



Helen Stafford - Tacoma

*"Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget." Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God**

Helen Stafford Interviewed, Feb. 6, 1993

After my parents' first child was born [approximately 1877], they decided to move West. Black women had problems in those days defending themselves from rape by white men. It didn't matter if my father was present, there was nothing a black man could do to stop a white man.

I was born November 15, 1899, in a little town called Wamego, Kansas which is about 35 miles west of Topeka Kansas, the capital of Kansas. I lived there until I was about 14 years old. It was a small town and there were few black people. My father and mother had come up from the south after the Civil War, from Tennessee. There were about ten black families in the town. The schools were mixed, however, I was always the only black person in my classes. My father was a stone mason. I don't know how he was taught the trade. He was quite the craftsman. In Kansas there is a lot of white limestone. That is what the college buildings in Kansas were made of [limestone]. He was away from town a lot on jobs. I never asked him any questions about where he learned that craft. He was an excellent stone mason.

Leonidas was my father's name. He was born a slave. My mother was always free. She was practically white. You heard about the white slave masters who took beautiful black women for their own, well that happened to my grandmother. If they wanted a black woman they just came and got her. They [my parents] tried to forget a lot of that stuff, I'm sure. My mother grew up in the master's home.

My mother, Georganne, had to raise my brothers and sisters on her own, because my father was gone almost always, except four months out of the year. They didn't lay stone in the winter time. He was a marvelous man. My mother taught him to read and write after they were married. His [hand]writing was very good quality, good enough to sign the checks to pay for my school.

I have a picture that my father had taken of the whole family. In the picture, I'm about 10 years old, my sister is about 4 years old. My father was a very stern man at his age, with young children. He was very stern. I don't remember my mother ever calling my father by his first name. She always called him Mr. Beck. My mother was 18 when she married him, but he was 8 years older. My mother must have been in her late forties when she had me.

My mother became ill when I was very young. So we had to move from the small town [Wamego] to a larger town where my siblings were living, so they could take care of her. I don't have many pictures from my childhood, because our house burned when we were in Topeka. A lot of my books and things were burned. I had an uncle, a brother of my father, who had been an officer in the Spanish American War. As a kid in school, we learned from Kansas history books that a black man had done this [fought in the war]. He was a Colonel and had a black battalion. I was so proud that my uncles' name was in a history book. James Beck, that was my uncle's name. Later, when I went back to Kansas [and looked up his name in history books], that had been taken out of history books. Nothing at all was in there about this black battalion. That [history book which mentioned his efforts] had burned in the house.

I do remember about this uncle. He was still alive when I was growing up. We went to visit him a few times. There were a lot of farms that were around Wamego. Mostly black people that had come up from the south lived on farms. I don't know how they got those farms, unless they worked and saved to pay off the farms. Several of my uncles were farmers, and lived outside the town. I saw them on Sundays at church, they would always come over to our house after the service to eat. I remember that because the kids had to wait to eat after the adults had eaten. Sometimes they didn't leave very much.

I remember that when I was in the second grade, I started at age four, if you can imagine that! But I became five in November. I started at four, finished high school at sixteen, and college at 20. The teacher I had in the second grade was an old spinster. All teachers were old spinsters, because they couldn't marry. They still couldn't marry, in those days, when I taught. If you married you were out of a job. My sister married

secretly, she was married for 3 or 4 years before she announced that. I don't have any idea why, no one ever told me.

In Topeka, I lived with a married brother. Our house in Wamego had four or five rooms downstairs, and the upstairs was one great big room. When the boys had to sleep upstairs with me and my sisters, my mother would put up sheets and things. I'm so amazed at incest these days. I never saw one of my brothers, they were always completely dressed. I know we girls took our bath in a large washtub every Saturday night. I don't know where the boys bathed. We never felt crowded, three meals every day, breakfast, dinner, supper, and everybody sat down at the table and ate. After I was seven or eight years old, my older brothers were grown and away. I can remember there were six kids sitting [at the dinner table] and my mother and father.

My mother never left the home. She had all she could do to take care of the kids. But my father was gone quite a bit. I can remember sitting around this great big old stove. Do you know anything about agate glass? Its like glass, but lightweight and you can see the fire through it. We would sit there around this table and get our lesson. They [my parents] saw to it that we got them. They would even use a kerosene lamp, because there was no electricity.

We all went to school. It was an integrated school. You always had problems [being the only black]. The teacher in the second grade, I was telling you about, every Friday afternoon [in class] you would have a program. It was pretty tough for being so young. Sometime during the semester, every kid had to give a speech or something, and get up in front of the class. This one afternoon, she dropped me this piece of paper. I'm five years old, now! She said take this home to your mother, and learn it so that next week when we have our program you can recite. She said, "I think this will be easy to learn." I wondered what she meant. It was something in dialect, with 'dis, 'dat, and shore 'enuf. When my mother saw it, she almost had a stroke. She put on her little hat and took me by the hand, this was embarrassing to a little kid, her mother taking me to the teacher. She [my mother] laid it out, "my daughter can speak just as good as anybody else. I consider this an insult." She handed her the speech back, she got red in the face. I remember all these things, I was so embarrassed. Here's my mother talking back to

the teacher. I never said anything to the teacher again, I just sat in the class and did my lessons. She [the teacher] was the worst one I had in grade school.

The kids [in school] accepted you. I remember once at Valentine's Day, kids were supposed to bring valentines. We could put somebody's name on it or not. I guess we did put names on them, but I was the only black kid in this room. And all the kids were getting valentines, I was just sitting. Finally, this one white little kid said, "here's one for you, Helen." He had gotten me a valentine. It made my day, because his parents were the richest people in town, and rich white people, they aren't prejudiced. Handsome kid too, that was when I was about 7 years old. I was in the second grade.

I remember the first car in town was owned by the banker, father of the boy who gave me the valentine. There was one car in town. When I became a teenager people finally had cars. My father had a wealthy black friend, who was a farmer. He had a son who was my first beau; of course they didn't call them beaus in those days. If you knew my parents, you were alright. If my parents knew the kid, it was okay. This boy's father was a well-to-do farmer. He was the only boy that my father let me go out with. I was about 14 or 15 years old. The kid was much older, he was a young man. I guess they thought he would take care of me. I guess he did. He taught me how to drive, imagine that, an old stick shift! We took a long trip one summer, we went to visit some relatives, and we had to drive long. Then it was long [trip with the young man] because we had to stop overnight somewhere. I helped him to drive. If you were my friend or my father's friend, you didn't say anything [disrespectful or suggestive] to his daughter.

I didn't even know what sex was in those days. It's not amazing that so many girls did have babies, they didn't know what they were doing. I can remember my older sister, one day we were getting dinner, my mother had died and we were living with a married brother, so I said to her, "nobody says anything to me. I don't know what makes babies." Boy, she almost fainted and said, "young lady you just keep your nose clean." I thought, what does my nose have to do with it? That was an expression in those days. That was all they ever told me about sex. **By that time you were almost done with high school?** I was almost 14 or 15, I graduated at 16. This friend, who was pregnant, was about my age. Everybody was just speechless, I don't know that she married, she

was a school girl like me. I saw her in school everyday. I remember my married brother said, "don't ever let me see you with that girl again." Here was your best friend, and you can't even speak to her. No explanation, anything, "Just do what you're told." I didn't know anything, but after some other kids told me, that's when I asked my sister, I don't even know how you get a baby.

