

INTERVIEWER: Good evening. My name is Shirley Guion and I am here as your interviewer about "*African-American Voices Between Two Rivers*". And, thank you so much for inviting me into your home.

This is the home of Ms. Jessie Mae Annette Daves White and the address is 1904 Chestnut Avenue, New Bern, North Carolina. Today's date is February 19, 2009. Again, thanks so much for letting me come into your home because I know you have a lot of history to share about the African American voices between two rivers.

The first thing that I would like to know about, and please give me, (even though I have said your name), but I would like for you to give me your full name, today's date and the place of your birth, if you don't mind.

MRS. WHITE: Welcome to my home. I am so glad you're here, Shirley, and I want you to feel at home. And, during this interview, if there is anything that I should remember to say, remind me, please.

I am Jessie Mae Annette Daves White. The name is so long because mother insisted that this was her last child, and I did happen to be her last child. Mae and Jessie came from my grandfather and grandmother. Granddaddy was Jesse and grandmother was Jessie. Jessie Wilson was my grandmother and she taught English at Taledego College and Jessie Parentine was the janitor there who later became Chaplain after he went to college and completed his days at Taledego.

Background for me is made up of many memories. My parents' names were Dr. Ira Alexander Daves, Sr. and my mother's name was Winifred Ernestine Terrentine. I was fortunate to have two college graduates as parents. Daddy was the graduate of Knoxville College in which he met mother at Knoxville College and he also proceeded to Meharry, which is the medical school there in Knoxville, TN. Mother completed her MA in English at Atlanta University which is now Clark in Atlanta.

When I think about the young people who have read her Thesis, I am always jealous because I never did go by Clarks to read her Thesis.

And speaking of memories, there were 4 siblings of us. There was Gladys Marie, Ira Alexander Daves Jr., Wynona Elizabeth, and yours truly, Jessie Mae Annette.

When you start talking about family history, there is so much to say because the memories are many. My family entered New Bern in 1928 when lawyer O'Hara, who was one of the most outstanding personalities in 1928, invited my daddy to come to New Bern. Most of the college graduates came to New Bern to live, and New Bern seemed to be the most prospering place for black families, so we had lots of professional people in the area.

INTERVIEWER: All right, let me ask you this. Could you describe yourself and your family that you grew up with in New Bern, like pre-school memories, games, and toys, and all of that when you were going to school?

MRS. WHITE: Well, when I went to school, I went to, first of all, my mother was supervising teacher of Jones County. So I went to Pollocksville for the first and second grade. I don't know when I started in the first grade because my mother taught me in the first grade and she taught me in the second grade. And when she came to New Bern to stay, I think she worked as an 8th grade teacher at that time and I was introduced to the second grade again to Ms. Redding's class.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of that school?

MRS. WHITE: That was West Street.

INTERVIEWER: And Jones County?

MRS. WHITE: J.W. Willis' School. So, I don't remember 1st grade or 2nd grade; I just had a pre-year experience. Then 3rd grade was Mrs. Scott and 4th grade was Mrs. Buchanan. 5th grade was Ms. Esther Powell; 6th grade was Ruth Houston; 7th grade was Percy Jenkins; 8th grade was Mr. William Wallace Booker; and then I became, in the 8th grade, Queen of J.T. Barber School. My mother raised money. Thelma Staton and Ollie Simmons rode on the truck with me with our large beautiful cowboy hats. So, our group raised more money than all of the rest of them. That's why I was Queen that year.

INTERVIEWER: You attended West Street until what year?

MRS. WHITE: I went back to West Street (only the 8th grade unit) because they had not completed J.T. Barber. And then it became a high school. We were the first class (1956) to graduate from J.T. Barber.

INTERVIEWER: Could you name and describe some of the things that you took part in high school?

