

Oral History Project

Mrs. Lola H. Hendricks

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Code: Huntley [H] Hendricks [He]

H: As you well know, what we're attempting to do is to develop, really, a history of Birmingham through the struggle with individuals like yourself who were participants of the Movement. And we'll start with a number of questions, and then we'll get into questions about the Movement itself.

He: Okay.

H: Let me first get a little background.

He: Okay.

H: Where were your parents from? Were both from Birmingham?

He: No, neither were from Birmingham. My mother was born in Standing Rock, Alabama, and my father was born in La Grange, Georgia.

H: And you were born in Birmingham?

He: Yes.

H: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

He: I have only one sister.

H: One sister. Were you the older?

He: I'm the oldest.

H: You're the oldest. What about education—your parents' education?

He: I don't think either one of them finished high school. Went to elementary, that's all.

H: Okay. What were their occupations?

He: My mother was a cook, and my father worked for a coal company as a truck driver.

H: Did she work outside of the home for other people?

He: Yes she did.

H: Did she live in the home for the people that she worked for? Or did she live at home?

He: No, she lived at home with the family.

H: Okay.

He: She would leave us and go to work every day.

H: What about your education? How much education do you have?

He: I finished Parker High School, and I have two years of Booker T. Washington Business College.

H: Tell me a little about Booker T. Washington Business College. What did you do there?

He: At Booker T. Washington Business College, I took Business Administration. We had Business Law, Shorthand, Typing, English.

H: Then you were clerical.

He: Yes.

H: Then I assume that your occupation was in that area?

He: Yes, it was.

H: Tell me a little about what you did, and who did you work for?

He: Okay. After finishing Booker T. Washington Business College, I started working for Alexander & Company, and I worked for them until 1963, when I went into the Federal Government, and Social Security Administration.

H: Alexander & Company was an insurance company.

He: Right.

H: And you worked there as a...

He: As a clerk-typist and insurance writer.

H: And then you went to work for the government. What did you do for the government?

He: I started working in files. That was the beginning of the integration. And they were bringing us in at those very low grades. I started in files, and I worked in files for about two years. And then I was promoted to Clerk Typing and Award Typing. And after that, I worked for Quality Appraisal as a Secretary and Unit Clerk. I stayed with Social Security until 1967. I left in 1967 and went to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and worked for them as a secretary and then a Supervisor of Control and Equal Employment Technician and, eventually, Equal Employment Opportunity Specialist. So I stayed with them from 1967 to 1983. And in '83 I took a break in service because my mother got ill and I took care of her. I went back to Social Security in 1988 and I worked until I retired.

H: Well you started working at Social Security in the mid [19]60's. That meant that you were probably one of the first [African American administrative employees].

He: Yes.

H: Can you tell me about that? How did you get hired?

He: Okay. Yes, I was among the first to come into the Federal Government. And the reason I know that is when I started working and was promoted upstairs to Award typing, I sat in front of a White female who was very nice and she shared with me the things that they were told when they were getting ready to bring us into the Building. She said, 'Lola, I have no problem with people who are a different color, but some of these people here are very prejudiced.' And she went on to name the different people in the office to watch out for. She said, 'They called us together at a meeting after they started bringing Blacks in, and told us that the Federal Government was now beginning to bring Blacks on here in the city of Birmingham to work, and if we started any disruption or caused any racial encounters here, that they were going to fire us.' And she said, of course, that wasn't received too well by many people. And, so, she told me the things I needed to watch out for and the people to be careful about.

H: And they actually warned White people that were there if they participated in any way [in opposing integration of the work force], they would be fired.

He: Yes, they did. They warned them.

H: Did you have to take a test?

He: Yes, I took a test for the federal service and passed it and was selected off the register.

H: Were there any efforts prior to your being hired to take tests for either jobs or for getting the right to vote? Did you take any test prior to that?

He: No.

H: Did you know other people that were taking tests at the same time?

He: Yes, yes. There were others who took tests at the same time particularly in the County Personnel Board. Dr. Jonathan McPherson, who is pastor at St. John in Hueytown, he passed. He was on the staff at Miles College at the time and he passed all of those tests, and he was never hired. And also Reverend George Johnson took tests to be a policeman, and he was never hired. Any number of Blacks—

H: They actually passed the test.

He: Yes.

H: How did they know they passed the test?

He: Well they got letters saying they were on the register. They were given their scores and they were on the Personnel Register.

H: So their names simply remained on the list, but they were never called.

He: Yes, but never selected.

H: What community did you live in during the time that you were growing up?