I moved in with a married brother in Topeka. After I graduated from high school, I went to Kansas State University which was in Manhattan, Kansas, about 35 miles west of Topeka. The first year, I had to board with an elderly lady there in Manhattan. My father paid her room and board. I think about that little house, cold! You know it's cold in Kansas! I had a little room upstairs, we didn't have any central heating. In fact, I don't think there was any heat at all upstairs. We had a pot-belly stove downstairs. She worked for white people, but she was a terrible housekeeper. I had cooking privileges, but I cooked very seldom, as I remember. I didn't lose any weight. My father would give me an allowance. I didn't know anything about handling money, by Thursday or Friday I was out of money. That old gal saw that I didn't go hungry. I remember my little room upstairs, no heat of any kind, oil lamps, but I would study up there at night. I remember one night, I studied all night. I had an exam coming. But, after that first year, my father decided that he could live in Manhattan just as well, so he rented a house. My father moved the second year I was in school. He could live and work anywhere. I kept house for him. I finished my last three years like that.

You had a little sister. Did she live in the house with you and your father? For one year, but she couldn't take it because my father was so strict. She was completely different from me. She was vivacious. I was kind of slow, from what I hear. **Slow, in what way?** Timid, you know how some kids are. She was out-going, everybody said "Oh she's cute." They didn't even notice me, which was kind of hard on a kid. Although, I had long curly hair, and her hair was kind of kinky. I got straight hair. That's all I had going for me, but she had personality and everything. **What was your sister's name?** Gladys. **Is she still alive?** No. She died early. She was a smoker. So, she died of lung cancer when she was 50 or 51. But I feel she was the pretty one in the family, I thought. But I do know, that I had long curly hair, and that sort of pleased me. Except that I was brilliant, although I shouldn't say that, I was a straight A's kid. She had

good grades, but you know, sometimes not too great or anything to brag about. That was the only thing I had going for me, I had curly hair and good grades.

At Kansas State University, I don't think there were over 35 or 40 black kids in the whole college. **Did the black kids hang out together?** Yeah, if you went in the cafeteria and sat at a table, the white kids got up and moved. **Were there any race riots, lynching or anything like that?** No, not in Kansas. It was very quiet. The [black] boys fought almost every day. Some white kids would call them "nigger" and they would jump on them and fight. They [black boys] were so good that the white kids finally left them alone. **I bet they stood their ground.** Well, you had to in those days.

When you were in school in Kansas did your parents expose you to different music, such as white music, symphonies? No, not really. As I said, my father was an old fashioned fiddler. He and his friends would get together and make good music. My mother had been a singer. As I told you, she had a chance to go abroad when she was a girl. She went to Fisk, it was called Central Tennessee College, then. She sang with their famous chorus. They had a chance to go over and sing for the King and Queen of England. It was a long trip on the ocean, my grandmother was just petrified at the idea of her going and wouldn't let her go. She was really sorry because she didn't let my mother go and the singers became famous, they were a success.

She [my mother] was a tiny thing too, no taller than I [about 5 feet tall], she was just about this big [indicates about 4 feet tall]. My father was a husky big guy, not too tall, with broad shoulders, part Indian, and very handsome. **Do you know what kind of Indian he was?** I tried to find out what kind of Indian. My brother tried to locate any records that may have been kept but wasn't able to find out.

All the black people were freed after the Civil War. Did I tell you about my father? He ran away to join the Union Army. He was large for his age. He said he ran off from the plantation to join the Union Army. They had him all signed up apparently, until it came to age. He was only 16 or 17. He was supposed to go back to the plantation. They nearly beat him to death when he got back there. **They made sure that he got back**

and didn't just runaway? They saw to it. The north didn't want to get stopped for a particular slave. That was one of the first bedtime stories I was told.

Do you have any other stories that you were told? Well, my mother was never a slave. Her mother was beautiful, she was -- what do you call a beautiful colored woman when they take them in? **Kind of a mistress?** I never saw my grandmother. Because she had another daughter besides my mother. When my mother went to Kansas, her other daughter went to the Midwest, Chicago to be exact. My grandmother died in Chicago. My mother went to visit my grandmother once. I was five or six, I guess. My little sister and I could both go, but I didn't want to miss school. Can you imagine that? They should have made me! I had not missed a day, and I never missed a day, until I was in the 5th grade. It was an honor, if you never missed a day or was late a day. In the 5th grade, I got the measles, then I had to stay home. I hated that worse than I hated the measles. My younger sister told me what a beautiful woman she [grandmother] was. My sister was impressed with her long hair. I think she looked just like a white woman. But she never got any further out [west] than Chicago.

What are all of your brothers' and sisters' names? This brother, he worked in a hotel all of his life. He had started to [work in hotels] after he came home from the service. I was just a baby when he came home from the Spanish American War. There was smallpox epidemic at the time he was on the ship, he couldn't wait to get home. Evidently, he brought the germs home, although he didn't get the disease. A lot of the service men died and every member of our family got smallpox. I was about 6 weeks [old] or so, in about 1900. So you were quarantined in the old days, they put a sign on your house. You couldn't come out or go anywhere, and nobody could come into your house, except the doctor. They told me about me having smallpox at age 6 weeks, because I don't remember. Your parents had to tie your sleeves down, so that you wouldn't scratch. A lot of black people, and maybe whites, too, had a lot of scars from the smallpox. If you scratched you got a horrible scar. But that's the way it was.

What was that brother's name? That was James, my oldest brother. My oldest sister was Araminta. The next three children died in infancy, I don't know if they had names.

My next brother was named Earl. Then Clarence, a handsome son of a gun, he was my color [medium cocoa brown]. The darker we were, the better our hair was. A fair skin, like you, had hair that was kind a tight. We had good hair just like Indians, so that used to be what we would say, "I may be dark but I'm better looking than you." Isn't that stupid! Anyway, Clarence was dark with beautiful hair. The next brother was Glen, he was one of the fair ones. He used to enjoy calling me "nigger." Every time he would get mad at me, it wouldn't be in the house, he would call me a "little black nigger." We had gone through some hard times, not just my family, but all black people. We've come a long way. White people looked down on us, and we looked down on us. We had no pride or anything. Then my baby sister came along and she had short kinky hair, Gladys.

My first year, I taught in a black school by my church in Kansas City. Lovely school. I always wondered what happened to it. I have been trying to find out. You know we aren't very business like. You know we lose things. **We do?** Because this college, it wasn't really a college. They called it that, [but] it was an advanced high school.

