

SHARA TRAYNHAM: -- task. My name is Shara Traynham, and today's date is February 23rd, 2008. We are in Charlotte, North Carolina, and I'm speaking with my aunt.

ALLEGRA WESTBROOKS: My name is Allegra Westbrooks, and today's date is February 23rd. We are in Charlotte, North Carolina, and I am being interviewed by my niece, Shara Traynham.

ST: Where did you grow up, Aunt Allegra?

AW: Well, I was born in Cumberland, Maryland, but at an early time my mother and sisters moved to live with my grandmother in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the home of Fort Bragg.

ST: When did you first know that you wanted to become a librarian, or what made you decide to become a librarian?

AW: Well, my first experience was -- after graduating from college -- was teaching. I taught for two years, and I had an anxiety situation where I was very anxious for my children to read, because the principal said that he wanted them to be reading, the first-graders, by spring. So, in trying to teach and being anxious and making charts saying "Run," "Jump," "Skip," "Hop," I found that I was losing my patience, and my mother said, "You're in the wrong profession. A teacher is always patient." I found that to be true, and I left the teaching field and worked for the USO in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where I had the opportunity to do programming with soldiers stationed in Fort Bragg who came to the USO Club for activities. And it was there, I guess, I saved my money, and as soon as time permitted, back in 1945, I believe, I went to the Atlanta University School of Library Service.

And from there, I was hired in the Louisville Free Public Library system, which, like Charlotte -- which I came to in '47 -- was a segregated situation. So, when I came to Charlotte in 1947, the director who hired me explained that I was to be head of public library service to Negroes in Mecklenburg County, and some people had difficulty saying the word "negroes" and would say "the negress." It was there that I, in 1947, started my challenging and sometimes awesome work with the people of Charlotte and Mecklenburg, the black community.

ST: So you came to work for the Charlotte Public Library in 1947. What position did you hold?

AW: Well, at that time, I was librarian for the Brevard Street Branch and the Fairview Homes Branch, and having the responsibility of teaching and seeking people of Charlotte to make use of the public library, because there was a feeling that the blacks were not using it as much as they should. So the director gave me the task of preaching the gospel of books to blacks over Mecklenburg County, and, of course, I guess I did that in many ways. I visited as many black churches as I could and on Sunday morning asked the ministers if I might have the opportunity to have a few moments during the morning service to talk about the importance of books and reading and why our children and parents should be involved in the process of seeing that every child has an opportunity to visit a public library.

ST: Who was your library director at that time? Was he supportive of some of the work that you were doing?

AW: Oh, highly supportive. His name was Hoyt R. Galvin, and it was he who, through my library school director -- he had a telephone conversation with my in Louisville and

invited me to come for an interview and see if Charlotte would not be the place where I could do the work that needed to be done and --

ST: So that's how you happened to come to Charlotte.

AW: -- and how delighted, because Charlotte was so close to Fayetteville, North Carolina, my home. And I said, "Why, yes, I will come." And on Saturday, I slipped away from the Louisville Free Public, got on the train and came to Charlotte, had the interview, and I was told, "You're hired. You can have it if you want it." I got back on the train and went back to Louisville, keeping the secret until I came back to North Carolina in May, because it was that month that my mother passed, and I did not return to Louisville.

ST: I know that was a difficult time.

AW: It was, and I was given the opportunity -- since the job offer came in May of '47 and mother passed that month, the director said, "Take the time you need." So I came to Charlotte in June of 1947, and having that work to do, it didn't give me a chance to mope and be sorry and think about what had happened in my family.

ST: It was kind of therapeutic for you then.

AW: Yes, quite so, because there was something to be done.

ST: I can imagine. Well, what are some of the obstacles you had to face working in a segregated library system?

AW: Well, I could go to the main library and pick up books that the black patrons needed. They could not go, but I could go, and there was a back entrance that I could go in so I would not disturb the apple cart.

ST: You weren't allowed to go in the front entrance?