He: During the time that I was growing up, we lived on the Southside, primarily over in the area of Fourth Avenue and about Fifteenth Street South. And when I finished Parker High School we were living in the Norwood section. And, then, after I got married, during the Movement time, we lived at 842 Centerway Southwest in the Titusville area.

H: How would you describe the different communities that you lived in—racial make-up, occupation of people there, recreation, different organizations that may have been available?

He: Both neighborhoods were all Black. No Whites in the neighborhood. I guess you would say in the Titusville area the income level was a lot higher than it was when I lived on the Southside and in Norwood. It was very low-income people there.

H: Southside had the low income?

He: Right, right. In Titusville the income level from their community was a lot higher. And as far as recreations.... In the two, Norwood and Southside, there was nothing that I was made aware of as a child that was available to us in that community, but over in the Titusville area, when we moved over there, Memorial Park was available, which was at that time a Black park.

H: Which Park was that?

He: Memorial Park.

H: What kind of activities did they have at Memorial Park?

He: I'm not sure if they had the swimming pool at that time, but I know they had the park where you played ball, picnics and games out there on the field.

H: And the swimming pool came later?

He: The swimming pool I think came later...right.

H: What about occupations in the various communities?

He: In the Southside and the Norwood communities, most people were either maids or janitors—the low paying jobs. In the Titusville area, we had a mixture of teachers, doctors, lawyers, a lot better.

H: Were there any steel workers in either community?

He: I'm sure there were some steel workers in the Titusville area, but on the North side and South side of town, where I lived there on Fourth Avenue, there were none.

H: What was your community's relationship to the Birmingham Police Department?

He: It was nothing during the early years. Things have improved since the Civil Rights Movement for the police department. Our relationship with the police department has improved.

H: Some suggest that the police department was there to protect and serve. Is this the impression that you had of the police department?

He: No, I did not have that impression, no. Because I didn't ever remember seeing policemen in the neighborhood where I lived in Norwood or on the Southside. They weren't around there. I guess it was a neighborhood where nothing happened where they had to call the Police or anything, but I just don't ever remember seeing policemen when I was younger.

H: Were you a member of any community organizations after you grew up, particularly in the Titusville area? If so, what kind of organizations were you involved in?

He: Okay. I was a member of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and I also was a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a member of NAACP, and the Southern Conference Educational Fund. I became a member of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights after they were organized, after the NAACP was outlawed.

H: Were you all founding members of the Alabama Christian Movement?

He: Well, I don't think I was a founding member, but I started the second meeting.

H: Oh, I see. What was the second meeting like?

He: The second meeting was very impressive, because it was at a time when I think that all of us who attended that mass meetings were aware that things were bad in Birmingham and it was not getting any better and that it was time for us to do something about trying to make things better for Blacks in Birmingham. The first meeting was at Sardis [Baptist Church] and this one was at New Pilgrim [Baptist Church], and we had a lot of ministers and people who were motivational speakers to motivate you to see where all the wrongs were and how we were being mistreated and we couldn't get jobs and we could not go to parks and do a lot of things in Birmingham that Whites were allowed to do. So, this was quite impressive to those of us that attended.

H: Were you afraid at all to attend the Movement meetings?

He: Never. I never had any fear. I felt that if the bombings or shootings or whatever was going to happen, it just happened, because we were treated like we were second-class citizens.

H: Did you hold any office in either of the organizations?

He: Yes. In the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, I served as Correspondence Secretary for that organization.

H: How and why did you get involved in the Civil Rights Movement?

He: The reason why I became involved in the organization was the one thing that had bothered me since I heard about or read about in the paper—a gentleman by the name of Judge Aaron, who was attacked by some White men in Tarrant City. I was very upset about that because they didn't know nothing about the man. They just picked him out and castrated him, and it just really upset me. And then when I heard about the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, it brought back that memory to me, and the fact that growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, I had been a person who would ride the bus downtown and sit behind this 'Colored' board, and I always had a problem with it, and my mother never would let me do what I wanted to do.

H: What did you want to do?

He: I wanted to do what Rosa Parks did—not get up when they came to move the board. And we would ride that bus and they would move that board, and we would have to get up and stand up most times. So I really thought about all those kinds of things and how we had been treated, and now was the time, I thought. No better time than now to do something about it.

H: Was there ever a time on the bus when you were asked to move, or others were asked to move, and you refused?

He: No, never. People always were submissive then. I asked my mother and father why were they submissive and their answer to me was, 'Well, we just have to stay in our place.' And I couldn't accept that.

H: So when you got involved in the Movement, what role did you play?

