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Black Women Oral History Project

Interview with

ETTA MOTEN BARNETT

February 11, 1985

Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College

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The interviews in the Black Women Oral History Project
are dedicated to the memory of

Letitia Woods Brown

whose enthusiastic encouragement and wise counsel
made the project possible

This project was funded by

The Rockefeller Foundation
The Blanchard Foundation
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INTRODUCTION

Since July 1976 the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College, with support from The Rockefeller Foundation recently supplemented by a grant from the Blanchard Foundation of Boston, has been conducting a project to record and transcribe the autobiographical memoirs of a group of black American women 70 years of age and older. The purpose of the project is to develop a body of resources on the lives of black women in the twentieth century, especially in the years prior to the Civil Rights Movement, and to make this material available to researchers and students interested in the struggles of women and racial minorities in the United States. Many interviewees have had professional careers in such fields as education, government, the arts, business, medicine, law, and social work. Others have combined care for their families with voluntary service to their communities. All have made significant contributions toward the improvement of the lives of black people and to the development of American society.

In the past the black woman often has not created a written record of her experiences, and when such a record has been created, it is not usually found in libraries or archives, the traditional repositories for historical documents. One means of attempting to capture and preserve such lives is the oral interview, which explores the influences and events that have shaped each woman's experience and gives her an opportunity to reflect on the past and to present her point of view on historical events. The interviews of the Black Women Oral History Project offer fresh source material that can add an important dimension to the study of the history of the United States. They supplement and comment on other sources as they examine the active participation of a group whose members were previously overlooked as being only shaped by and not shapers of historical events.

Etta Moten Barnett, an internationally known singer and actress on stage and in film in the 1930s and 1940s, is now a patron of the arts and a volunteer in civic service, locally, nationally, and internationally, with a special concern for the African countries.

She was born in 1902 in Weimar, Texas, the only child of Freeman and Ida Norman Moten. Her father, a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was transferred several times from one pastorate to another; therefore as a child, Etta attended schools in Texas, California, and Kansas. As the minister's daughter, and a participant in church activities, she became a Sunday School teacher at the age of ten. She attended Paul Quinn College (actually a secondary school) in Waco, Texas, and was in the choral club; at age fourteen, she went to Western University in Quindaro, Kansas--a high school and junior college combined. There she joined the Jackson Jubilee Singers, headed by R.G. Jackson, and toured with them on the Chautauqua summer circuit. Without finishing school, she married at age seventeen and in a short time became the mother of three daughters. She was divorced from her husband after six years and returned home to her parents, who took care of the children while she attended the University of Kansas. There she majored in voice and speech and took a minor in public school music. She also continued singing with the Jackson Jubilee Singers in order to help to pay

her way through college. While in school, she had her own radio program on the University of Kansas radio station. Her 1931 senior recital at the University led to an invitation to become a soloist with the world-renowned Eva Jessye Choir in New York City. But after only two weeks in New York, she was beginning rehearsals for the Broadway show Fast and Furious.

While traveling from Kansas City to New York, she had had the opportunity to meet Claude Barnett, the founder and head of the Associated Negro Press. She continued her friendship with him when she was living in New York, describing her experiences in letters that he often published through his news service. Fast and Furious closed after only two nights, but Etta Moten had been seen and heard, and she was invited to appear in another Broadway musical, Zombie. After a short run it too closed.

She went to California with Zombie and soon was invited to audition for Warner Brothers. In several films her singing voice was dubbed for that of other performers. Finally, in a role in The Gold Diggers of 1933, she sang "Remember My Forgotten Man." The Negro newspapers acclaimed her as their new star because she was not cast in the stereotypical role for a Black woman. This led to her own lecture and concert tours. In 1934, she appeared in Flying Down to Rio, where she received screen credit for the first time. In California, she was soloist on Meredith Wilson's radio show, "The Carefree Karnival." She also appeared in other films and Broadway shows, including the revival of Porgy and Bess with which she toured from 1942 to 1945. Gershwin had talked

with her before the original Broadway production, saying that she was the kind of Bess he had in mind, but she had felt that the role was pitched too high for her voice. In 1934, Etta Moten had married Claude Barnett. He gradually took over from her other agents, became her manager, and booked her lecture tours and concerts.

