

Oral History

Monday, April 21st, 2003

Interviewee – Mildred J. Harris

Interviewer – Kuanita E. Murphy

Transcriptionist – Emma D. Strickland

Kuantia E. Murphy: This is Kuanita Murphy. I am on my way to the home of Ms. Mildred Harris. Today is Monday, April 21st, 2003.

KM: Okay. We are at the home of Ms. Mildred Harris and she's going to share with us some of her experiences with shape note singing and her recollections that she remembers as a child.

When I called you earlier on the phone you said that you really didn't know that much about shape note singing itself and as you know - what the notes may mean and all that other kind of stuff. But you did have some experience you know going to the different singings and conventions and so forth. Could you tell me a little bit more about how you got involved in going to the singing conventions and what were they like?

Mildred J. Harris: Well, I went to the singing convention with some of our elder deacons, deacon boys *unintelligible* and I joined Saint Luke Baptist Church when I was twelve years old and we didn't have no piano, they old peoples, someone would sing, and one would pat. They would pat and sing until the Holy Ghost comes. We didn't have no pianos way back there. So, I liked to say take me back to that old church house way back home. And some of our songs was Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, and Swing Low Sweet Chariot and uh, that's how we got started and we were patting and singing and fanning with paper sacks until the Holy Ghost come. We had a good time and the last hour sung was when we getting ready to dismiss we pray and

we would sing I am coming home, never more to roam. We know how to sing, and we know how to pray and we still *unintelligible* and our prayer will take us home.

KM: So, um, you remember a lot more people attending the different singings and so forth -

MH: Yes

KM: - at Saint Luke's than they are now?

MH: Yes, a lot more. They all ahead, they gone on all, all of them gone on.

KH: Uh, you sing with Virgil Chapel -

MH: Yes

KM: - uh, choir now -

MH: Yes

KM: At the, with the -

MH: Yes

KM: - With the shape note singing -

MH: Yes

KM: How long have you been doing that?

MH: Uh, I come to *unintelligible* in (19)42, ever since I been there, I been singing

KM: Okay, so do you do the lead part of it or?

MH: I sense deacon S.T. William died, he was the leader, uh, Mr. Will Green born in Jackson, all of them I come up on them they *unintelligible*

Phone ringing in background

KM: And um, so you been doing this for quite a while?

MH: Yeah, I always been trying to sing ever since I was 12 years old.

KM: Well, uh, could you tell me a little bit more about what would take place at these different singings and conventions that y'all attended? You know?

MH: Yeah well, we would have food each choir would go around and sing *unintelligible* and they would sing, and even Fady Groom way back in there, he was one of our choir leaders, *unintelligible* Will Green, boys of Jackson. But when we had those conventions, each church would have it maybe it every month, but we have it every quarter now and so after Owen died, thanks to deacon William, he asked me to take the singing over. And I didn't think I could never do it but after he asked and showed faith and never said another word, I just say I can't let him down I am going to give it a try. Thank God I did, I enjoy it.

KM: So, do y'all ever uh, you know practice the notes now or for the singing?

MH: Yeah, we practice about every three months when we sing, we practice before singing time.

Ain't but three of us now -

KM: But three of y'all.

MH: - I do all the people.

KM: Is there, uh, you remember a Virgil Chapel now -

MH: Uh, yeah.

KM: Is there some kind uh, of effort at Virgil Chapel to kinda keep the shape note singing going in the church now or?

MH: Yeah, just we was in there singing, but they got two more different choirs

KM: Okay and do they sing shape note singing at all or?

MH: No, they get them pianos and things *unintelligible*

KM: So, uh what do you, uh, the other interviews I've done, Mr. Jones and uh I've done you know Ms. Diane Jones; you may know her and uh, Ms. Ethel Baldwin they all have stated that you know this is a tradition that's dying out –

MH: It is.

KM: And uh, I asked the question, you know to them, what do they think needs to be done to revitalize this tradition in our African American community. Especially here in Randolph County. What do you think we could do?

MH: We need our young people to step in cause we have fallen by the way side, and stop depending on so much a piano cause some day you may not have a piano to play. We need our young people to come in. We beg them ever convention 'come on and sing for us, we'll sit back and let you sing it' it's a old people song, but we want them to come in and take a part because we know we won't be there always. We need our young peoples, so when we gone from this place, they will be able to take over.

KM: Okay, I had asked Mr. Jones also about, you know, this question, and you know he want - another factor that he brought up was about uh, having the pastors of the churches interested in it. Do you think that's important

MH: Yeah, the pastor ought to be the head of the church you know they start everything; we need our pastor as much as we need our young people.

