

TAPE TRANSCRIPT
Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project
Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, NC

Interviewee: Beulah Mason
511 Hyde Park
Durham, NC

Interviewer: Spencie Love
2516 Millwood Court
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

Place: St. Joseph's AME Church
2521 Fayetteville Street
Durham, NC 27707

Equipment: SONY MZ-R700 Minidisk
Sony microphone ECM-907

Tape: SONY MD-80 Tape

Date: January 19, 2004

Description of Interviewees:

Circumstances of the Interview:

Spencie Love (SL): This is Miss Beulah Mason, and Spencie Love is interviewing her today. We are in Durham, North Carolina, and this is part of the Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project. Ms Mason has come to an event she comes to every year, and maybe you could just start by telling a little bit about what you come to, and when you started visiting here.

Beulah Mason (BM): I just come every year. I always get a letter from Ms Lottie Hayes, telling me about what they're going to do and what to expect when you get here, and the date and everything. Of course, it's usually on Martin Luther King's birthday, anyway. But we come and we sit around and we have lunch and we--there are people here that remember some parts of the marching and demonstrating. They will contribute what they remember. And then we have a speaker or something and then we go home.

SL: Now how do you know--

BM: Lottie Hayes.

SL: How do you know her?

BM: I've known her for all my life. We used to attend the same church, but we don't now.

SL: Which church was that?

BM: Mount Zion.

SL: The one you were talking about earlier?

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: So how long has this been going on?

BM: I don't know, really. I've come to, I think I've come to about five. Ever since I heard about it, I've come to it. Because I'm interested in things like that.

SL: Could you tell a little bit about--when were you born?

BM: January 6, 1936.

SL: January what?

BM: Sixth.

SL: January sixth. So we're real close to your birthday.

BM: Uh-huh. Yeah, it was two weeks ago.

SL: And you were born here in Durham?

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: What part of town? Do you live right here in the city?

BM: Actually, it was right near where we are.

SL: Really?

BM: Right down that street down there, Burlington Avenue.

SL: Your parents both were from here, or--

BM: Mm.

SL: Were you born in the hospital?

BM: No.

SL: Born at home?

BM: At home. My mom had ten children, and we was all born at home. She always had a-- what you call it?--midwife to deliver. She never went in the hospital to have any of us.

SL: And where were you in the family, out of the ten? Are you one of the older one, or younger ones?

BM: Older ones. I'm the third from the oldest. No, the fourth from the oldest.

SL: What was your mother's name?

BM: Terry Mason.

SL: Terry Mason. So you grew up and went to schools here in Durham?

BM: Yes.

SL: I believe you were telling us earlier about, you were at Hillside High School?

BM: I went two years at Hillside, and then they switched the line to the city-county line, and we had to go to Merrick Moore because we lived in the county. So I went two years at Hillside and two years at Merrick Moore. I graduated Merrick Moore. I forgot what year that was. It's been a long time ago.

SL: Well, let's see, that makes you--you look too young to be more than 1936. You do. People must tell you that--other people.

BM: Well, yeah, but I was doing like that because I was saying I am--

SL: You are that old.

BM: I'm 68. Became 68 two weeks ago.

SL: What do you remember--I want to go back to your life, but you were talking earlier to the folks in the other room, about what you remembered about the movement. What are your memories here in Durham?

BM: Well, I didn't participate. My parents wouldn't let me participate. They were scared, and I was scared, too, actually. Cause some people were getting shot and beat up, and all kind of things.

SL: How old were you?

BM: I was in high school. I remember some of the marches and stuff, and stuff they showed on TV. But like I said, I didn't participate in any of it, and I remember the sit-down at Kress's. And I remember something going on in Greensboro. I think it was a sit-down over there, too. Sit-in. And about how they treated Martin Luther King and his family in Alabama.

SL: ()

BM: I heard about it, but I didn't participate.

SL: You were in high school when this was going on. What do you remember hearing? How do you remember even knowing--because your friends were talking about it?

BM: Well, it was on TV, and that's all you'd hear. Everybody talking about it.

SL: Everybody was talking about it.

BM: Everybody. This was a change in the history of stuff.

SL: Yeah. Did you know people who had participated?

BM: Not really.

SL: You were maybe younger than some that were participating, cause a lot of them were college age.

BM: Yeah, college and the high-schoolers participated. They was in the marches and stuff.

SL: But not people you knew?

BM: No, not that I can remember.

SL: But you remember hearing a lot about it, and knowing it was going on?

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: And it was scary.

BM: It was scary. Didn't know what to expect.

SL: And your parents said, no, you can't.