AW: I could go in the front, but I chose to go the other way. And I would -- well, the janitor would bring down the collection of books that the patrons desired. And then, when I went up, I could bring others that were desired so that all who had requested materials could have access to them. But they had to get them at the branch library, and I remember once the distinguished Harry Golden, who wrote *Only in America*, came into the library one day, the Brevard Street Branch where I was, in the headquarters of my so-called branch. He said, "This is a damn shame that the black man cannot use the public library all over our system."

ST: That was really something. Were there other library -- you were based at the Brevard Street Branch, and that was the branch that served African Americans. Were there other library branches which --

AW: Well, there was a sub-branch, which was also under my supervision --

ST: OK.

AW: -- the Fairview Homes branch. It was in the housing project, and it was open, I guess, for about five or six months. And it may be that after the library got the two bookmobiles, one for the white people and one for the black people, it was -- then, that branch was closed. But there were small white branches in Cornelius, Davidson, Huntersville, Matthews, Mint Hill, and Pineville, but they were not open to the blacks of Mecklenburg County.

ST: Right.

AW: So the day of the coming of the bookmobile was our salvation.

ST: Oh, I see. Do you remember some of the programs and services you offered at the community?

AW: Well, I guess, first, I think about the services in the branch library or the library. I guess I call it "branch" because eventually that's what it was.

ST: Right.

AW: We had -- of course, there were story hours for children, and I started a program, which was under the auspices of the American Heritage Association, and there we invited citizens throughout the community to come for discussions. And I had the president of Johnson C. Smith University and all the people of prominence who were working in various organizations like the YWCA, the YMCA, the Social Workers' Roundtable, so that our little branch was just run over with people. And for weeks, we would have various different discussions. I recall that one evening we had a discussion called "Religion in American Life and What it Means to You." I had a call from a gentleman by the name of Hugh [00:10:00] Ashcraft, who said, "I would come to the discussion, but black people are too emotional." And I told him, "I'm an Episcopalian. I don't get up and shout." So there were various interesting tidbits, and, of course, the *Charlotte Observer* covered the entire series of events that I had and sent reporters to come to those gatherings, and that was quite a time. I have such a wonderful collection of photographs of the different sessions with the room full of people from all walks of life, the undertaker, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. (laughs) We had --

ST: You attracted everyone to your programs. They found it exciting.

AW: Yes. And, of course, it seems like at that time Charlotte wasn't having many events like that, so the pictures I have show the diversity of people attending: lawyers, doctors, NAACP fighters, and just quite a collection of citizens who wanted the opportunity to talk about what's wrong here, what's wrong with our world, what should we be about. I

had a very favorite friend on the city council who later became Senator Martha Evans, who was the one who put in her ticket to fight for our cause.

ST: Were you the first African American librarian at the Public Library of Charlotte, or were there others?

AW: Well, I was the -- I guess you would say -- the first professional librarian.

ST: OK.

AW: As time went on and money permitted, at first I headed the library and had one lady with me. And in the morning, the janitor would fire the furnace, and we'd keep the coal in the furnace going all day, going down and (inaudible). So the two of us -- and I don't know how in the world -- we ran the library from Monday through Saturday. Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., I would take the morning shift one day, and she'd take the afternoon, like one of us 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., one 12:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., and work on Saturdays and alternate.

ST: How often did you have to add wood to the fire?

AW: Oh, I guess about two or three times a day you'd go down. After he'd fire it in the morning, we'd just keep it up by just adding a little bit more coal.

ST: Oh, wow, that's hard to imagine. (laughs)

AW: Certainly in these days.

ST: But it kept the building warm, didn't it?