He: During the Movement days, after I became Corresponding Secretary, I became very active and stayed very busy dealing with the correspondence for the organization. I also had an opportunity to help with setting up the conference for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when they came to Birmingham. I had an opportunity to set up the conference for the Southern Conference Educational Fund when they met here in Birmingham. I was also instrumental in assisting Dr. King's staff working with Dr. Wyatt T. Walker when we invited them to come to Birmingham in [19]63. I went to Dr. Gaston to secure an office space for them, because before they came we did not have an office space. I was instrumental in getting that set up for him and putting him in contact with the people that he needed to contact in Birmingham that would help us get the direct action campaign taken care of. Then, the other things that I did— My family and I were very active. My ex-husband and I filed a lawsuit during the fifties, which was to integrate the parks here in Birmingham, Alabama.

H: So you were really on the front lines?

He: Yes.

H: As Corresponding Secretary, what did you actually do?

He: Okay. All mail coming into the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights at that time— Like I said, we did not have an office. We were operating out of Reverend Shuttlesworth's church, so all the mail that came for the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights was directed to his church and I would have to answer the mail involving Reverend Shuttlesworth's speaking engagements or funds coming in from different organizations about supporting us or people who wanted to come to Birmingham to speak or wanting him to come to other places across the country to speak. I had to correspond and take care of that mail for him.

H: How long did you handle that operation?

He: I worked as Corresponding Secretary from 1956 to 1963, when I went to the Federal Government.

H: So, obviously, you attended the Mass meetings on a regular basis?

He: Yes.

H: Can you describe to me what the Mass meetings were like in the early days and, then, whether they were similar or different during the time that Martin Luther King was in town?

He: Okay. The Mass meetings from [19]56 to '63, before Dr. King came, were meetings where we met and dealt with the local problems, the filing of lawsuits, singing and praying, and we had a motivational speaker every Monday night.

H: Who were some of those speakers?

He: We had speakers like Reverend Edward Gardner, Reverend J. S. Phiffer, Reverend T. L. Lane, Reverend Shuttlesworth, Reverend N. H. Smith, Reverend Parnell, out of Irondale, Reverend Thomas of Ensley, Reverend Woods, the Woods—

H: All of these were local Ministers?

He: All of these were local ministers, yes. We did not have an awful lot of out-of-town ministers during the early days, because it was really the Birmingham Movement and we were just doing things here in Birmingham without the outside help. So, occasionally, we may have a visiting minister come, but for the most part we did not solicit any visitors like that. These were local ministers who would speak to us to keep us motivated on keeping the dream that we had alive at that time.

H: How did the meetings differ in the early days versus after Dr. King came?

He: After Dr. King came to town the meetings were very different. The meetings were on a high hyped-up session, I would say, because Carlton Reese was involved more and you had a lot more speakers at those affairs.¹ We had so many people coming in to Birmingham to assist and they were really dynamic speakers, and they kept us in a situation where we were all excited and so caught up with the moment until we were all on a high.

H: Were Birmingham policemen present at the meetings?

He: Yes, they were. Detectives. Note-taking detectives. They were sitting in the back of the

church taking notes.

H: They were present at every meeting?

He: Yes, at every meeting.

H: What was their demeanor? Did they just come in and sit down? Did they say anything to anyone?

He: No, they just came in and sat down, never said anything to anyone.

H: How did those that attended the meetings react to the police being there, and how did the leaders react?

He: Well, Reverend Shuttlesworth and some of the others like Reverend Woods— Reverend Shuttlesworth would throw out little hints at them like they knew what their purpose was and, ‘You all [detectives] take this down real good so Bull Connor will know what our plans are tomorrow because we know that's what you're here for.’ And those of us in the audience just ignored them and acted like they were not there. We really did not care. We were not afraid.

H: Do you think they were there partly for intimidation purposes?

He: I think so. I think they were there so a lot of people would be afraid. It would turn some people around, I'm sure, but, for the most part, for the mass of people, it didn't effect us at all.

H: Did you go to jail?

He: No, I was not able to go to jail. I wanted to go, but I did not get to go. Reverend Wyatt T. Walker told me that I knew the people locally and that he wanted me out. He didn't want me in jail, so I had to work with him directly.

H: So you worked very closely with Wyatt. What did you do for him?

He: When he came to town, I had to put him in touch with the ministers here, the churches here, the business people here, and when he got ready to go to certain department stores and set up the

ground rules for the boycotting and demonstrations, I had to take him to the various areas in the city of Birmingham to show him which stores were targeted and the libraries and things like that.