MRS. WHITE: Music and band; majorette; I played the [_____]. I was constantly in everything; basketball, drama. We had plays and talent shows, May Days. We choreographed many dances together. We played in the field. See, we didn't have gyms so, we knew that, when we saw that the back yard was going to be blocked off and lined in back of the school, we knew we were going to have a game that day. So, we would play basketball and meet with the teams. But Jones High and others around were getting gyms and we didn't play in their gyms. We had a gym at J.T. Barber high school, which was the first gym that was completed in this area for Blacks.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of community did you live in?

MRS. WHITE: I lived in an all-Black community. I lived on Bern Street, behind what we called the bus station, which was called the Short Bern. Then we had access to St. Joseph's school, which was a Black Catholic School. My mother had a beauty shop, a barber shop, on the corner of Bern and Neuse St. and Daddy's office was upstairs. He was a dentist. He operated all the surgical work, DDS, and so his work was done at that particular section of the community. Up there also was other apartments and doctors' offices: W. T. Lewis' office where he had an insurance business; Dr. Burton, Dr. Johnson, and the apartments, I could name the people that lived in the area apartments around in which my daddy provided for them.

So the home on Bern Street was 16 big houses that had many, many rooms of elegant furniture and I did not know that everybody did not live the way that I lived as a child. In a beautiful well-furnished home and there were many days that we had company and guests that lived in our homes. We had concerts in the house. We had club meetings often. And what was so pretty was that all of the ladies would dress up all of the time in their furs and they had proper manners with tea services, crumpets before dinner and canapés of all sorts. They were well cared for.

INTERVIEWER: Did you and your sisters give little recitals for them sometime when they would visit?

MRS. WHITE: Absolutely. We would sing before dinner and always bless this house with song as a matter of opening the evening session before the dinner

prayer. And we had Wednesday night prayer services. And when conferences came, everyone stayed at my home.

INTERVIEWER: Has your community changed since you grew up there?

MRS. WHITE: Of course. I think it's moved in many ways. I think that growing up in New Bern has been a new experience and yet and still, the people have not changed. The young people who grew up in the community have lovely homes now. In fact, they had lovely homes then, because most of my friends grew up in big houses, white houses, and everybody sat on the porch in the afternoon. The sociability of the community has changed because of the clientele. The people who live, the type of what they expected of each other has changed and therefore the character of the community has changed because the people have moved into the integrated community.

INTERVIEWER: All right, you talked about your pre-school, your elementary school. I didn't hear you say anything about the college you attended.

MRS. WHITE: Oh, North Carolina Central. All of us went to college and we took for granted that everybody did. My oldest sister went to Howard University (Gladys) and my brother also attended Howard University. His average has not been toppled in the Med School. He finished Howard Medical School and there is an endowment in our Alexander Daves, Jr., name. All of his children (he has 4) has finished Howard. He was there in 1990 and he finished a year after Obama, so they were friends. They had dinner together during the campaign in LA this past year. Ira, Jr., and Kathy finished Stanford University. Beverly (Angela, Pamela), finished Berkeley in California. There were with us on our 50th Anniversary that my husband and I just finished celebrating in November.

I am married to Lee Alphonso White and we met when we were in high school. We grew up together in the band; and we were talking during the anniversary and we don't know when it turned to chemistry, (the little friendship). So, I told my mother when I was sitting in the balcony of St. Peter's Church, when he was graduating, that I was going to marry that man. Dr. Seabrook was in our home that weekend and his daughter and mother remembered and told me that when she was about to leave this earth and she said "you always talked about Alphonso" and I said "Well, I think that's what it's going to be", and eventually we married and we now have been married 50 years (1958 – 2008).

INTERVIEWER: What was your school known for and what made it unique?