AW: Oh, yes. So that was quite an experience. And we hadn't been accustomed to keeping copies of magazines, so I got the janitor to help me make some shelving down in the basement where the furnace was so that we could start a collection, so people could have the opportunity to read magazines, because our collection was quite small. In fact, many

of the books that we had, you could look in them at the stamps and see they were -- things had been used at main and had been brought on down to the black library. But finally, after having talks with the director and saying, "You know I need a little budget," he said, "Well, what do you need money for, because you have books?" I said, "I need a little budget. I need to be able to spend money for the book collection," so that we could have more books by --

ST: So you were able to get a few more books that way.

AW: -- yes, and more books by and about black Americans, because that area was --

ST: Were there many books at that time about African Americans?

AW: Well, I was --

ST: Did you really have to look hard to find them?

AW: No, I guess because having -- through my college experience and having worked in the college library throughout my days and my own family doing a lot of reading, I knew about books by and about blacks. I knew what Carter G. Woodson had done. I could tell them, "We've got to have some Ralph Ellison material, Richard Wright." You knew the authors --

ST: I see.

AW: -- because that was your world.

ST: That's right.

AW: And if you didn't order them and get them, they might not have them. In fact, they said that -- one of the assistant directors of the library said, "You know, you helped us." He said, "Those books we didn't have, you helped the main library's collection, because we'd see what you ordered, and we'd say, 'We'd better get a copy of that too.'"

ST: And we may still have some of those books today, I imagine. (laughs)

AW: Yes. Yes, I would think so. I hope they're not all gone. I know one book that I'm sorry I cannot find at the main library is the *History of Public Library Service to Negroes in the U.S.A.*, written by Eliza Atkins Gleason. I was told -- I used to have a copy, but those books --

ST: That sounds very familiar.

AW: -- were missing. But one time, there was one in the Carolina Room of our public library here, but I don't know what happened. But it's certainly an interesting story, because there are some who say that Charlotte had the first black facility for -- black library, and another writer says the Louisville system, both around 1905, 1906, but we won't argue about it. My good friend [Rosemary Lanz?], who worked for the library system, helped to put that out to me.

ST: When did the Charlotte Public Library finally become integrated? Do you remember when that was?

AW: Well, I would say -- well, formerly, like in the 1950s, one of the things that was unique about the Charlotte Public Library system, it was opened without fanfare. There was no big to-do. The doors just opened --

ST: It was kind of quietly done.

AW: -- and quietly done. And it began without a lot of fanfare, and some pictures were taken of users who had come for the first time, blacks and whites standing beside each other at the main library desk, which was a part of the building which is now located, of course, always, when it was Carnegie Library even at North Tryon and Sixth Street.

ST: Is that where the main library was located at that time?

AW: Yes, but, of course, it faced Tryon Street, because it was a Carnegie building. It was not the current facility that we --

ST: That we have now.

AW: -- that Charlotte has now.

ST: I see. Do you remember some of the positions you held during your long career at the Public Library of Charlotte?

AW: Well, yes. After I served as, I guess you would say, the ambassador for service to Negroes, in 1950 -- I don't know what I had to do with ordering books that other people didn't know about -- I was offered a position at the main library as acquisitions librarian. And following that, I've had the title of the coordinator of adult book services, and each month I would hold meetings where librarians from over the county, Cornelius, Davidson, Huntersville, and so on, the whole of Mecklenburg would come to the monthly meetings where we would have samples of books of significance that they might like to consider ordering. And Baker & Taylor, a famous wholesaler, provided us with those copies that the librarians would look at to see what they would want that would be unique and of interest to their branches. So that was quite an experience, but I think, sometimes, it's awfully hard to look at tables and tables of books and make selections within the period of time that you have to come downtown from the various areas of the county. But sometime after that, we had a person who was in charge of book selection who would make out a list of suggested readings. And when they came to meetings to examine books they would have the list and of course many of them being resourceful, would go to other magazine literature that maybe the library didn't even take and find something that was unique or needed.

ST: What did you enjoy most when you were working at the -- what position did you enjoy most when you were working for the public library? Was there any particularly type of work that you did that you really enjoyed?

