-grandmother and I sewed with a needle and thread. I did not use a sewing machine. Years later, I was introduced to a sewing machine that I loved. I had no desire to go to college at that time. I only wanted to study dress designing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember anything other than your family running a tailor's shop? Was your family involved in the community in New Bern? I know you told me that they ran a tailor's shop.

MRS. SIMS: Other than church and the barber shop that was owned by my cousins. [The Seth Vail family]

INTERVIEWER: Who were your cousins?

MRS. SIMS: The John Bell family. [Seth Vail, the Junius Joyner family, the Blounts] In church, my grandmother was the Superintendent of the Sunday school and my mother, when she was alive, played the organ for the choir.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. Can you tell me anything about the buildings during this time? What kind of buildings did you have, school buildings? Did everybody attend the same school?

MRS. SIMS: I attended West Street School.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the only school that you had here?

MRS. SIMS: Yes, back at that time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get another school?

MRS. SIMS: Yes, we got a black high school.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of the school?

MRS. SIMS: West Street High School. I attended West Street Elementary School when I was 6 years old and went to West Street High School where I graduated.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so everything was West Street at that time ... J.T. Barber was not in existence?

MRS. SIMS: Oh, yes, J.T. Barber's Elementary School and J.T. Barber High School. [Later J.T. Barber Elementary School moved to Duffyfield.]

INTERVIEWER: Was that school here when you were in school?

MRS. SIMS: Yes, it was on West Street, where it is now. [No]

INTERVIEWER: That's West Street School.

MRS. SIMS: That's what it's called now. But years ago, I can show you a picture of it, the old school. It was a 2 or 3-story building, beautiful building, very spacious. The campus grounds were wonderful. Later on, we had to have some little buildings connected because the little children were expected.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any favorite teachers?

MRS. SIMS: Oh, yes. One of my favorite teachers was Ms. Danyus. She taught French. She was a lovely lady; very special to me and Miss. White, she was the Principal of the high school when I entered high school. She wasn't there always, but when I entered high school, Miss. White was Principal.

INTERVIEWER: You said that you went to an all black school. Was there any discrimination in the school where students would discriminate or teachers would discriminate against students?

MRS. SIMS: No, oh no! I must tell you about our home economics classes. They were ideal. We had two wonderful teachers: Mrs. Carrie Smith [Fisher] and I can't remember the name of the other right now. But they were two beautiful teachers. They taught us to cook, sew, whatever. They were very nice, had a lot of patience with us. I can say that growing up in New Bern, North Carolina was the happiest time in my life. Of course, I didn't know it then.

INTERVIEWER: What is the name of your church family?

MRS. SIMS: My present church is St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a church before St. Cyprian's?

MRS. SIMS: Oh, yes; my maternal grandmother's family was Clinton Chapel. I think that's a Methodist church. But I was not happy in the Methodist church. I had attended the Episcopal Church with neighbors and I had fallen in love with Rev. R. I. Johnson and his church. I didn't have to persuade my grandmother. She had attended the church just to take a look over, wondering why I was excited about the Episcopal Church. But once she met Rev. R.I. Johnson, she consented for me to be confirmed in that church.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Thank you. Did your family own their home in New Bern?

MRS. SIMS: Yes, now, that's another story. My great-grandmother was considered a Mulatto. At that time, around 1910 and 1911, people that were considered Mulattos, could buy properties. My great-grandmother jumped ahead. She bought property on 9 Carroll Street that consisted of a very large frame house. Also, it had a lot on the back of the house, a small lot on the side of the house, and

my grandfather grew vegetables on the large property. We had vegetables, all kinds of vegetables, all kinds of fruit trees and my grandmother had a flower garden. She attended that. I hated flowers because I was allergic to them. But at that time, I didn't know I was allergic. I was just sneezing all the time. We were quite happy there. My great-grandmother died soon after she bought that property. My great-grandmother had six daughters and one son. They all had passed away by the time I was school age.

INTERVIEWER: All right, you said you lived on Carroll Street?

MRS. SIMS: Yes, #9 Carroll Street, just in front of Mt. Cavalry Baptist Church, when the street was very popular, but it's no longer Carroll Street. [The house is no longer there. It was sold and torn down.]

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the prominent African-American owned businesses while you were growing up, and where did you go for entertainment?