H: So you were, more or less, his right-hand person in developing Project C?

He: Yes, right. Project C.²

H: Are there any incidents that may have taken place as you and Wyatt rode around the city in relationship to what was happening in the group at the time? Anything that may come to mind?

He: For when we were getting prepared to do this?

H: Yes. Wyatt talked about making the walk from the headquarters, A. G. Gaston Motel, to various places downtown. Did you ever accompany him on those? Were there any other things that may have taken place that you would remember? What is the most vivid thing that you remember about your relationship with Wyatt?

He: I can't think of anything out of the ordinary when we were doing things because most of my work was contained there at the office giving him directives and locations where to go. So he, Bevel³, and Andy Young—that group of men—went out and did the actual leg work out in the streets. I just gave them the directions for who to see, who to contact. So I really didn't have any contact with him going out in the field to do that. They did that.

H: During 1962, during the selective buying campaign, you did some traveling. Can you tell me about that?

He: Yes. On December 1, 1962, I went to New York, Boston, and Brandeis University. That's where I saw Angela Davis. I went there on a tour with Reverend William Howard Melish of Brooklyn, New York, who was one of the field directors for the Southern Conference Education Fund. I was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with Carl Braden, who was a staff member also. We went into the homes of people they had set up for us and talked to them about what was happening in the South and the struggles that we had going in our attempt to start this selective buying campaign because we felt that this was the only way to get jobs and the White merchants to start hiring Blacks. They were very gracious to us. Not only did we meet in their homes, but in most instances we spent the night there. They put us up in their homes and they sent a lot of money back to our organization after that tour. At Christmas time,

they sent boxes and boxes of toys and clothes for our children for Christmas, and what I did was, after they came— Not only did they send toys, they sent wrapping paper. Then I got a group of people together. We wrapped the gifts and toys and carried them to the Movement and they were distributed to people within the Movement who needed them for their children for Christmas.

H: That way people did not have to go downtown to shop.

He: Right. Exactly.

H: Were there other tours, or was it just this one tour where you went up East?

He: That was the only tour that I went up East. The other ones were done by the ministers when they'd go off and speak and preach. That was the only one that I did.

H: Was this under auspices of SCLC, or the Alabama Christian Movement?

He: The Southern Conference Educational Fund. I was working with them.

H: Did others in your family participate in the Movement?

He: Yes, they did. My daughter, at the time of the Movement, was nine years of age, and she was arrested and stayed in jail for five days. My ex-husband was arrested for riding the bus and he was in jail for about one week, I believe it was. And he also was a security guard for Reverend Shuttlesworth out at the church. He was also among the men who went to Anniston to bring the Whites and Blacks that were on the bus that was burned in Anniston back to Birmingham, and we kept two of them in our home.

H: How did you feel about your nine year old daughter spending time in jail?

He: Well, it didn't bother me at all. We had a communication line with the person at the Juvenile, and we would call once a day to check and see if anybody was sick and how the kids was getting along. This person would give us information about her and we didn't have any problem at all.

H: Where was she housed?

He: She was housed at Juvenile.

H: Was there a mass of children there?

He: Yes, there was a mass of children there.

H: I talked with another individual and they talked about something called 'kites.' People that go to jail, they would send them a kite out—in other words, a message written on any kind of paper. Are you familiar at all with that terminology?

He: No.

H: When your child went to jail was she one of those who came out of school?

He: Yes.

H: Can you tell me anything about that?

He: Since our involvement was so intense, our whole family was involved. She told me because I was surprised that she went. And when I got the call that she was in jail, and after she came out, I said, 'What made you decide?' She said, 'Well, you all were involved and I thought if it was right for you all to be fighting for our rights, we should help, too.'

H: So this was not something that you sat down and planned that she was going to actively be involved in?

He: No, I did not ask her to do it.

H: How did other members of your family react to your participation?

He: They were very supportive. All of our family members were very supportive. My mother and father were very frightened about it, but they said they knew it was the right thing to do.

H: What church were you a member of?

He: New Pilgrim Baptist Church.

H: What was the level of involvement of your church and your pastor?

He: New Pilgrim Baptist Church was very involved and our pastor was Secretary of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. He, too, went to jail on two occasions, so our church is very rich with civil rights history.

H: So, because your pastor was involved, did that create any difficulty for him with others in the congregation?

He: Not at all. They were very supportive.

H: So then your church itself was very actively involved?

He: Yes, yes.

H: Were there meetings held at your church?

He: Yes, indeed. All the time. And the second meeting, after the first meeting at Sardis, was at New Pilgrim.