BM: They didn't say we couldn't, but they said don't do it, don't participate in it. Cause they were scared for us. And I was scared, too, actually. But I was interested in it, to see what would come of it. And I remember one Christmas, we boycotted stores and things, and did not shop.

Mr.--that was amazing, cause I didn't think that many people was going to come back and shop. Especially at Christmas time. But it was amazing, the numbers that participated.

SL: And it sounds like you participated in that.

BM: My parents, I told you, wouldn't even let us go in the area where it was happening, because they were scared for us. So we didn't--of course you know, we didn't go to the stores, cause that's where they were participating.

SL: Right, right. Well, in that boycott, did they have people with signs up, saying "Don't buy here?"

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: And then there probably was some violence, even downtown, maybe.

BM: Yeah. And they locked up a bunch of folks.

SL: You just stayed away?

BM: Yeah.

SL: You participated in that way. What do you remember--do you have any memory of like when you first heard about the movement, the very first time, or on TV, or--

BM: They talked about it in the schools and things. And on the news, it was telling about what was happening with Martin Luther King.

SL: Do you remember the Montgomery Bus Boycott? Hearing about that?

BM: A little bit, uh-huh.

SL: You must have been a lot younger then.

BM: Yeah.

SL: Because that was fifty--

BM: I think I was in my teens during this whole time.

SL: During the whole time. So it really shaped you.

BM: Mm-hm. And I thought those people were really brave to walk and stuff, and walk to their jobs and not get on the bus. And what's that lady's name, that sat down and wouldn't get up.

SL: Rosa Parks?

BM: Right, I thought that was very brave of her, cause she could have gotten killed.

SL: Yeah, yeah.

BM: And a lot of people say that she sat there because she was--well, that was the beginning of the sit-in and stuff, but actually I saw her in person at North Carolina Central, a few years back,

and she said the reason why she sat there, cause she was tired and it was a seat available, and she didn't understand, didn't see where she needed to get up to let somebody else sit down when she was tired--had worked all day, and was tired. And so she sat there, and then they put her through all these changes and stuff. I think she was a brave lady. I would have been scared.

SL: I gathered, though, that when they asked her to move, she said no.

BM: She said no, and she said she said no cause she was tired. And she couldn't understand why she had to get up to give somebody else her seat.

SL: Right. Do you remember the buses being like that--segregated buses?

BM: In Durham?

SL: Mm-hm.

BM: Sure. Yeah, we got to sit in the back.

SL: Do you remember--

BM: I don't remember any incidents happening from that, though, cause I guess we just knew that we were supposed to go in the back, or whatever. Then somebody decided not to go in the back.

SL: Do you remember a lot of other things about segregation?

BM: Uh-uh. I'm talking about the ones I do remember.

SL: You remember the buses?

BM: That was it. I remember the bus station that was downtown, how they had one side for the white and one side for the black. And I never understood that. Matter of fact, I never understood any of the segregation. Didn't make sense to me. All the rules were just stupid.

SL: What did you parents say about it?

BM: Like what?

SL: I mean, did they teach you, you've got to obey this stuff, because you'll be in trouble if you don't?

BM: Not really. We were used to going in the back, going in the side, or going in wherever it said "For Colored." And we'd just go in.

SL: You just did it because that's what you grew up doing.

BM: That's what I grew up doing.

SL: Yeah. But then, when the movement came along, I guess that made you think about it differently.

BM: Sure.

SL: It was like a big weight that ().

BM: It was like, this is real stupid. (laughs) It's like this lady said, is there a difference in the taste of the water or what? You've got your white water, and you've got your black water. What's the difference? Just, you know, you've been put in that place to participate with the black water, and not in the black seating area and stuff like that. That didn't make no sense. None.

SL: But it's kind of like a lot of people didn't really think about it until the movement came along.

BM: Mm-hm. That's what I think.

SL: You know, it really woke people up and made them think about it all differently. Of course, that was the really formative age for you, being a teenager, and having it all happening right them.

BM: Mm-hm. Yeah.

SL: So you finished school about when? When did you get out of school?

BM: I've forgot, it's been so long. I think it was in the '60s.

SL: Late '60s? Do you remember--

BM: No, not late '60s. Early--late '50s.

SL: Late '50s.

BM: I think it was in the '50s, I forget. Been so long.

SL: Well, what you were remembering, though, like the sit-ins, that was mostly '60, '61.

BM: That was?

SL: Well, the bus boycott--

BM: Well, I might have graduated by that time. But I remember marches, and I was in high school then at Hillside. I remember that. And I remember the marches that was taking place, when they was organizing the march. And I was in high school when I got the information and stuff.