MRS. SIMS: You wouldn't believe Carroll Street. On the corner was a grocery store owned by a foreign white man who was very kind to all the black people and the black people loved him. Next door to Mr. Reese, who was the grocer, was a black lady named Miss Melvinie Barber. She also had a large house, plenty of property in the back. She had a small building to the right of her property and she had a candy store. She did not have to worry about customers. All of the little kids would run in there to get a little penny black cow. I won't go in to tell you what a penny black cow was, but it was good.

And next door to Miss Melvinie Barber was my great-grandmother's home. Next door to her was an elderly lady. We called her "Miss Mae Jane". What other name she had I do not know. But she was to us "Miss Mae Jane". Miss Mae Jane baked hard cookies. We knew they had sugar in them but they were hard, but the kids loved them. She would grab them and tell them "Come in to get your cookies while they're hot." She wasn't calling us in to get cookies; she was calling us in for prayer meeting. So she knew we wouldn't come unless she mentioned her cookies. So we would go in and Miss Mae Jane would give us horrible prayer [cookies.] We were all going to die in sin, young or old. But there were the cookies.

Down the street I must tell you about the Bryant family. They owned a shoe shop. The father made shoes, repaired shoes. Whatever you wanted done with your shoes, Mr. Bryant would do that.

We also had two Dixon families on that street. One lived across from me, [us] Mr. and Mrs. Dixon, who were the mother and father of Lula Dixon, who was a very popular musician in this town and her sisters and one brother. Next to them lived Mrs. Mary Ann Nixon who was a nurse.

Across the street was the Jimmy Nelson family. His mother was a songstress. She sang in Clinton Chapel choir.

Next door to her was Captain [Ike Powell's Building.] (I can't remember his name right now). He was a retired Army officer. Some way, I have no idea, he owned the building there he called "The Grand Army of the Republic". It was right next door to Jimmy Nelson's house. Jimmy may be able to tell you more about it. He also owned a house on the street in back of Carroll called Commerce Street. He had a large building there. It was also called "The Grand Army of the Republic". On the 4th of July, Captain would get us all dressed in red, white, and blue. It was large, red, white, and blue flags. He would line us up and we would parade from one Army place to the other. Then we'd all get together and march from Commerce Street in New Bern down to the soldiers' cemetery. They would open up the cemetery and the Captain would go in with his group and we would have a program. The little children were given states and they would talk about the states. I had the state of Ohio and I hated it because I had to say "I'm representing the Buckeye State of Ohio" and I would say to my grandmother, "What's a Buckeye?" She didn't know, but she told me I had better recite what the Captain had told me. Then he would have, on Halloween, a parade with little children, and he would give us lighted lanterns. I don't know how they were made, but we made them and they would have a candle in them. We didn't have any electricity lights then, so as we walked, the candles would glow And everyone would come out applauding and we were so proud. I'm saying that to say this: it was so much in New Bern, in the churches, in the schools, but now things have faded away. There are other things that have come in that are better. But me, being from the old school, think there is nothing better than it was back in my time.

INTERVIEWER: Was Carroll Street close to Five Points?

MRS. SIMS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any businesses in the Five Points area?

MRS. SIMS: Yes. We had two restaurants run by Mr. Downing. The other one was run by Miss Sarah Murphy. We had a fast food shop that was run by a guy named

Bug and he had one leg but he made the most delicious bologna sandwiches. Now you would know nothing about bologna sandwiches. But it had a trimming on it. It had a special chili that he made. You could beg him for the recipe, but he would not give it to you. We had the chili and the mustard on that bologna sandwich. We didn't know anything then about hamburgers. Next door to that shop there was a grocery store run by a white man who was very nice, very kind to all the black children. Next to him was the Green's grocery run by Mr. Robert. Next door to him was a meat market run by a black man, Mr. Sutton.

INTERVIEWER: Was Oscar's in that area too?

MRS. SIMS: Yes. Then next to him was the drug store that was run by Dr. and Mrs. Henry Kennedy. Above that store were offices of black doctors: Dr. Mumford, Dr. Mann, and another doctor that I can't recall his name right now. Across the street was the shoe shop. He made shoes, repaired shoes, anything done to shoes he would do. Next to him was the drug store. That was run by a white man. I understand that drug store was here for many, many years.

INTERVIEWER: What about movie theatres; did you have any?

MRS. SIMS: Oh, yes, we had two; one in the Five Points called the Palace Theatre. When I was a teenager, I sold tickets in the theatre. In the Frog Pond, there was another theatre. The theatre in Five Points was run by a white man. But the one in the Frog Pond was called Mitchells. And that was the black theatre run by a black man.