KM: So, do you think having the pastor's interest, that would you know, help encourage the other members in the congregation –

MH: I believe so

KM: and steer it back into that tradition. Um, and one of the things in my research that I've – since I've been doing this project is um, about singing schools. You know, there was actually

schools I know in, you know maybe in the white community, where they went to teach shape note singing. Was there anything like that here to your knowledge, about uh like singing schools where they would go to actually learn how to sing shape note singing here in Randolph County?

MH: Well, they at one time a few years ago they did. But uh, you know when we was going to school we had devotion, we had to sing before you start open up school. That was the first thing you had to do. You had devotion and sang, say a pray and sang a song. But now, I really don't know about these schools too much since all my children grew up.

KM: Okay.

MH: But it would help.

KM: And uh, one of the things Ms. Diane Jones had mentioned was that you know maybe if some instructor or somebody on a professional level came into the community to actually teach shape note singing -

MH: Yeah.

KM: - To the younger people or offered as a class-

MH: Yes.

KM: - at Andrew College that may help revitalize -

MH: It will, it certainly will.

KM: You agree that would help?

MH: I would agree.

KM: That would help. Okay, about back to the conventions, what order of service would they go through with that? How would that work? Would you have the devotion or the scr-

MH: Yeah -

KM: How would that work?

MH: the devotion, then you call the roll, you do the welcome and then call the classes roll and then go from there *unintelligible* about three songs a piece, last song a collection of third song

KM: So some of them have what they call at least three sessions or what ever

MH: Uh-Huh, oh yes.

KM: So one, the first one round all the church is present sing at least one selection

MH: Uh-Huh.

KM: - and then the second round just another song -

MH: Uh-Huh.

KM: - and the third, as a I heard one gentleman say at a church, sing and pay or whate-

MH: Uh-Huh, that's it.

KM: Uh, the months, the churches would pay what kind of donation or what would that money be used for?

MH: It would - most church got their own treasure, but you know their own treasure our – we leave our at the church we don't - everything done by the church something we do not. They represent peoples different thing, but we ain't ever been that, we represent Virgil Chapel.

KM: Okay and just the monies that are raised, what is that used for exactly?

MH: The church, anything the church sees a need for, we don't never keep no money.

KM: Okay.

MH: Whatever is needed.

KM: Okay, uh, one another thing I wanted to ask about um, the uh shape note – well your experiences with it, you had mentioned about uh, you know the crowd of people that would come to these singings or whatever. Um, could you tell me more about that, how that was.

MH: Well, this was a Georgia and Alabama singing. I hadn't started singing then now they was really singing, you could, they –

KM: Do you know what year that was?

MH: Mmm, Lord back then I married in the forties so before then because I started attending, that when I started going to it. But our group was in the Georgia and Alabama singing. Now, it's just anybody now because Georgia and Alabama, all the people gone on and we just singing, some of them same people with them now is still singing, like Robert Lee and all them and Joel Lawson. He was our teacher, he was our instructor, he done a good job as long as he was able. He tried to teach us notes, but I wasn't good at it *laughing* we had sung note, we had sung note, he would teach us.

KM: So, there was an influx of people that would attend these conventions -

MH: Yes.

KM: - at this time. So, there aren't any churches that are from Alabama in the convention anymore?

MH: No, I think they around *unintelligible* Louisville and all like that. I think Benevolent still in and New Salem too, but we never been in it.

KM: Okay, our attendent won the Georgia-Alabama singing back in February and I believe I was informed that only like 8 or 9 churches now, and they were all from Georgia, so.

MH: Yeah, you used to have a Georgia and an Alabama singing once a year, you couldn't get to the church.

KM: Really?

MH: Man Jones, they was in it, I think Pine Grove used to be in it, I don't know if they still in it or not.

KM: I am not sure, I know Mr. Man is in it, you know he likes, he loves this type –

MH: He loves singing. He's a good instructor too

KM: Yeah, he loves to do this and he expressed an interest in being willing to share it with others, um the shape note singing. So, uh, what they served dinner or what was, what was the atmosphere like at one of these conventions? You mentioned that you wouldn't, you wouldn't be able to get to the church-

MH: Uh-huh.

KM: You know what would be, what would be the –

MH: They sung some good hard down singing in there, and they didn't sing about music either, and them Scotts and all those people well known. It just good, hard down plain singing everybody was in they place. Like I might start off leading, but I'll probably end up helping tone likely. Everybody know they part and they sung. We been good singing.

KM: So there was uh, a lot more fellowship in the area?

MH: Yes, there was. And people would be there so because they know who was gonna singing and who was coming. It was huge uh, you know different singing, different choirs back in those days.