AW: Well, I guess, when I became supervisor of the public library branches, I found [00:20:00] challenges, and I found joys. Some of the challenges that, I guess, I found first were some resentment from some librarians. "What has she got to do, coming here? I'm head here. We don't need help." Maybe one location where I'd make a suggestion that, "In addition to having story hours, wouldn't you like to have some discussion groups going where you could bring in citizens? My friend from Duke Power Energy would like to come and talk to you about some of the resources that are available. The lady who works with the home demonstration as a home demonstration agent can come and demonstrate cooking utensils," and a variety of topics, trying to suggest that the library needs to be more than just a provider of books for reading but an instrument for getting citizens together to see the resources that the community has, where books serve as a background to those resources. And sometimes, I had a little opposition, maybe --

ST: Maybe they weren't used to it, a little something new.

AW: -- no, and felt like -- yes, new, and maybe it's putting on extra work.

ST: Right.

AW: All the -- one lady said, "Why, my goodness, the books are here, and if we have a story hour for the children that's all we need," so trying to convince --

ST: Were you able to convince them that they needed some other services?

AW: Well, I think things worked well. If you look at all of the branches in Mecklenburg now, there's not a branch that doesn't have some kind of program going.

ST: That's right. That's true.

AW: Something is going that would be of interest to the locality where the branch is or to something new that is happening in the community, even maybe having a politician come talk to his area about why you need to vote, what is the importance of political action in the community. So, through the library, I think it's a vehicle for so many things, and I think we see that happening today.

ST: I can see that you really enjoyed your career and that you gave a lot to the library. When did you finally retire from the library system?

AW: I retired in January, 1984, after a lovely career of working and saying, "The public library is the people's university." We serve the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker.

ST: I like that.

AW: There's no institution like it.

ST: Yes.

AW: But in 1984, I retired, and all the people that maybe might have fought or felt like fighting me during the days when I wanted them to do more than just check out a book, it looks like they gave me due honor and respect.

ST: I bet they were grateful.

AW: Yes.

ST: They realized all that you had given them. (laughs)

AW: Well, certainly, that was a joy, and I guess I would like to mention that my highest joy is a young lady by the name of Mae S. Tucker who worked for the library system who was the head of the main public library services at her [end?]. I would say Mae was not committed to integration in the first of her days. She had not had many experiences with

it, but we became genuine friends, and we'd go to Belk's when the doors opened, and I could eat there with her instead of bringing my sandwich to the library. And we would sit together and talk about the issues of the day. We became bosom friends, and, at her death, she awarded money to my sister and me for being genuine friends. We were in her will, so I consider that the highest joy, of having convinced her that we are all alike, that we are all a one, and let's go down and eat together and talk about our problems. And Allegra, she said, "You're not going to eat a sandwich in the building off by yourself anymore." We'd go in as frequently as we could.

ST: When were you able to eat together in Belk's? Do you remember the time period, the year?

AW: I would say it was in the '50s, around maybe '54, 1954, '55, I think.

ST: I bet that was a joyous time for you.

AW: It was. Of course, I was so delighted to even go to the section where Belk's had books for sale, and the lady who was the head looked at me and was sort of like, "What are you doing here?"

ST: Oh, I wondered if you had any resistance.

AW: And then, she became friends of another librarian who was the head of west branch, a lady, and at the time of her death she became my friend, and I have two beautiful quilts that she gave me in the later years --

ST: Isn't that amazing?

AW: -- when she felt like, "You're one of us."

ST: Isn't that something? Goodness. Did you want to share any other favorite stories of your work experience? I know you have many.