We had a lot of black kids come up from the south. Because at one, some of the black kids were getting money because of their Indian background. They were always mistreating the Indians, so they were trying to make up for it. So I had all of these kids in this school. They had lots of money. They had diamonds and things. I remember one girl in cooking. I taught cooking. We made kids take their jewelry off, I don't know why we did. They had to wear hair nets. These kids would bring me their diamonds and things, for me to keep while they were working. My sister and brother-in-law lived in Kansas City, Mo. The school was in Kansas City, Kansas. So, I had to take a street car across the river every morning. But on this particular day, this kid gave me her jewelry and I put it in my purse. And then they [the kids] were supposed to stop on by after class and pick the jewelry up. That kid, you know diamonds didn't mean anything to black kids, she left and I had these diamonds. I put them in my purse and took those cotton picking diamonds with me. I had to transfer when I got to the Kansas City line. I got off one street car and got on another, when I realized that I had left my purse on the street car. I about had a stroke! I discovered it, however, when the street car had just gone a couple of blocks. [I had the street car driver] let me off, so that I could run back

and check the seat where I had sat. I looked and there were people sitting there, but no purse. I'll never forget that woman. A white woman too, and in those days they didn't have much to do with us. She said, "did you lose your purse?" I was just 21, green as grass. I said, "Yes I did." I don't know if I was crying. She said, "well I found it. I was going to turn it in, but I'm glad you came back." There was my purse intact with everything. Isn't that something? **That's wonderful, I don't think that would happen today.** I have never forgotten that. Because I had quite a bit of cash in that purse, too!

Do you know the name of that school you were teaching at? It was called Western University, it was an A.M.E college [African Methodist Episcopal]. **I'll have to do some research and see if I can find out about it.** Shortly after, I left for some reason or another, I don't know, we aren't businesslike. I shouldn't be saying that, [but] we had little business experience. Whoever was running the school just let it go to pot. So then the kids stopped coming and if you don't have kids, you don't have a school. I often wonder if we still own that property. It was beautiful. I don't know what it had been. It had brick buildings overlooking the Kansas river. It was fantastic. I don't even hear about it now. I have asked ministers about it, if it was still there. Because the president of the college was always a minister. I had a very interesting experience with the man who was the president of the college. I thought [he] was really old. But he was probably about 35 or 40, but when you're 20, that's old. Tall and stately, but he had a reputation of liking women. He had a nice charming wife and they lived on campus. And that so and so, a young teacher was just what he was looking for and he was always putting his hands on me. You were taught very graciously to ignore that, slightly pushing him away. You know in the Fall he didn't offer me a contract nor did he bother to tell me that "you are not coming back." He just didn't give me any information at all, later I found out that I was fired. **Because you weren't paying attention to his advances, so sexual harassment has been around forever.**

It was the same way when I taught in Kansas City with the principal at this grade school. The kids did cooking, so I taught them and they baked. A lot of nice kids, and brats, too, but the girls took cooking and sewing. I didn't teach sewing, but they took cooking in the 6th and 7th grades. This old guy used to come by my room, and pull me up to

his office. He always had something to tell me and he always put his hand on me. My supervisor came up one day, a white woman, and teachers are supposed to wear these little caps on their heads and the girls too. I had not been wearing my cap. This old gal who was my supervisor, I didn't know she was coming, so she went up to his office and told. After he called me I told him what had happen, he said, "you tell her to mind her own business. I like this hair." He ran his fingers through my hair. I had a lot of hair then. So I made it a point after that never to be alone anywhere with him. He and my brother-in-law were excellent friends, good friends. My brother-in-law, with whom I was living, with my sister and brother-in-law, we lived right next door to the son-of-a-gun. But he [the principal] was going to have some fun, you know.

Which brother came out to Tacoma? That was my older brother, James. We called him Jim. He was a married guy. He loved to fish and, of course, this is the place to go, if you want to fish. But his kids were going to school. He went to the University of Kansas for a couple of years, but there was not much for a black man to do in those days with a college degree. Unless you were like my brother-in-law who studied medicine, one of the first black doctors in the West. Black men did whatever they could find. My brother went two years to the University, but he just sort of became discouraged. He ended up working in hotels, which was an excellent job for a black man. He came out here when the kids were little, so they could go to an integrated school. He stopped first in Salt Lake City, Utah. He liked Salt Lake City, but someone had told him about all the lovely water [in Washington]. He was an ardent fisherman. So he came on out here, and he loved it. So he sent for his family and they came.

You must have come by train from Kansas? All the way. It was lovely. **Train ride, by yourself?** Oh, sure! **So, you were quite the adventurous young woman?** [Mrs. Stafford giggles] By then black people could sleep in the sleeping cars. I enjoyed it. **The trains weren't segregated?** No. It took two or three days to get out here. I could sit in the Jim Crow car. I had experience with them, because in my second year out of college, or was it third year, I had an opportunity to go south and teach. [When she went south on the train, Mrs. Stafford had to sit in the Jim Crow car.]

It was one summer vacation, that I came out here to visit him. I fell in love with the forest and also a young man. I went back and finished my job [teaching] at Christmas and came out here and married him [W. P. Stafford]. **What was it that you loved about the West?** It was cool in the summer and not too cold in the winter. I was just tired of the midwest, I guess, all the discrimination and everything. Although there was discrimination everywhere, it wasn't so evident here. I met this guy, too.

This guy became your husband, W. P. Stafford? He worked at one of the big hotels here. He was the man in charge of the dining room. It was a nice job. They had to work hard. There were parties. It was one of the biggest hotels down on the waterfront. It was called Tacoma Hotel. Many famous people stayed there. The President of the United States stayed there and wealthy white people stayed there also. Sometimes, he would get asked to come out to some of the white people's houses in the country to serve, and sometime he would take me. I would help serve soup and stuff. It was a nice job at that time. The hotel burned down. I remember Betty was about 6 weeks old. The phone rang early in the morning, breakfast time about 10 o'clock, "wake-up, your bread and butter burned up." That was around 1935. The hotel reopened across the street in a smaller building, but it was never quite the same. The hotel had all black waiters, but one day the boss called and told him [W.P.] "this is it, we are hiring all white women to do your job." So we had pretty tight times for quite a while.

I had tried when I first came to Tacoma to get a teacher's position. I called first for a conference, and the man was very nice, he said come on down. He didn't know I was black. When I got there, right away he looked like he wanted to faint. He stood right up to me and said, "Sorry, Mrs. Stafford, we don't even have a Negro janitor here. We couldn't subject our children to that." Whatever *that* was! That was around 1928 or 1929.

When did your husband become a merchant marine? When he was fired from the hotel, about a year later. He continued [as a merchant marine], it was excellent money. We had a bank account, and when the Depression came along, in the 1930's, do you know, our money disappeared! I think, we got 10 cents on every dollar. It's amazing, things that happen to you, and you have no recourse. Of course, we weren't the only

ones. Anyone who had a little money in the bank just lost it. The bank went broke. When you went down to ask them for it, the bank wouldn't give it to you, just as though it wasn't your money.