KM: What, were there a lot of young people involved then or?

MH: Yes, there was a lot of, lot of them then. Wasn't as many as we got now that don't go, but there was a lot them come cause they didn't have nowhere to go. Their parent took them to church and they join in with them singing. Mm-Hm.

KM: So how long were these conventions lasting? How would one session last? Would it be an hour or a couple ho-

MH: Well, maybe a couple if you go there at 12, you get out about 3. Uh-huh, cause sometimes they start off in Sunday school. If you gonna go sing, you gonna have Sunday school. Everybody in one place.

KM: Would uh, a meal be served or something?

MH: Oh yes, after, after the convention in there they serve

KM: Would that, that church that hosted it prepare the meal or would people bring – I've often been told stories about people uh, back in the day here in the south would bring like trunk loads of food and stuff. Did they do th-

MH: It was mostly at our school cove, and everybody would bring a trunk. I remember that, but at these singings most churches responsible for they own event that day. Like Virgil Chapel, we having it till three something, so we are responsible food for the chapel, responsible for the guest choir.

KM: So, uh, as the older heads died out, uh the tradition, you know, did it seem to die out?

MH: Yes, the children find the parents, they didn't have enough energy to bring the children.

Back in the old days, when the parent brought the children, you saw the momma up singing the child was standing right behind, they be singing. But I remember what happened during this
unintelligible

KM: Well, do you think, um, there's uh, there has been a change in the African American community in relationship to the church as the way you remember it?

MH: Yes.

KM: You remember it, you had stated that um, you know, the parents brought their children. Do you see that now or what are your thoughts on that now?

MH: I think uh, that the children go where they want to go, they tell their parent they don't want to go. That includes my grands. And they let them do what they want to do. But back in the old days, if you said we going to church, she meant we, and they were there. I wish we could go back to the good old ways; it would be a better place.

KM: What do you think would have to happen to get us back there?

MH: I think the wake on the parent. Ain't no need in blaming the children, wake on the parent. I'm speaking from experience. I don't know what got to happen to get us back, but we need to go back to the good old ways.

KM: Well, um, when I interviewed Ms. Diane, she had mentioned that she had learned uh, singing at home. You know that was a part of daily life for her, around her house. Uh, her parents sung, or you know, even all of her siblings they sung together –

MH: They did.

KM: - you know when they worked in the cotton fields or whatever they were doing they were singing and that's how she caught on to singing. Uh, did you, uh, have – share a similar experience of you know singing around the home or –

MH: Well, I got it from all the peoples and they didn't sing quiet at all, they were singing hymns and be at church on Sunday mornings. But I always wanted to get in the choir, I can sing hymns too, but I like choir. And back to Diane Jones, um, I remember I know her family. All them from day one like to call, you know some folks they born with the gift. And there they sung, while I was out there trying to get it anyway I could. *laughing* So, I like singing, but it didn't start from the family, cause my family almost didn't never sing, we went to church together but some, some was in the choir, but this the whole entire family, they were doing it. I always wanted to be

in devotion to them hymn *laughing* and then I liked the choir. I like what I'm doing, I hope these young people catch on because we really need them.

KM: So, um, I know one recollection she had was um, a cotton field song she sung, it was – you probably heard her sing it before, I wonder uh, will the day ever come -

MH: Yes.

KM: it will be free. Do you recall any other songs or whatever being sung in the cotton fields or um...

MH: Nothing but hymns, my mother-in-law and all them there, get out there and do and making moan, you can hear them moaning from uptown nearby the *unintelligible* and they didn't go home and sit down you know, they run out the field and wipe they feets off to carry they shoes in hand; they went to church. We didn't have no 'I ain't got time to go to today, I got to rest'. I got a *unintelligible* from the old people, I always want to do like older peoples.

KM: So, there was no excuse?

MH: No excuse.

KM: Uh, also during that interview with Ms. Jones, she had mentioned something about um, you know as far as the, the spirit in the church – the atmosphere -

MH: Yeah.

KM: I mentioned that earlier. Uh, she remembered uh, how you know the sisters in the corner would be doing the moaning –

MH: Yeah.

KM: - and so forth, the amen and all that kind of stuff. Uh, do you remember any of that in the –

MH: Yes, I think so. I got it from Saint Luke church. I was coddled down there, we were little, I hadn't even joined the church, they be moaning so during revival, and my mother-in-law you

could hear her moaning and I don't know. You can tell when she was troubled, they just *unintelligible* and it just brought joy to me every time I get down and out, I would just go to moaning because I got that from her. She was in my – her sister she lived a 106 and walking around.