AW: Well, let me see. I was telling -- I think I told the tale about the gentleman who said he couldn't -- he wouldn't come to the discussion group because we --

ST: African Americans were too emotional. (laughter)

AW: -- African Americans were too emotional. And then, when I was allowed to have a little extra money and hire a page, a little fellow by the name of James Edward [Dial?] came to work as a page, and I discovered he was such a reader that even though he wasn't paid a librarian's salary as a page, I used James as if he were trained. He did such a good job and, of course, got mad at one of the librarians one day. He quit, and the associate director of the main library called and said, "Is James Dial still with you?" I said, "No, James quit, because he had a difference of opinion about books with one of our staff." And he said, "Well, if James is available, the main library would like to hire him." Kays Gary, who works for the *Charlotte Observer*, said, "That is the smartest little guy I've seen," so James went to work at main.

ST: I remember Mr. Dial.

AW: And the word -- yeah, and the word went around, "If anybody can find it, James Dial can." I think when he left the system and -- I think he has a relative here, where I understand the collection of books that James had personally was around 5,000. So you could see what the library meant to him.

ST: He came to every book sale that we had. (laughter) He loved books.

AW: So I always felt it was one great thing in my life to have hired James. He was certainly worthwhile.

ST: Allegra, could you tell me how books became a part of your life when you were a child? Was it a certain relative?

AW: Oh, books. My mother was a reader, and she did a lot of reading. And we had a neighbor whose husband was a Presbyterian church minister, and she was in love -- his wife with my sister [Anne?], and she read true stories and loved magazines. My sister Anne, at that time, didn't like going to school, so she'd get under the house and take the true stories and read them and lend them to the rest of us who wanted to read. So it was always some kind soul who was giving us reading matter, and then, of course, having relatives who worked at Tuskegee Institute Alabama, and all of them were good readers, my auntie who retired as dean of Tuskegee University, and another aunt who was a beautiful coloratura soprano who played for the Tuskegee Choir. It looked like my grandmother's mantle must have fallen on all of her children. Grandmother was 101 when she died, and during her lifetime, when you'd say, "Oh, Grandmother, they say I've got to get up and say something in church," or [00:30:00], "I've got to say something in a meeting," she said, "Get up, darling, and speak as the Spirit gives you utterance, and you will make it."

So everybody had a charge to keep. I remember once, on a Christmastime, she had 12 of us grandchildren all surrounding the dinner table, and she said, "All right, before eating, everybody must have something to say, all of the 12. You can say what you want. You can say a Bible verse or whatever." So, of course, somebody said, "Jesus." Somebody else said, "The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want," and another, "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" And everybody had something to say. My father was present at that gathering, and he was not much of a churchman, so he was bathed in sweat and said, "Come over into Macedonia and help us," and that is a passage

in the Scripture. When you'd get frustrated, we'd say, "Come over into Macedonia and help us." (laughs) So that was quite a wonderful occasion, and one relative was good at cooking. My cousin [Sharon's?] mother was the intellectual of the family, so she could lead us into some very interesting topics. And she herself was a very smart woman, having taught at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and having gone to the White House conference back in the '60s. So we said everybody in the family could talk, and my grandmother said, "If you can't talk, you find something to say if you have to go get a book and read the first lines of the book." (laughs) Our family was -- I guess you would say -- enjoyed books and reading, and we were able to pass that love of books and reading on to others and to generations that follow so that my niece and my nephews, I think all of them have a love of reading and can recommend --

ST: That's true.

AW: -- something good for you. So the world of books and reading has been my life and my love. When I go to bed at night now, 3:00 a.m. in the morning, Allegra Westbrook is reading something. And if you go in the --

ST: It's the favorite family pastime, I would say. (laughs)

AW: Right. It was. And if you go in any one of the bedrooms now, "What is this stack? What's that stack?" I still get my American Library Journal once a month so I can keep up with what's happening in the world of books and reading. And I'm so proud that one of my dear friends is being honored at the American Library Association in Anaheim, California, for her service and her pioneering work in libraries in San Francisco.

ST: Aunt Allegra, do you have any words of wisdom that you would like to pass on to me?

AW: Well, I guess the words of wisdom would be to continue your love for books and reading, and sharing it with others who maybe have not found that joy.

ST: Thank you. [00:33:55]

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