MRS. WHITE: My mother always created an atmosphere of learning; so, learning English. My brother spoke 4 languages. And, Ira, my brother, knew German. He didn't have to learn German when he went to med school. When I went to North Carolina Central, I was interested in everything. We went to workshops every summer. We worked in music; we worked in languages; we worked in creative arts. Ernie Barnes was my best friend at North Carolina Central. He painted [_____]. He could sing also. His friend and all of us would have gatherings where we sing on campus. I joined Alpha Kappa Alpha, 1957, December of that year, and I've spent 50 years as an AKA, member. I was in the pledges at North Carolina Central and put 13 people, young ladies, on line, in my junior year of attending there. I was dormitory (what we called) director because we worked with the counsel to keep the school. I worked on this in every dorm I lived in. We had a good time there.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of your favorite teachers?

MRS. WHITE: Dr. Pearson, my English teacher. He always thought I should be an English teacher. I told him that never, because my mother was always correcting me as I went through life, you know. It was not good. It was well nourished. We had to describe and put verbs and adjectives and appositions in everything that was supposed to be as we spoke and I was always uptight as to whether I was in order or not, so I never went into English. But I did enjoy my science and, so, I went in pre-med and finished in pre-med. I was supposed to go to med school but my mother died in my sophomore year and my daddy died when I was in 9th grade, and many things changed. I began to take on family when I was 17, 18, and 19 and make sure that they were fed and clothed and clean because everything had turned.

So, I know that I have children that are healthy and alive and well and in big, pretty homes now. But, we have decided to let the property be property instead of trying to maintain and rectify what was then and not now, the present day of state. So Bern Street is a vacant lot compared to what it was when Mother and Daddy were alive.

INTERVIEWER: All right, tell me about some of the prominent African American-owned businesses around here. Do you remember some?

MRS. WHITE: Every one of them.

INTERVIEWER: And did you visit them frequently? You lived in the vicinity of a lot of those businesses, didn't you?

MRS. WHITE: Well, to begin with, next door to me was Whitley's Funeral Home, and across the Home the Whitley girls lived. They were old ladies when I came along. They were the most brilliant young people that I knew. Hermoine sang most of the time and she would get out and hang the clothes up in the morning and sing, and Juanita would do the same. The ladies had three homes and none of them lived in each other's homes. They were self-sufficient when I knew them. So they were wealthy to begin with and Adalaide married Wallace Booker. And, he watched me ride my tricycle around the block thousands of times. The left end of my home was a grocery store, which was Roy's Grocery Store and around the corner from it was Hayes Shoe Cobbler Shop and that was Onita Nixon's granddaddy's place on the corner. And then on New Street, we had the Jones Brothers. One of the Jones Brothers, Harry, is teaching, he taught my niece, (Ira's youngest daughter) in law school. I was leaving her graduation and I heard this voice say "Justine", and I didn't recognize the person's face. He said "You don't know me, but I want you to know me because I was your neighbor. I knew the younger brothers; but he was the oldest brother. He is presently working there, at Howard University.

We have had businesses. We had lots of ministers in our area. So, C.H.C. White, Rev. White, had a lovely family two doors [] well, he was further down North Bern Street. There's a Smiths' if you would go down Bern Street, you would line up with his church, which was Ebenezer Presbyterian Church; come back towards my home and you would see St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion Church on the far left and then you had Ann Moore's family, the Sawyers, and then you had Janera Jones. And if you think of the families, all of them had their own businesses.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you had businesses in the Five Points area. Was that your little Harlem there, might as well say, in the Five Points area? Do you know of any of the businesses that were in that particular area?

MRS. WHITE: The Pollock family. The Pollock family was a number one family when it comes to groceries in New Bern because they had 5 boys or more. All of them were very large people. We used to tease Donald because Donald was in my classroom and all of them were about 6'4" or more and wore a size 13 shoe and we would tease them because of their size. They were the most handsome men in town and all of the women in town loved them.

We had drug stores: Dr. Hill's drug store; Dr. Fisher's office on the hill; Dr. Martin's office. We had senators. Marjorie, you would have to get someone else to tell you about Marjorie and the congresswoman that lived in our block. I did not know her very well; I can't remember all of the details but I remember her as being the most fashionable lady I had ever seen in my life when it came to furs and clothes. She would do the Hollywood style.