H: And that's when you got involved?

He: Yes, at New Pilgrim.

H: What benefits did you, your family, and community realize as a result of the Movement?

He: Well, I think as a result of the Movement, as far as my family is concerned, it made us better individuals as it relates to knowing what we were entitled to be and what we had been deprived of. We had been denied a lot of opportunities and after the Movement started and doors started opening up for us, we were able to walk into doors that we never would have done if we had not started this.

H: If you were in control of the Movement and could go back and change some things, what would you change?

He: I wouldn't change anything. Not anything. I wouldn't change anything.

H: Reverend Shuttlesworth says the same thing. He would not change anything. And I ask him would he change the beating that he received at Phillips High School. He said, 'No.' What is your assessment of the Birmingham Movement. How successful was it? What did it accomplish?

He: The one thing that I was very proud of [was] it showed unity. It brought us together as a Black race, and some Whites. It wasn't just all Blacks. It was some Whites. It brought us together as a community working together to break down the barriers of segregation and discrimination. Jobs for the citizens of Birmingham, the opportunity to go into the stores and shop as well as have clerks and employees hired in these stores, and the opportunity to go into schools. There were some stores at that time where you could go and buy a dress, but you couldn't even try it on in those stores. So, that, along with the fact that we have policemen that we see and we're very proud that they are Black, and our chief of police and our mayor is Black. I'm very proud of the successes of Birmingham.

H: You mentioned that there were Whites that were involved in the Movement?

He: Yes.

H: There were local Whites?

He: Yes.

H: What were their roles?

He: Well, we had some Whites who would give money, but, for fear of their life and their own jobs, they were afraid to be visible. But there were some Whites who did give money and then there were Whites who would be supportive in ways that they could, without it being known to others. We had an attorney named Morgan, Charles Morgan, who was active and was helpful to us. Of course, he had to leave the city, but he was active. And then there was a man by the name of Reverend Lamar Weaver who was active and sat at the bus station with Reverend Shuttlesworth and his wife when they sat at the Birmingham Terminal Station in the White Section. Of course, he had to leave. But there were Whites that did.

H: Were there any Whites that demonstrated in the Birmingham Movement during April and May of 1963?

He: Not to my knowledge. The Whites that I knew were there were from out-of-town.

H: You mentioned that in 1962 you went to Brandeis and you saw Angela Davis. How did you know Angela Davis?

He: She came up to me after the meeting was over, and told me who she was and where she lived. And she said, 'I'm just shocked to hear all of this. That's my home. I have been sheltered.' She said, 'I heard the bombs, but I had no idea what was causing that bombing.' And I said, 'Well, Angela, I hate you were sheltered, but that is Birmingham.' And she was really shocked to know that all these things had gone on in Birmingham. She said her mother and father kept her sheltered from that.

H: Have you seen her since then?

He: No, only on television and in the magazines.

H: Is there anything else that you would like to add that we have not dealt with that relates to the Movement and how it actually evolved at the time?

He: I am very proud that I had the opportunity to be a part of this Movement. I don't regret anything that I contributed to the Movement, and I think that Birmingham— In fact, I know Birmingham is a much better city to live in than prior to the Movement.

H: Were you ever one of those that rode the bus with Reverend Shuttlesworth during the early stages—[19]56, '57, '58? Many people were riding the bus and riding in front of the board. Did you participate in that?

He: No. I never did.

H: As you said, you needed to stay where you were because of your position.

He: Right.

H: Can you tell me just a little inclusion about the suit that you and your husband had against the Park Board?

He: Okay. The lawsuit was filed back in the fifties when we were filing for desegregation of buses. We were not allowed to go into the parks and let our children play like other children in the City of Birmingham. We could not go to the one on Third Avenue West, the fair grounds. Those were places that we could not enter, so Reverend Shuttlesworth brought it up in one of our meetings and I told him we would sign for that law suit and be the party for it, and that's what we did. And the laws would later change and it was desegregated.

H: I certainly do thank you for coming out today and sitting with me. This, obviously, will add quite a bit to the story of Birmingham and I hope to do this with you again, because I know you have much, much more. Thank you very much.

He: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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¹ Carlton Reese, a Birmingham native, served as Director of the Alabama Christian Choir for Human Rights—the choir of the ACMHR, often referred to as the “Movement choir.”

² “Project C” was the name given to the overall plan for attacking and ending segregation in Birmingham. The “C” stood for “Confrontation.”

³ James Bevel, a young member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC] staff, had formerly worked for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in his home state, Mississippi.