SL: Were there a lot of Hillside students in it?

BM: The whole school participated.

SL: The whole school?

BM: Faculty and everybody.

SL: They were in the march?

BM: Parents, too, if they wanted to.

SL: In the marches?

BM: Yeah. Anybody that wanted to. But Hillside was just one of the schools that I remember being in it. But anybody could march that wanted to. Old, young.

SL: Right. All ages. But you say you didn't at the time, cause you were scared, or your parents said not to?

BM: I didn't participate. Cause my parents ().

SL: Were they pretty strict?

BM: Well, I didn't think they were too strict. What they did was for our own good. I don't think they were strict or mean or anything like that. We respected their wishes. Didn't see nothing wrong with it.

SL: But they both said no way, we don't want you to--

BM: My mom, mostly.

SL: Now, was your father around then?

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: But he also--

BM: He just died a few years ago. He was 92 when he died.

SL: What was his name?

BM: Paul Mason.

SL: And what did you parents do? What kind of work did they do?

BM: My dad worked in a factory. That's been so long, I've about forgot where he was at. Both of them worked in the factory.

SL: Cigarette factory?

BM: Mm-hm. Liggett and Myers.

SL: What kind of work have you done? What do you do?

BM: I've done lots of work.

SL: Lots of different things?

BM: Mm-hm. Mostly getting an education. I've spent a lot of time educating myself.

SL: That's great.

BM: Right now, I'm in a computer class for the seniors. I just move from one thing to another, whatever I think I can benefit from. I'm retired.

SL: When you worked, what did you do?

BM: Hmm--what did I do? I don't even remember?

SL: Did you have children?

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: How many children?

BM: I had three kids.

SL: Are they around this area?

BM: No.

SL: Did they move to different places?

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: They're grown, obviously.

BM: They're grown, uh-huh. I have three kids and three grandkids.

SL: That's great. That's wonderful. So, I want to hear more about your music. Your singing.

BM: Well, I'm not a professional singer.

SL: No, that's--

BM: I tell you, I just bought that book in case Oren Marsh needs some ideas on what to sing and stuff.

SL: Now, is he the choir leader?

BM: I think Lottie put him in charge of the music for this occasion. Cause he usually is here when we have the reunion.

SL: Did you grow up going to church? Do you remember singing these songs?

BM: No, we didn't sing them. That's just a book of songs that I got, that I bought that I wanted to have. I don't sing out of it. I don't sing music, I just--some songs I like, and Oren can play them, and I--

SL: If he can play them, you can sing them.

BM: Not really. No, it ain't that professional (laughs). Cause Oren can play anything.

SL: Really?

BM: Yeah.

SL: Now, how do you know him? From coming to this, or--

BM: We went to school together.

SL: You went to school together.

BM: Mm-hm. I've known him all my life.

SL: And what church did you go to?

BM: Mount Zion.

SL: Mount Zion. You don't go there any more do you?

BM: I'm there.

SL: You still go.

BM: Yeah.

SL: I think I drove--isn't it on Fayetteville Road?

BM: That's right.

SL: It's a big church.

BM: It's a big church, and little White Rock.

SL: Yeah, it's--

BM: It's not all that big.

SL: Not huge.

BM: Compared to White Rock. White Rock's bigger than ().

SL: White Rock's a lot older.

BM: Mm-hm, it is.

SL: But Mount Zion looks like it's a very well funded church, really well organized.

BM: Well. No comment. (laughs)

SL: How long have you been going there?

BM: We're struggling. All my life.

SL: All your life. I mean, the building looks pretty new, is what I'm seeing.

BM: Oh, yeah. And the Family Life Center is just--well, it's not really completed inside, but it's newer than the sanctuary.

SL: So, do you remember any of the leaders during that time? Hearing people speak--you know, during the boycotts and the marches?

BM: I heard that lady who I was talking about that sat down. I heard her, she came and spoke to us.

SL: Rosa Parks?

BM: Rosa Parks. I attended that. That was way after all of the movements and stuff. She was an old lady, she could barely get around.

SL: I'm trying to remember if she's still alive. She was alive.

BM: The last I heard, she was, but she was old. I haven't heard anything about her now.

SL: What do you remember about Martin Luther King? Do you remember seeing him on TV?

BM: Marching and speaking.

SL: Do you remember when he died?

BM: I remember when he got killed. Got shot.

SL: Where were you that day?

BM: Probably in school. I don't know.

SL: But you remember--

BM: A lot of this stuff is--

SL: You remember it.

BM: --you know, I forget

SL: Mm-hm.

BM: But I remember when he got shot, I remember the day he got shot. I remember when the president got shot too, Kennedy.