As I said, the people who grew up during the time that I was a child, they were very prosperous and I'd have to think of Anna Donaldson. Anna Day Donaldson was a person whose father founded North Carolina Central University. The Dormitory on campus is named Anna Day and I lived in Anna Day Shepard Hall and Dr. Shepard was the president of the college when I was there. No, not when I was there, but he was the president of the college. Alphonso Elder was the president when I was there. I can't remember all of these things at once. It happens, you know life is so quick until you have to stop and think and I'm not saying half of the things that I need to be saying because one of the things I want you know is that New Bern prospered at the turn of the century, of the 1900's. The young people went to college. They came to New Bern, a lot of them, from the colleges and they would walk in the afternoon to the river and back home. And everybody would dress up. They loved to hear news from... well we had the train that went from New Bern to Raleigh and back and people would just take the train ride and [_____]

INTERVIEWER: Well, those were some of the activities, that's how you amused yourselves as children.

MRS. WHITE: And fishing. We could go on fishing trips every weekend down to Morehead and get on the boats and ride the waves and catch fish. My sister would catch 14 in a second. She was very good at catching fish. I never could catch one. I was not good at catching fish. I can see Billy Dove now carrying the buckets. And the bleachers were always full of holes and he would step in the holes but he would not drop any food.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Can you tell me something about your family church?

MRS. WHITE: Well, my family church began with the Episcopal Church. My brother was an Icolet there at the Episcopal Church and Rev. Johnson was a member there. He had a club foot, tall, handsome big guy. I can just remember him. I called him Santa Claus. He was just a smiling face with a beard, a jovial man. My family was there until my daddy died, I think. It's kind of wavering

there. Then we went [] Miss Picket and Miss Dent began to take care of Wynona and I and we ended up at St. Peter's Church because they were there. And so mother and daddy, well, mother started coming to St. Peter's church. Daddy was there, too. I can't remember all of the details when daddy died. I remember I was in the 9th grade when he died. And our home church at that time was St. Peter's A.M.E. Zion. The details I can't remember as to how.

INTERVIEWER: But you do remember going to St. Peter's as a child.

MRS. WHITE: Of course, I was confirmed there.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other things that you want to add about your religion, like activities that you participated in, were there a lot of activities for the young people at that time like they have today? Rides and things like that?

MRS. WHITE: Yes, Rev. C.H.C. White always had bible school. Miss Pickens, Henrietta Pickens, do you remember hearing her name?

INTERVIEWER: I've heard the name.

MRS. WHITE: Yes, she had her bible school at St. Peter's. So, those were the two weeks right after school closed that we ran through all of the cataclysms there were to learn and we memorized everything in that day, who made you God? What else did God make? God made everything. We could go through the whole book and we had, the one who memorized the whole book got the trophy that year. I was in the running but I think my sister Wynona was the best of all. And when you say religion, we all knew that Christ was first in our lives. We knew that our tithes had to be paid. We knew the basic structure that life was centered around, the heavenly father and we have been blessed because of it. So, when we memorized poems in school, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you and make allowances for their doubting too, if you can dream and not make dreams your master or think and not make thoughts your aim or live boastful triumph and disaster and treat both imposters just the same... our teachers taught us so well. I was in a play in Miss Powers' room when I was in the 5th grade but I can remember the poem now, "A summer's day, I lost my way, and wandered through the hills afar, the hours fled and the daylight sped and in the heavens there gleamed a star. A laugh, a laugh, I heard a cry, and knew not that which was night [] and then all of a sudden I hold in my hand this thing of gold [] wherever [] bound, release me and give me my crown. And so, the witch was turned