When we moved into this block, if you can imagine in 1927 or '28, there was not another black family within ten blocks. All whites lived right down the street. There was one black doctor, he lived three or four houses down. **Did you know him, and did you socialize with him?** Oh, yes, he was a very nice man. His wife belonged to our church, but actually she was Baptist. She had a beautiful voice, she had graduated from Fisk and been in the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

What was Tacoma like when you first arrived? Back then in Tacoma, the main street was Pacific Avenue. All of the stores were on Pacific Avenue. It was a small town with nice big stores. **There was no Jim Crow?** No Jim Crow, ostensibly. One day, these kids went in and sat [at a lunch counter] at one of the stores. You knew that they didn't want you, and you didn't want to be embarrassed, so you didn't go. They wouldn't wait on you. They would just ignore you as though you weren't there. Finally you would just leave.

There were Japanese and Chinese restaurants downtown, especially Chinese. They were smart. Anybody could go into their restaurants and eat. So, most of the time when we ate out, we went to a Chinese restaurant. Delightful food, and you were always well received, especially if you had the money. But the big thing downtown was the hotel where my husband worked. After the hotel had burned down, another was built to take its place. They didn't even have black help. Marian Anderson, the famous signer, she was here to sing, but they [the hotel] wouldn't even let her eat in the dining room. They would rent her a room, and she could eat in her room. And she told them where to go. So she lived in Seattle and when she came down here to perform her concert, she came by taxi.

Where did you live when you first moved to Tacoma? We lived in an apartment in Tacoma Avenue. We lived there for two or three years. We decided that we wanted to get out to a larger place, the apartments are rather small there. There were a couple of

big houses right across the street by St. Joe's hospital. This black couple owned this lovely two family house and so we rented the downstairs. It was nice, you could see Puget Sound. Although, I didn't enjoy that because you could see them bring out the corpses of people who had died. It was the largest hospital in Tacoma at that time. We lived there for a couple of years. We decide that we'd look for something that was further out. I had this good friend, [an] aristocratic young niece whose father had worked downtown with a big hotel and had a lot of clients. He died suddenly and left these kids and a wife, who was kind of flighty. The men at the hotel bought the house, paid for it completely so that the children would have a home. But the mother didn't want to live there, so it was up for rent. The Aunt rented us this house and I've been here ever since. That was about 1928 or 1929. So we decided, that after the children came of age [after the children were old enough to sell the home], we would buy this house . We had first choice. **So you've seen this neighborhood change quite a bit?** There was only one other black family [the doctor]. Mostly, they were foreigners, white, Italians, Germans all up and down the street.

What got you started in all of your activities? Pure boredom, really, [since] I couldn't get a job teaching. My father said, "we are giving you girls an education so that you don't have to work in white folks' kitchens!" I decided I wouldn't do that kind of work. Although that work is honorable, why spend four years in college to go cooking? Staff [her husband] was making pretty good money working at the hotel.

After we had been here about one week a real estate man came and asked if we wanted to sell. We were sure the neighbors had put him up to it. The neighbors that were here were very chilly at first but that didn't matter to me. Because I could be just as chilly as they were, so if they wanted to speak, fine, if they didn't that was fine, I could ignore them completely. They were kind of chilly.

They were of German descent I think, a father and mother and half-grown daughters or grand daughters. But if you left them alone they were OK. They became real friendly. I remember one winter it snowed in the middle of the night; that was when my husband [Staff] was going off a lot on long trips. When I got up in the morning he had been over and shoveled my sidewalk and steps. They were good neighbors, but we

were never close. On the other side there was an elderly couple, very nice. A little old lady and her husband, they were retired.

I was born and raised A.M.E. **Your parents took you to church when you were growing up?** Oh heavens, yes! That's all you did on Sundays. They let us read the funny papers, but a lot of the old folks wouldn't let their kids read the funny papers. That's how I knew it was A.M.E. I was christened in that church when I was five weeks old. I've been there ever since.

You were married at Allen A.M.E.? I married at Allen A.M.E [by a minister from Allen] on the 31st of December, 1926. I joined Allen the next week. I was married in my brother's home. We had a local minister marry us. We had a group of young people, and I've had a good time while I was there. His wife had some [sic] beautiful singing voice. I married at their house. They had a beautiful house. I didn't know that many people. My husband was kind of persnickety and so he didn't associate with a lot of people in Tacoma. **Why was that?** His family was the first family of Spokane. They had come to Spokane about 1880 or somewhere around that. In fact, he was born in Spokane in 1896. But they were kind of persnickety. They were not quite sure that they wanted me for a daughter-in-law. I didn't know what they were stuck-up about, except they were one of the first families of Spokane. Old-timers, they had done a lot then.

One of his uncles had been the grandmaster of the Masonic Lodge. One of his sisters was very popular, a beautiful, beautiful woman. I don't know that they ever accepted me. But I could out do them. I didn't know if I wanted to accept them. They were really very friendly. My husband and I had got along fine.

When Betty [her daughter] came along they were very fond of her. We'd fly over there sometimes. Betty still remembers being a little kid, and being in Spokane.

When they put up pictures [in the Tacoma Public Library Main Branch] of the pioneers of the State of Washington [during the Centennial celebration in 1898], my uncle [in-law] he was a big Mason. His picture was all over the library downtown. His name was Emmett Holmes. A very nice looking fellow, and very nice man. He used to stay with us

when he came over to give a lecture. He never came over without his collar and tie on. If you were a married worker [you always wore a collar and tie] in Spokane. I liked him. He worked in one of the big stores.

My husband's mother and father were organizers of the A.M.E. Church [officially called the A.M.E. Church of Spokane] in Spokane. They were the original members, their names are on a cornerstone over there. Emmett Holmes was a famous man who was the Grandmaster of the Masonic Lodge.

How did you become involved in so many activities and organizations? If I saw an article in the paper about something that was going to be here, I'd just go. I remember once seeing in the papers about ladies at the YWCA having luncheons. So Mrs Stafford got dressed and went down. We always had some sort of a little car, except for the few months my husband had lost it because my husband was out of work. I went on down to the YWCA. I heard some words about good food. They had this [luncheon] on an upper floor in a big room setup all daintily to start at one o'clock. I would always go early, because I wanted to get a seat. If they [white women] didn't want to sit with me they didn't have to. They don't usually until all the other tables are filled. It was worse standing than sitting down. It was nice, and finally when all the other tables were filled some ladies sat down with me. They were nice. They had to sit somewhere. They had a little business session. Then someone spoke, a lady, who was closing the meeting, wanted to talk a little bit about the YWCA. Then she said, "Does anybody have any questions?" So, Mrs. Stafford arose and said, "I hear that the black girls aren't allowed in the swimming pool?" That old gal rose up and said, "That's true!" She looked around to see if anybody else wanted to ask any questions. I said, "I would like to know why?" "Because the white mothers don't want their girls swimming with Negro girls." Here this is around several hundred woman, that old woman got real hot under the skin, and she wouldn't let me say anything else. But that was my first experience. Actual experience that somebody just told me flat-out, except the man at the school board.