INTERVIEWER: Were you allowed to go just to the black theatre?

MRS. SIMS: No, we could go to both! In the Five Points the theatre was run by a white man and in the Frog Pond the theatre was run by a black man.

INTERVIEWER: All right, Ms. Sims, thank you so much. Do you have anything that you would like to tell me about politics, or the Civil Rights movement in New Bern when you were growing up? Was there a Civil Rights movement when you were growing up? Maybe later on in your life, did you participate in any type of movement?

MRS. SIMS: No. I, sorry I didn't, not at all. At that time, I was living in Brooklyn, New York.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, what about health services here in New Bern? I know you told me you had doctors. Did you have a hospital here for Blacks?

MRS. SIMS: Oh, no.

INTERVIEWER: Are you telling me that children were born mainly by midwives?

MRS. SIMS: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MRS. SIMS: Like I told you, my mother was not allowed in the hospital. I think the building is still there.

INTERVIEWER: St. Luke's?

MRS. SIMS: Yes. St. Luke's. Sometimes the black doctors could get special permission to bring in a patient. And that's what happened with my mother. They had special permission to bring her in. Then Rev. R. I. Johnson got tired of it. He decided that we were going to have a black hospital. Rev. Johnson was a presence in New Bern, North Carolina. He had a club foot, and he made use of that club foot. You would see him walking down the Five Points, straight as an arrow, swinging that foot. "Rev. Johnson, Hi' Rev. Johnson." Everybody knew Rev. Albright Johnson. Even in other cities like Greenville, Cove City, he was well known. So he decided that he would go in these different towns and try to collect money to help us to build a hospital. He got the money. I don't remember now how he did it or where he got the money from. By the time the hospital was built, I was living in Brooklyn, New York.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know the year that it was opened?

MRS. SIMS: No, I don't.

INTERVIEWER: Well, my son was born at Good Shepherd. But my daughter was born at Craven Regional. So, I have a relationship with Good Shepherd. All right, Ms. Sims, I know you told me that you love arts and crafts. Will you tell me just a little bit about your work? Can you briefly tell me about the type of work that you did?

MRS. SIMS: Yes. I have to go back to my great-grandmother. I guess I was about 6 years old. She was trying to tell me about men's suits. I didn't want to hear it but I wanted to learn how to sew. So my grandmother gave me a doll so I could make a doll's dress. Then I grew into making dresses in home economics. But I wasn't happy. There was something else. I wanted to go to Pratt Institute, but I've told you that was a failure. But when I moved to Brooklyn New York, I was introduced to the garment factory. I loved the garment factory and, sewing machines were going a mile a minute and I was standing there with my eyes wide open. But anyway, I did not learn. I was too slow. In the south, we're never fast.

INTERVIEWER: Ms. Sims, we're about to end this interview, but of course, I have one more question that I would like to know about and maybe you can answer this question about New Bern. As you know, we are going to celebrate our 300th anniversary, and what do you think about New Bern celebrating its 300th anniversary? What does that mean to you?

MRS. SIMS: I don't know much about it, Shirley. That's a question I'd like to skip.

INTERVIEWER: All right. What do you think about Obama being elected President?

MRS. SIMS: Awesome! One word, awesome!

INTERVIEWER: All right, what about Beverly Perdue being elected Governor?

MRS. SIMS: Well, she's all right. I don't know that much about Beverly. I knew her when I lived in Raleigh but I haven't paid much attention to her since I've been in New Bern.

INTERVIEWER: Ms. Sims, I want to thank you for letting me come in to have this interview today. I have enjoyed it. I have enjoyed it very much and I hope you have enjoyed telling me about your life, growing up in New Bern. I know you were telling me there were many other things you would like to tell me. Maybe one day I will come around and sit down and listen to all of your history. You were telling me you had written a poem. Would you like to tell me about the poem before we end?

MRS. SIMS: I wrote a poem about Shirley if I can remember it. I'll try. I was holding up a throw that had been given to me for Christmas and it was so soft and I

said it is so soft it feels like love and love feels like lace and love feels like a love song lace. (You don't get it.)

INTERVIEWER: All right, thank you again. And I will be back to visit you so that you can share some more of your history.

MRS. SIMS: I have some readings I would like to share. This book is almost full of my writings. But it's not easy for me to talk period.

INTERVIEWER: All right, thanks again.

[] = changes made inserted by Mrs. Sims or family.