KM: Your sister?

MH: My mother-in-law's sister, Lorine Johnson. She lived to be 106, and she was about 90 something before she joined the church.

KM: Really?

MH: She didn't even go to church; she could moan about what your problem was and just drive them away. And I do it now sometime, I get up in the morning and I feel down and out I just go to moaning.

KM: So, um, music uh, you're using it kinda like a daily constitution, if I can borrow those words from again Ms. Jones, she um, referred to the same thing as how she would moan and sing and um, hum to herself. You know and that was a way of lifting her through whatever she was going through. So, you, you use that in that same respect

MH: Oh yes, it'll do a whole lot for you. You don't have to talk to no body, you just go to moaning, you find peace of mind. It just speaks for yourself.

KM: So, uh, where do you see shape note – we know that its dying out, you know now, and uh currently, what do you uh, you know think needs to uh, happen in a hurry if you know, we gonna keep this thing alive. Or what would you like to see happen uh, to keep the tradition going.

MH: I would like to see the pastor step in, they the head of the church, they need to step in. And you know most children relate to pastors and they would listen cause, well my children took over with some youth but know the youth is children theyself and they don't relate to the parent. And

they go “well they said they don’t wanna go” and when I was going to Sunday school like they are, I didn’t ask them if they wanted to go, I said be ready at a certain time and they would be ready, and we need to start somewhere, and I believe its first the pastor and then it’s in the home. He need to relate to the parents.

KM: Uh, you had mentioned that you think the pastor also needs to be interested in this, um, how involved do you, your current pastor is or past pastors have been at Virgil Chapel in shape note singing?

MH: Well, a long time ago we had one 32 years, he was alright and then you stay and play too long and get too satisfied, he left his self because he see we moving and he left his self. And now we got a pastor the children love and now it’s time to take over and start waking. They love him to death; you can give anything we have *unintelligible*. The pastor say “I need my children” the down there running the pulpit over and this is the time, if he let this opportunity go by I don’t expect he can regain them again. And they really, they need, he need to step in now.

KM: Have uh, has anyone made any efforts uh, at your church in particular, to try and get the ball rolling on that.

MH: Yes, they trying but they going about it, he just – I don’t know, he don’t know *unintelligible* I didn’t tell him anything. Reverend *unintelligible* I – we been trying, I hope it gets better after a while. We done started trying doing it different ways.

KM: Do you think he personally has an interest in the shape note singing or knows a little bit about it?

MH: I – when he hear it he respond to it, but I don’t think he’s but 40 something years old.

laughing

KM: So, he’s baby? *laughing*

MH: *laughing* Uh-Huh. But when he hear it he respond cause he don't hardly know, he know we have a senior choir but the only time you know he have other church all the time he hear us when like Pastor anniversary or senior citizen we'll sing some. And "I didn't know y'all do that singing" – he don't be involved in other things. But those children now he, he tell them that we need to do this, he told them, he'll tell them about it. They need to get other song, and he'll tell them about them old song what brought us through the older people. They don't sing them no more, but them songs still good. He always costing them about what – how we come from and the favorite song - never forget where I come from. When you get there, don't forget where you come from.

KM: So he needs to um, take advantage of –

MH: Oh yeah.

KM: - the youth responding to him

MH: Yes.

KM: - that's, that's one way for it to be revitalized in your particular church.

MH: Yes, and I always go to him and tell him how we got, made it this far and tell him how we got it, and we need his support to help push, bring the others on behind.

KM: And, and so uh, you mentioned that it was only 3 of y'all now at Virgil Chapel going to the different singings and so forth. Um, how often do y'all go to these singings or -

MH: Quarterly.

KM: - Just quarterly?

MH: Mm-Hm.

KM: Okay.

MH: We passed up this quarterly, we threw it in fifth and go quarterly.

KM: And do you attend any of their conventions frequently, whenever they're held?

MH: Yes, I attend whenever I can. I attend, I go almost all the time when I was able.

KM: Are they held quarterly also or – the conventions?

MH: Some of them. Some of them, like these choir anniversaries with these pianos, they usually be held once a month from one church to the other. I don't follow them like I used to. I like they singing.

KM: But the conventions, how far away are they now?

MH: Well, we go – they not far. Which? Distance?

KM: Yes ma'am, uh I mean in the region or like as far as like Dawson or

MH: Nah. With the choir anniversary the young folk about music they goes everywhere but the seniors we just right around in Randolph County.

KM: Okay.

MH: *unintelligible* Seven churches in one, six in the other, third in fifth.

KM: Okay, third and fifth. Okay, alright.