Then I decided, Betty was just a little fry and I was home all the time, I think I'll get a group of girls together. If they can't join the white teams, we'll have a black team. They

to be. But, if I go out and buy a beautiful house, I don't want any of you [black people] to come and move beside me, because you would ruin the neighborhood. I'm serious.

Do you still drive? No, I stopped driving when I was seventy five. It was time for me to get a new car, too. I didn't think that I could afford it. I had a good friend who said, "When it came time to buy a new car, I figured that I could take a lot of taxi rides for the cost of a new car." I said, "Well that's a good way of looking at it." But, I hate to always have to ask people for a ride. I can't understand that, I always had somebody in my car. I didn't like to go places alone. When I came here, there was only one other black woman driving. For years, I hauled all the Matrons to the club meetings. There was a woman who lived in Seattle, and once a year we would have a meeting there. We had a lot of nerve, because those old cars aren't as good as the ones today. It would take you two or three hours to get to Seattle. I never asked them to help with the gas, which you didn't matter, gas was cheap. I've never been one to count dimes anyway. I guess that's why I'm so poor. We'd go over there, to that gal's [the Matron who lived in Seattle] house, just like it was right here.

This morning at church a lay-person asked what this [the Matron's Club] group did. They give scholarships or they give kids money. The Matron's Club also has events, such as the annual style show we're having on President's Day at the Executive Inn. We have local talent at the talent show. Its just for fun, but we charge. For years, we've given at least one thousand dollars to the scholarship fund. We never give one kid more than five hundred dollars, always at least two. We figured it would help. This young woman came up to me after church, she said that she would like to give money to your club for this scholarship fund. She handed me a check for 50 bucks.

Do you get asked to talk a lot? My teacher says that you are speaking at Tacoma Historical society. Oh yes! It gets repetitious. This colored girl who works at Tacoma Community College asks me to come speak to her class often. I don't know why they want to hear about how ornery they've been. But they eat it up. They want me to come out and speak for a 11:30 am group and then again at 1:30 pm, twice in one day! **Are you going to do it?** Oh, sure. I might as well.

Can you tell me about when you were a social worker? Boy, that's another story, dear. I was at another one of those luncheons that I told you I always went to. I'd see an add in the paper, it was a restaurant luncheon, but the gals that were sitting at the table said they had to get back to the office, the Welfare Department [Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) - Pierce County Division]. Sociology was my minor at school. I thought, well, here's my chance, so I talked to one of the girls. I said, "How do you get on duty down there?" She said, "Oh, all you just have to do is apply. Then there's a state exam you take. If you pass the exam, then your name is on the board." She said, "I'll take you down." She was going back to work, so it was no problem. I followed her all the way back down to the office. She took me into the boss' office, it was lunch hour - the boss was out. She said to the secretary, a big old tough looking gal sitting, "Mrs. Stafford wants an application for the exam." This woman sat there like she was frozen in space. Just sat! The other woman said, "Hurry up, hurry up, we haven't got all day!" Finally, this young looking gal got up kind of reluctantly. The girl with me kind of snatched it out of her hand and gave it to me.

I filled it out, and turned it in. Then I got a notice about when this exam would be, they gave it at a certain time. There were about twelve of us. I took the examination and passed the written. They [the notice from DSHS] said I had to take an oral examination, and they told me when that would be. When I went to that office [Pierce County -DSHS], they were quite surprised. At that time, I think they only had one black worker in Seattle. **Was that in Seattle or Tacoma?** I was in Tacoma, but I guess they had them [black workers] longer than that, because one of my sorority sisters had a niece that worked there, not as a caseworker, but as an office clerk. I took the oral exam, and I passed that, too! I got notified to come in, where to go, what time, and who my supervisor would be. That morning I got up bright and early and went to my job.

[The conversation is interrupted as I started to squint, when the afternoon sun shines in my eyes. I got up to help change the venetian blinds. Mrs. Stafford motions towards the blinds, when I say, "Here I can get it," Mrs. Stafford says, "I can get it. That's one thing, I have to tell you young people about, don't all be jumping [up to] help to older people. It doesn't do a thing for our ego."]

I don't know if you've been to a Welfare Office. It was a great big room with 25 or 30 caseworkers all at their desks. They had a little room where you would go to interview clients. Nice job! I had to report to the guy who was the head of the department, to his office. He greeted me. He was a very friendly guy. It was about 8 o'clock, the office opened at 8 am. He said, "All of the folks should be at their desk, I'll introduce you." They were all at their desks jabbering. All of these girls. ... they had equipment and telephones. He said, "Hey, hey be quiet." It was a very fun place to work. So, they stopped talking, looked at him, and kind of wondered, who's she? He said, "She's our new caseworker, blah, blah, blah." You could have heard a stone drop in that room it was so quiet. Dead silence, as long as we stood there, he talked. Nobody said a word. They were frozen in space.

When you first started that job as a social worker, how did the other workers feel about you? They were frozen in space, like I said, not only the workers but also the clients. I rarely had a black client. I was in areas where there were none of us. One of my first assignments was Puyallup, and black people were almost unknown out there. You'd be surprised how far we have come. I had my experiences out here also, I could tell you many. **Do you want to share one of those?** I had a gal that come into the office to apply, they had to see an interviewer who would take all the information. We had to go out and visit. This was the old days. I don't know what they do now, they have such a small amount of workers compared to what they used to have. At that time you had to go out and verify that they were there -- see the rent receipts and all of that crud. This was not my first client, but one of the first. I remember her because she had ten kids, ten kids! I got to her house. You had to be pretty good. You had to have a map because the streets weren't named. I knocked on her door and no one answered, but I could hear people inside. So, I just left a note, got back into my car and went about my business. I went three times, got that same reception. I told my supervisor that night, he said, "Oh, what the hell, Mrs. Stafford, write her a note. Say that you've been out there three times. She'll get what's coming to her [she wouldn't get any assistance money]." I didn't say that much to her, but I wrote her a note. She called him up, she told him, "What are you doing sending a n-i-gg-er, out here? I won't have a nigger in my house." I said, "I probably wouldn't want to go in anyway." I'm sure she said it,

too, fat, sloppy and smelly. So he said, "Don't worry about it. I told her that you were the worker for that area. If she wants to get any assistance, she'll see you." Boy, those AFDC [Aid for Families of Dependent Children] women got good grants, you won't believe how much those women got! Today, I don't know how they live! They don't get very much. But this gal, especially with a house all of kids, her check would be twelve or fifteen hundred dollars a month. Boy! She was living on the fat of the land. That was way back, when things were cheap. We put a hold on her check. She had already been authorized for the grant, but I had to go out and verify. She called in [my supervisor], he said, "You know Mrs. Stafford is working in that area, and if you want help you'll have to see her." She said, "Just take me off, take me off!" He said, "Fine!" Then he told me, "Just put a hold on that check, she'll be back." She was back in a couple weeks. She called him and he said, "If you're ready to see Mrs. Stafford, she'll be out." It was the only house I went to that I had to come home and change clothes after visiting. Icky kids, and they came out and leaned on me. Except, we became good friends. At first, she had no choice, but she took to it gracefully.