into a little princess and the story ended. So, Mrs. Houston, Miss Powell, and Miss Eva Adams, (bless her heart), she taught us dances. They took crepe paper and made bumblebee outfits. We had the most beautiful units and we were personally taught how to groom ourselves in a certain way in presenting that particular part of the play. I remember my sister being the little French girl in Little Women. So, there were many ways in which we were taught. It was a community that loved each other and loved the children of each other. And, all of us, Harriet, Lillian, Wynona and I, Jean, Ruth, I can name all of the children: Carolyn Moore included. She was the pianist at that time; Egan Hall [] we had recitals and my oldest sister gave a concert in the 6th grade and gave one in her senior year also. Many dances were given for the children, skating parties. We never had anything but joy in our lives.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you this. How were race relations during your growing up years?

MRS. WHITE: Well, all of the kids played together. We played marbles. See, one thing, my father was a dentist and a toothache has no color. When your tooth is hurting [] I know my daddy worked on just as many whites as he did blacks, so a toothache does not have a color. I can remember when one man told the story, that he walked past the door about 3 times, and finally, he got the courage to ring that doorbell. My daddy worked on prisoners. They would come in on shifts and he would take care of them. We had records. Daddy worked with the Oral Hygiene of North Carolina 14 years, running across the state doing dental work in mouths of children in the school systems. So oral hygiene was his early years.

INTERVIEWER: So, you're saying to me that you didn't really feel the effects of discrimination or anything about racial issues when you were growing up. Everybody sort of stayed to themselves and the other race stayed to themselves. There was not a lot of intermingling.

MRS. WHITE: No. Margaret and Buddy, Buddy, well in my block, at the time, we didn't run all over the units. We stayed in our block and the neighborhood. And, so, Margie played marbles with Allen and George and me and my brother. Kay and Wynona were girls. They didn't play with the boys. We were tomboys and they didn't jump from trees and they didn't dress up like Batman and Robin. And they didn't put on their capes and run crazy like we did. But we used to take tires and beat the tire with a stick and roll it and roll it around the block. And we called it running the tire. We would get in a gang and go around the cut and one of the

little ladies, white ladies, would say "don't you come around here." She was after the children. She didn't want any children on her lawn or on her flowers, messing up her yard, running with those tires, going around her house. So she would stop us. Mother would have to tell us that we had a borderline. We couldn't go past that point. And that's the way we handled the yard. But there was a little boy who lived on my block, on Broad Street. Broad Street was white and Bern Street was black, and so he was a waterhead baby and his name was Buddy. Well. Buddy was always in the chair and he was round to my house. "Jessie", he would holler on Sunday morning we would sell eggs because I would raise chickens in my backyard. And so, Buddy and I would wash eggs and we would go around selling fresh eggs. This was before 8:00. So everybody on Bern Street had fresh eggs. Mrs. Bell, who ran the barbershop, Bells Barbershop, they were right up the street from us. Our house caught on fire when I was in 4th grade and we lived with the Bells for about 2 years until our house [] the fire was between the walls and we didn't know which room was going to burst out in fire all of a sudden. Everybody stayed downstairs and Wynona and I stayed over to Mrs. Bells' house. I've many stories to tell. We were right behind the bus station. So, everybody who came from the bus station ended up in Winnie's Beauty Shop and Deluxe Barber Shop and Lee Simmons ran Deluxe Barber Shop and Dorothy Dunstan from Riverdale and Ms. Estelle Boone ran Winnie's Beauty Shop. She was the organist over at Clinton Chapel Church.

INTERVIEWER: From what you can recall, can you remember anything about civil rights, the assassination of Martin Luther King (which I'm sure you do), the Kennedys, how has that affected you?

MRS. WHITE: Oh, don't ask me that question. I was away at North Carolina Central and my mother and father had died. I'm going to say it. The blacks threw bricks at my daddy's business and all of those panels of glass; and all of that place was torn to pieces.

INTERVIEWER: When did this happen? I mean, for what reason? What was going on at this time that they did this?