SL: Both of those times are times that people sometimes will say, "Well, I remember I was in my middle school phys ed class," or whatever. They know--

BM: I forgot where I was at. I remember hearing it, though.

SL: That was a shock.

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: Big shock.

BM: Cause Kennedy was--wasn't Kennedy the first one got shot, and then Martin Luther King. And that was (.). Wow, they shot the president.

SL: November 22, 1963.

BM: Mm-hm.

SL: And of course, Martin Luther King, I believe it was April 5th, 1968.

BM: They said he would have been 70--I think it's 78, I believe.

SL: If he were alive.

BM: If he was alive.

SL: Yeah.

BM: Then I said, well, he's ten years older than me.

SL: So how do we keep all this alive now?

BM: Which part of are you talking about?

SL: The movement.

BM: Keep the movement? How do we keep it alive?

SL: Yeah.

BM: I have no idea. (laughs) Do you think that--I don't see a need to keep it alive. Are you talking about the history of it, keeping that alive?

SL: Yeah, uh-huh.

BM: Oh, okay. Yeah, I think that's a need to keep it alive.

SL: Well, what I really wish is you could just--tell me which songs you like on here. Just tell me the ones you like.

BM: () (Papers rustling)

SL: Maybe we could tape you later, if you sing. ()

BM: Yeah, you can tape me. Mm-hm. I don't care if you tape with the music. I don't want to sing ().

SL: Which ones do you like of those songs?

BM: I like all the ones that I know.

SL: Which ones do you know?

BM: Not too many of them.

SL: Do you remember when you first heard these?

BM: Uh-uh. "Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," my version of it.

SL: Which one?

BM: "Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray."

SL: I haven't heard that one.

BM: "Deep River," and "Every Time I Feel the Spirit." "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," and "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."

SL: You know all those?

BM: Mm-hm. "Were You There?" Those are the ones I know.

SL: Mm-hm. Well, he's got to get you to sing today.

BM: He'll--you know if he's here. He usually is here. Sometimes he has to leave before the program goes, so he rushes through it and get on out of here. But Lottie--

SL: With your grandchildren and children coming along, what would you want to tell them about segregation and about the movement?

BM: I'm glad it's over.

SL: You're glad it's over.

BM: (laughs)

SL: Segregation.

BM: Yeah, segregation, I'm glad it's over.

SL: Yeah. You're glad it ended. Have you ever--is it something you'd want them to know about, or not want them to know about?

BM: ()

SL: I mean, a lot of the--

BM: Cause what we was trying to accomplish, we've accomplished most of it. And they can benefit from it. They won't have to go through that.

SL: So what would you want them to know about the movement?

BM: I don't know. Like what?

SL: What it was like. Do you think it's important to pass on that history?

BM: I haven't even given it a thought. Like I said, I'm just glad it's over.

SL: Mm-hm. Just glad it's over.

BM: And that things are better from it. Sometimes these young people, they don't believe that a lot of that stuff that's being said really happened, anyway.

SL: They don't believe it really happened?

BM: I don't think they believe it.

SL: No.

BM: They say no.

SL: It couldn't have been like that.

BM: Couldn't have been like that, and it's impossible to treat somebody like that. I've heard some say that. And then they would say, well, why did you all do it, if that was the case, why did you do it? That's a good question.

SL: Why was it like that? How did it come about?

BM: Why was it like that, and why did we do those things? Well, see, they don't understand that. I'm getting tired now, you can turn that off.

SL: Okay. I want you to just finish your sentence. What do they not understand? What would you want them to understand?

BM: Nothing, really. But like I said, it's over. We can just move on and forget about it.

SL: Good to ().

BM: Mm-hm. I think what you all are doing is good.

SL: You think () record it.

BM: Put it in the history book, yeah.

SL: Keep it.

BM: Yeah, I think that's good. But nothing particular. If they read it, then they'll know it's for real. That it did happen, you know. And not dwell on it, just go on and live your life. And be happy about it.

SL: Yeah. Well, thank you so much.

BM: So, I think this is a beautiful you all are doing to get this into the history.

SL: Well, thank you. I'm so glad that you came with these songs, and I really hope you're going to sing all the ones you know.

BM: It ain't going to take that long, with me singing those songs. (laughs)

SL: I hope you sing every one of them.

BM: I don't know what Owen has.

SL: He might have some planned already.

BM: Don't know.

SL: And he's coming at 11:30--about an hour from now?

BM: Yeah. I reckon he'll be here at 11:30. We have lunch at 11:30.

SL: He may get here earlier. We might talk to him before then.

BM: Mm-hm.

END OF TAPE