Did other people have black clients, or were they just not served very much?

We had black clients before the war, they had one or two. I had a black gal tell me that once too. Boy, she was good looking. But, I think she had an excellent boyfriend and didn't really need AFDC. When I went to see her, she had a better robe than I have. She had a gorgeous robe, she looked well taken care of. She greeted me very grandly. You'd think I was asking her for something. We took her on.

What is your most significant experience as a social worker? What are you really proud of that you did?

There were so many, it's difficult to just pick out one. I'm really proud of everything that I did! I got along well with people, white people don't excite me. I've met people at Safeway who say you were my mother's caseworker, you were my grandmother's caseworker. I was young enough then to enjoy older people. Sometimes when I went over there, they had coffee and cake. We weren't suppose to, but I couldn't tell these people that I couldn't drink a cup of coffee with them. I really had nice clients. I had no problems with them. I can't remember if I ever had a black client.

I don't know why, but we [caseworkers] ended up going way out. We had one bad snow. I think it was 1950, any old-timer would remember. There was just a narrow path on the stairs [leading to her house]. The snow was about this deep [three feet]. I had snow tires put on my car. I had to go beyond Puyallup. I had a supervisor that was kind of snippety. She insisted that we go out. You go in that stuff, but I don't ever remember getting stuck in the snow. I had it up to my knees. You had to see people who applied for assistance, you couldn't just take their word for it. We had to see them, before we could send them a check. If someone was hungry or applied for care, you have to get out and see them. Most of the workers in that area were women at that time. Once it go so bad that we just refused to go out. We had a supervisor that was a real you know what! She said, "These people have got to be seen!" So, you can imagine, us out there alone, it got dark early and driving 15, 20, 25 miles. All of us went in one day and told her that we didn't think we should be asked to go out [in the snow]. [Helen's supervisor said] "I worked for a year in Alaska, and we always went out." One of the gals said, "I bet you weren't driving your own car!" "Well, no." "If anything happens to our cars or other people, we're responsible." So there were enough of us, that solved the problem [of us having to go out in bad snowy weather].

Why were you a part of the union organizing? I don't know, my husband was a big union man. Just nosy I guess - - and, too, you have a little more push when you're together, with all the people that were working there. I don't know why they were so late in affiliating with the union anyway! You don't have to join, now it's mandatory. There were some people who are still opposed to labor unions. But they are happy when the union gets them a raise. We're still active [retired union members] and we meet. We have different divisions, one at Western State; every state office can have their own division. The Pierce County Assistance [Department of Social and Health Services - Pierce County Office] had the largest, I'm sure we did, even though I didn't ever officially check. Pierce County is a large office. The Seattle Office, they have several divisions.

[Helen's first supervisor at DSHS] He lost it too - [trying to remember her supervisor's name]. He was a good guy for the job. I still know him. We had a banquet for the

retired employees' club. He comes to all the meetings. He always comes up and gives me a big hug. We were the originators of our union [Washington Public Employees Association, a division of AFSCME]. They are still growing and have thousands of workers now. But, I remember the first organizing meeting was at one of the restaurants in town. They had a big room, I was the only woman in the bunch. There must have been 15 or 20 men. **What year was that, do you remember?** No, but I could probably find the date. We didn't even have a union at that time. There was a national one, but they had not organized one before that time. **Being the only woman there, how did the guys feel about that?** Guys are alright. Its the women that are funny. I have no trouble with the men, none at all, none!

Did you get paid very well as a social worker? I think we did. **Do you think men got paid more than women?** In our department, they got paid the same. There were far more women caseworkers than men.

You were involved in lots of women's organizations, can you tell me about those? I told you about the Matron's Club, Sorority - A. K. A.. When I came here there wasn't a Chapter [Alpha Kappa Alpha]. Of course, there were no college graduates; how can you have a chapter. I have a niece who was doing work for the State in Seattle. She had lived on Fox Island, so she knew a lot of people. Our first sorority meeting was a combination of Tacoma and Seattle. I would drive over there to get parents to let their girls join. A lot of the girls' mothers didn't trust me much. I was a new-comer, but eventually, there was one other who wanted to join. She graduated with a Doctorate. She had graduated from Fisk. She wasn't too keen on it, but she said she would help. I had a niece who moved to Western Washington, she had some friends [who wanted to join]. You had to have ten to start a chapter. I finally got them together, and they expressed their interest in A. K. A.. I contacted the regional director in California. We had several meetings with the group here. I heard from her, that she was coming out.

Now, we have 50 members in Tacoma, and a lot of them belong to my church. Its nice! The sorority went national, I think in 1908 or 1909. The sorority director, she was going out to the national meeting, and she would stop here and give us an interview. That way, she would have a new chapter to introduce at the meeting. This doctor's wife,

smart gal - beautiful singer - strange! But that's how some people are! About one week before we were to be made, she decided not to do it. I had to get on the telephone, call San Francisco and tell the regional director that "I'm sorry but we lost one person. You don't need to come."

"But, I'm coming!" she said. "You'll just have to find somebody else! I made all my plans." So, the Lord was with me. We had a woman come up to visit from the South. She came up to marry a man that she met in Tacoma, but she had to work two or three years in the South. She'd be here for the summer. I got on the telephone [to call this woman]. She was not the kind of person who would want to join. She was older, not nearly as old as I am now. In fact, she was close to retiring, and that's why she still had to work in the South. She was to marry him, to be sure of him when she came back here to live. The registration [fee for the sorority] was \$50.00 even then. Of course, she had to ask him for it. He was a service man, I don't think she exactly said what it was, but she talked him into letting her join. She agreed to go with us to get the chapter started. The girl in California said, "You will do it!" She came on up. I think she is still living [the woman from the South]. We organized the chapter and have been going ever since.

What does your sorority do? We meet. It's not just a big club you know. When you're in college and you're a member, you have to have a certain grade point average. We started a graduate chapter. We mostly work with you [college student members] and we get scholarships. It gets people of like mind together. We meet once a month, down at the public library. We're getting ready to entertain the region now, which consists of Washington, California, all up and down the coast. We're having a meeting at the Sheraton and expect 400 or 500 people. We'll have a big open meeting and a party or something. Nationally, its really something! It isn't just something that's altogether social. Some of the stuff is secret. You'll like it I'm sure. **Secret! Why is it secret?** It's a secret organization. **I didn't know that.**

We have a password, you have to know that. If you see a sister in distress, it's up to you. I remember driving to California when Betty was a little girl, I had company with me. We were going to San Francisco, so I dropped them off. Something had happened

with my arrangements in San Francisco and I didn't have any place to stay. It was night, and here I am with this 3 or 4 year old little kid. The gals I had taken, their houses were full. One of the gals was a sorority sister said, "I think I know somebody that belongs to that group." We black people are kind of envious. If you're a college graduate and I'm not, then I don't like you. But this was one nice person, I think she's an A. K. A. So this gal got on the telephone and the person asked to talk to me. I told her my predicament. She said, "I work at night. I wish there was something I could do. Why don't I leave my key with the neighbor." I had told her it was me and my baby. She said, "What's a sorority sister for anyway? I'll leave a note for you, just come on in and make yourself at home." She said, "If I'm not there when you want to leave, just leave the key." I thanked her. I've never seen her. I've never seen her since. We left before she got home. She had a lovely home, clean as a pin and everything in order. She left bath towels and food and bedding. I went to bed, got up the next morning, left her key, and I've never seen the child since or heard from her since. **"Wow! That is a nice thing to do!"** It is. It's a fantastic thing to do! If you know someone you have no problems. **But, why is it secret?** I don't know. The white people started that. They have had secret sororities for years. Some black girls belong to the white chapters. I don't think I would have gone that far. We have a chapter at UPS [University of Puget Sound].