MRS. WHITE: Nobody wanted to get in jail. When they said they broke downtown, they did not go to Kress to throw bricks. Let me leave it there. Because my heart is clean and there was nothing I could do. The people wanted to retaliate and they did not want to break up businesses downtown. Somebody retaliated in the black community. They knew that our parents were gone and there was no hope for that area. So, it was damaged pretty badly.

INTERVIEWER: I can remember seeing some of the broken glass. What are some of the segregated facilities that you could not go in?

MRS. WHITE: Oh, all of them. When we were children and traveled, we ate ice cream because my mother was not going to tolerate going in the back of white businesses. My days of remember traveling on the bus (my husband and I were talking about it) how we didn't know what we were getting when they stuck their fingers out of the door because we couldn't see faces; we only saw hands and the change coming back. And the food, we were so hungry, we didn't know what we were eating. But the hot dogs and the hamburgers came through those slots and we can remember traveling and having to eat like that. And it was a degrading experience to have to sit in those back rooms of the bus station where heathens, these people who were not clean, slept on them all night long, and you had to sit on them and wait on them, in your clean clothes, to wait for the bus to come. So I am always shaking and angry in my heart when I feel the pressure of those days, traveling and having to be treated as we were treated.

INTERVIEWER: All right, what about the health services around here for blacks that you can remember

Health services [] the person that I admired most was Dr. Lula Disasway. Her teacher worked with me as a teacher in English. She married a Disasway. Margaret married Jack Disasway when she lived on Spencer Avenue and her sister, Lula Disasway came in as a military doctor and she stayed at the hospital night and daily. She took care of every baby coming in this world. Another person I admired is Miss Strong, Miss Mary Strong and Ada West, midwives, and these people, we had the best services when it came to Dr. Burtman and Dr. Johnson and Dr. Martin and Dr. Fisher and of course we had a lot of doctors who would let the blacks come in the back doors and they fed them out from the side, the needles, and their colds, and their caretaking. So health care was always available and people paid by bushels of peaches and bananas, whatever was present, potatoes mainly. I can see barrels and barrels and bushels of onions and potatoes in my yard and on the sideboard because daddy would take funds for whatever.

Here's a joke; no, this is not a joke. It's the truth. There was a man that daddy had fitted for false teeth. He mailed them to him. And he put them in but daddy had not seen him. So he saw him because they always played checkers across the street. It was a big building over there. They had apartments. Those people leaned out Saturday nights; a lot of things went on over at that big building across

the street. So my daddy would always sit at the foot of one of those doors over there and play checkers with his buddy. And, so, he saw this man, and he called everybody doc. He said "preacher, did you ever receive those teeth?" He said "yeah, doc, I fit them in pretty nice". He said: "well, when you're by the office, come up to let me see them sometime". So, about a week later, he came by and he saw that they fit pretty well; all the way through his mouth, and doc said, "uh-huh, uh-huh", and he would smile. He took the man's teeth out and said: "now preacher, I'm going to keep these teeth until you bring me some money".

INTERVIEWER: All right, we're just about to wind this up. But something happened this year that I know in my lifetime I know I would not have anticipated it. And maybe you had not, either. But I won't speak for you; I can only speak for myself: the election of a black President. What do you think about Obama as President, and then, a woman, for the first time in the history of the state of North Carolina, as governor: Bev Perdue. What do you think about this?

MRS. WHITE: It's a wonderful thing, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER: It is.

MRS. WHITE: You know, I think of Obama as Joshua. Moses could not go into the promise land. And to me and my analogy, that is Martin Luther King. He didn't get there; but Joshua went into the promise land. Obama is here and we know that Christ is in charge.

INTERVIEWER: What about your governor?

MRS. WHITE: Beverly Perdue has been a lover of people all of her life; and she is a "New Bernian". And to me, when I say "New Bernian", that means that we are going to get on the eastern seaboard; some business happening. We're going to have railroads. We're going to have highways. We're going to have better schools. I am happy and pleased.