Living in Tacoma for a long time, there are a lot more blacks now. How did Tacoma change after World War II? That's when they came. We had an influx! **From the military?** All over - mostly the South. I found out recently that in the South they gave Negroes money to come up here. Yes, they did. **Who? The state or the nation?** I've known this one woman for years, I didn't know that's how they got here. But she told me. I believe when she came here she got a job as a teacher. They were not rich. I don't like seeing black teachers when they aren't ready. Does it bother you when you see black people in jobs that they aren't ready for? **Yes, it does.** Their English! I don't know why it bothers me. I think that if we are going to teach, we ought to be equal to the white people. Whatever they expect from white people, they should expect from us. **It bothers me when white people aren't competent, too!** I had a cousin who was the first black teacher in Los Angeles. Their people came to California when my people came to Kansas. [They arrived] early, right after the Civil War.

Has anyone in your family done a genealogy? My brother did, the one in Kansas City, Kansas. There's one in every family. He was quite a politician. He once met the President. When the President came to Kansas City, my brother was the one, he met him at the train. **Was that brother, James?** That was Earl. He was a lone gun. Some kids are just smart. He never graduated from college. I think he just had a couple of years. But the minute he came out of school, he and another fellow saved their money and bought a grocery store. They operated it for a long time, until he went into politics. So he knew all the politicians in Kansas City. The President was Truman. He was a Kansas City man. So, he and my brother were pretty good friends. Earl had a good job. When he worked at the YMCA for a while, he remembered [sic] the Presidents and the officers in Kansas City. They had a boys club, most of the boys were black. It was for incorrigible boys. They built this beautiful home for the black boys, outside of Kansas City. It was so nice that when it came time to open it, Kansas City wouldn't let them. It was too nice. They didn't want to give it to the black boys. It stood empty for a year or two. So when Mr. Truman became President, and came to Kansas City, my brother told him what the situation was. Mr Truman saw to it that they opened this home for those boys. When my brother left it, he retired, it was one of the finest homes in the state. They had vegetables, cows, and chickens.

It sounds like your family was politically active? Well, that brother was. The brother who lived here [James] wasn't particularly interested. The other two brothers worked in hotels or for the railroads. They both made good money. They had nice families.

Did you ever have family reunions? We never have. We talked about it. Now my grand-daughter who lives in Portland has get-togethers. She says she is going to organize a reunion. [Helen shows me pictures of her grandchildren and great grandchildren. The pictures are sitting on a buffet in her dining room. We talk about her grandchildren.]

Of all the things you have accomplished what are the greatest? Oh heavens, my God! My grandchildren and great grandchildren! All of the grand-kids have finished

college. I hope the little ones will. [More stories about grandchildren and great grandchildren. Mrs. Stafford spends Christmas with her grandchildren.] The church gave me a surprise party for my 90th birthday. They invited all the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They were all here. Betty's ex-husband, but he's just like my own son. Reverend Ellis Kasen, pastor of our second largest church in Los Angeles [an A.M.E Church].

Have you been back to Kansas? I've even been back to the little town where I was born. Because my parents and some of my brothers and sisters are buried there. Kansas City is not that far from this little town only 50, 60, or 70 miles, which is not long now. But it was, when I was a kid. My brother asked me if I wanted to go see the family plot. I don't think we've lived there since about 1920, maybe, or 25. Would you believe that we found our family plot in this little town! Well kept! My mother buried there, my father buried, and the three kids buried. **It's all marked and everything?** [Mrs. Stafford nods in agreement] mmm-hmm. **This little town is it still there, thriving?** It was when I was there, but that was about 25 years ago.

Why don't you tell me more about how Tacoma changed after World War II? We have become more receptive, although we're still black and white. I think Tacoma has done pretty good. When I first came here, I was in the NAACP ever since it was organized. I can remember some of those organizers came to the town when I was in high school. Of course, in those days kids liked to be helpful. So they had hired us for one of these big banquets. The NAACP came in and one of the originals from the organization came and spoke. They had a big gathering for him at one of the homes. A lot of rich blacks in attendance. This was a lawyer's [the home owner] and they had a great big home. I remember it was a snowy day, they picked out some high school girls to come wait tables. I got picked, that's how I first found out about the NAACP.

When I came out here, they had one, but it [NAACP] was sort of dying on the vines. So I got busy in that and I was president for a while. I was always interested in the NAACP. We were trying to integrate. I remember, we went downtown and talked to the stores that had no black help. Safeway is the one that I remember that we talked about them having some black people work in their stores. They'd promise you most anything, and

nothing would come of it. Even at that time there were quite a few black people in this area. So we went up to them and said that, if you don't hire some black people, we're going to picket your store. We gave a day and a date when we were going to picket them. I think it was one Monday. On the Sunday before that, they hired a black girl. **They didn't want that.** That's right, and they've been hiring them ever since. The NAACP has done a lot of good things. I'm all for them. **Did you have any boycotts of stores?** We just threaten them. We never had to. Gradually they began employing black people.

I was out at one of the big stores at the Mall one day, Nordstrom's, or one of them. I just happened to notice this black fellow talking to one of the white guys. I realized that he was one of the clerks. You know how you do when you go to a shoe store, you go in and have a seat and wait for them [for one the clerks to come help you]. This guy, I'll never forget it, looked up and saw me and had business elsewhere. The white fellow came to try on shoes. It was so obvious that this fellow wasn't going to have anything to do with me. I thought to myself, you little b-a-s-t-a-r-d. If he knew what we went through to get him that job.

What else has the NAACP done, because often this stuff is not written down? NAACP, they keep the history, they still do that. Often, you'll see something in the newspapers every now and then.

Did you have in Tacoma, any desegregation of schools, busing, or any of that? Not that I remember. Things sort of opened up after the war [World War II]. Betty was born in 1935. She was the first black kid [in her school]. Not only that, but for several years. When she was ready to go to high school, she came home one day and said she wanted to stay in glee club at school. She was active in music. She told me that we were in the Stadium [high school] District. But she heard that the teacher at Stadium didn't want any black kids in his chorus. I told her, "We'll have to find out about that." I talked to some of my white friends and it was true. He didn't tell anybody that he didn't want any black kids. He just didn't have any. But Betty said to me, "Maybe, you can get me into Lincoln. They have a music department." The music department was wonderful. The woman who was the head of it had no prejudice at all. So, I had to

write a letter to the school board to see if Betty could go to Lincoln. If you lived in that district that's where you went to school. They let her go to Lincoln. She was in the glee club. She played the piano for the orchestra. She liked Lincoln. She was on the honor roll out there. **She didn't have any trouble participating in sports or anything like that?** Betty, I don't know where I got her, osmosis or something like that. I don't remember telling her that she was as good as anybody else. She doesn't even know that she is colored. You know she still doesn't. When she graduated in the seventh grade [from junior high], the kids always had a party before they went to high school. She asked if she could invite some kids over. I said, "Sure!" There wasn't a black kid in the bunch. But there were very few black kids up here. She didn't know she was colored. **She must know now!** I don't think so, I don't think so. Because when I hear her talk to the people at her job. [Helen shakes her head in disapproval.] They retire you before you're already. I never minced words with her.

She came home one day from school, we had buried Staff several weeks before that, she said, "I think I'll go out and get a job." I had visions of her going out and washing dishes for some white lady. There is no disgrace to the work. I said, "Where would you find a job?" She said, "Well, most of my friend work at the library as pages." I thought oh-oh, she's going to get refused. I said, "If you want to apply its fine with me." I thought no more about it. Then one day I got a call. She didn't tell me when she was going. [The caller said] "Mrs. Stafford, this is so and so, and so and so at the library." It was a woman I had met at the League of Women Voters. "I told Betty to bring her grades in, and if they are okay enough we'll put her to work." They did. She worked there all the time she was in high school. She went to Pullman [Washington State University], she worked in the library. She and Ellis married. They moved to San Francisco, she worked in the San Francisco library. Los Angeles. That's all she's ever done. Well, it pays to talk sometime.

So, you must be pretty proud of her? Yes, I am, yes, I am. Although she foiled my attempts when she was a sophomore in college. She wrote me from Pullman, Ellis and I are going to get married. I said, "Betty I want you to finish school." She said, "I'll keep on going to school." Well, I heard that before. Better to get married than to have a baby out of wedlock. Ellis was just out of the service. He was pastoring at a small church over

there, somewhere. I said, "If that's what you want, but if you marry you're on your own." That didn't bother them. So they got married. I'll show you a picture of her in her wedding dress. I gave them a nice wedding. It was at a hotel downtown, the Winthrop Hotel, it was there at night. It is where the Presidents stayed when they came to town. I remember when Marian Anderson had been here several years before, they very reluctantly gave her a room, but they said she can't eat in the dining room. She said heck with that and she stayed in Seattle. So, this was several years after, I'll see if I can try to have Betty's reception at the Winthrop. So, we had the wedding reception on the tenth floor, whatever the top floor is. It was fantastic, fantastic! **You threw a big party for her?** Yes, I did. What did that guy ask me, if I wanted any booze. I said, "I think we can do without that, a nice punch will do. I don't think good Methodists should be serving booze."

Speaking of the Methodist, how did the church influence your life? I admire the A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] because they grew out of the experience of black people in Philadelphia. They had been attending this Methodist church and sitting anywhere they wanted to, then one Sunday they went in and the deacon or somebody asked them to sit upstairs. They walked out. That was the beginning of the A. M. E. Church. I always admire anybody with guts. I was born in the A. M. E. Church. Of course, when you're a kid you go wherever your parents take you. I was christened when I was 6 days old. I've been a member ever since. My father was the superintendent of the Sunday school and my older sister played the organ. My mother was a stewardess, so that's all I know. Its the oldest black church in the country. They have some tremendous members and ministers. I had an uncle who was a minister in the A. M. E. Church.

One of my church brothers, my oldest, went to the university to become a bishop. He became a bishop. When my husband died and his wife died, we thought about getting married. He was as old as my brother. He could have been my father. I probably should have. He was a neat guy. In fact, he sent me this ring. But, it really just didn't seem to work. Betty was just a girl. I've heard about stepfathers molesting girls, even though he was a minister. I thought, you never know.

Why didn't you ever marry again, after Betty left home? You must have had lots of suitors? You'd be surprised at how few college men there were twenty or thirty years ago. That shouldn't have made any difference to me. **But, what about military men?** There were lots of them, but they came and went. Nobody asked me. I had some dates with nice men out there. But most of them were married, their wives just weren't here. **Did that bother you not getting married again?** Not particularly, except that it's a lonely life sometimes. I had a white fellow come on to me, my dentist too [I turned off the tape so that she could tell me the dentist story]. There isn't a day that I don't have someplace to go, sometimes two or three places to go. Which is alright. Its better than sitting here and vegetating.

Do you having any hobbies or other activities besides all these meetings? My daughter and I have season tickets to the symphony. Tonight the conductor from Portland is going to be here. The conductor is black. They have the best music. There are only about three or four other blacks [who attend the symphony]. **Maybe the tickets are too expensive for them?** Oh no! You buy the tickets for the season or select individual shows. You may have to sacrifice. We have many black people in town who are very wealthy. I have a good friend, once my husband couldn't go at that time, I said to this woman, "Would you like to go?" She said, "What is a symphony concert? All them fiddles!" [We both laugh.] Well, the only way you find out is by asking.

I belong to a bridge club, I was one of the founders of Bridge club in Tacoma. Bridge has changed. Now, its just like life and death. It [Bridge] just doesn't matter that much to me, but I still go. Today, with all of the rules in Bridge, you have to study. I don't have time for that. There are so many new rules. You get points, they have a newsletter, you get famous, a national organization, you get the book. [shrugs it off]. **Its serious?** Serious! Would you believe, even now in our group we has some division members. In our group, you have a leader, when its your turn to play, I forget and you hear, "Mr. Director," and he bawls you out. You loose points. Life is too short for all that! I had a good partner, she got out of the club. She didn't even tell me. She said, "Nobody going to tell me what to do."

[Mrs. Stafford starts talking about a friend who has had many husbands, they have all died, but she doesn't tell her age.] How could I have lived here for seventy years and be 55. If you got children, grandchildren, and great-grand children, you can't be young.

I can't complain, I'm lucky to be able to take care of myself at the age of 93. **What's your secret to staying healthy?** I think your health depends on your family background. I must have inherited my father's long age. My father was almost one hundred when he died. I apparently must have taken from his side of the family. When I finished school he retired, so he stayed with many of the kids. He even came out and stayed here for three years when Betty was a baby. My mother died when she was young. My father was staying with my sister in Texas, he was at the breakfast table one day, he collapsed and died. He walked so proudly in the later years, he was ashamed when he had to use a cane. He ran away to the army when he was 15.

On Aging

*...When my bones are still and aching
and my feet won't climb the stairs,
I will only ask one favor:
Don't bring me no rocking chair...*

Maya Angelou

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