Barnett had a long-time interest in Africa. He had come to know many of the continent's future leaders when they were college students in the United States, and he had engaged some of them as correspondents for his news service. Thus, when the Barnetts went to Africa in 1947, although it was her first trip, he already had many contacts there. From that time until Mr. Barnett's death in 1967, the Barnetts visited Africa several times, often as official representatives of the United States government.

Several years before her husband's death, Mrs. Barnett's career as a singer had tapered off, and she began to involve herself in civic work, such as the Chicago Lyric Opera, South Side Community Arts Center, DuSable Museum, and National Conference of Christians and Jews; she also became active again in her sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. In 1970, she was made an honorary member of The Links, Inc., and a consultant to their international trends program. She soon became a full member of The Links and was appointed head of the international program. She participated in their activities around International Women's Year, and headed the United States nongovernmental delegation to

the International Women's Year Conference (the Tribune) in Mexico City in 1975. She was later very involved in The Links program for the United Nations Decade for Women World Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985.

Mrs. Barnett is on an advisory committee for a Delta Sigma Theta program, Delta International of the African Diaspora, and since 1960 has been a member of the board of the African-American Institute. She is a life member of the National Council of Negro Women, the NAACP, and Alpha Kappa Alpha. She has received honorary degrees from Atlanta University and Spelman College, and a citation of merit from her alma mater, the University of Kansas.





Levack County. Levack is a cow, you know. It's spelled that way. It was the cow country and they were the cowboys. There's a large family of them, except that one woman that married Etta Moten Barnett, who was a little lady that was slightly, just a little darker than you, but

photo courtesy of Judith Sedwick

Etta Moten Barnett

INTERVIEW WITH ETTA MOTEN BARNETT

Ruth Edmonds Hill: Would you tell me something about your family background, your parents, but also your grandparents if you...

Etta Moten Barnett: All of the Motens were born in Texas. This version of them. The background is really Virginia. But the grandfather came to Texas on horseback, they say, with a member of his family. They settled in Bastrop County, near the Pedernales River. You heard about the Pedernales River from L.B.J., the president of the United States, in that area, around Houston, not Houston, but around Austin, as the name says and that sort of thing. So it was in Winchester, Texas, that they settled.

I remember as a child spending so many wonderful days on that farm, the Moten farm, which butted against another large farm that belonged to "the Germans." There was a German family there. They said that every time the German lady had a baby, that Grandma had a baby. Each one had children that matched each other. They were playmates. This is in Texas, but the Germans, they told me, in the state of Texas didn't ever want slaves and didn't have slaves. So therefore, the discrimination thing just didn't exist out there.

REH: In that part of the country, yes.

EMB: That's right. So that was where my father was born. Then my mother was born on the Colorado River. I don't think it was too far from there, but you know how you are when you're a child; it seemed a long, long, long ways. So anyway, Mama was born in Columbus, Texas, and they lived in Glidden, Texas. The way to describe that is, that it's sort of a central point for the Southern Pacific Railroad, between San Antonio and Houston.

REH: Now where had your mother's parents come from before?

EMB: My mother's parents had come from what is called Lavaca County. Lavaca is a cow, you know, in Spanish. That was the cow country and they were ranchers, the Normans were ranchers. There's a large family of them, except that this Norman that married my mother's mother, who was a little lady that was slightly, just a little darker than you, but

had a face just very similar to yours, in that it was round, but small. She was a small lady. Grandma was so cute, I always thought. She was quiet and she knew her background was Choctaw Indian. And so she married this Norman, the great ranching family, and was widowed very early with her two little girls, my mother and her sister, Sarah.

They, in turn, married, my mother married a minister, a young minister, who had just come out of college, Paul Quinn College at Waco, Texas. He came to this little town of Glidden to pastor a church and fell in love with sister Norman's oldest daughter. That was Ida, my mother. Sarah was married to Bud Glenn, who was a railroad man. He worked at the big roundhouse at the Southern Pacific, and that made him quite well off because he made lots of money, about fifty-five dollars a month. That was great in those days. So that was that part of that family.

Then over in Winchester was the Moten part. Papa pastored in Weimar, Texas, and it's a German area, you know. So Weimar is named after the city Weimar in Germany. Then he eventually moved to Bellville, Texas, which is over in another section of Texas, direction-wise. As a little child, I remember Bellville, because Papa built a parsonage there. We had a new house and they had dug a new well. I remember the taste of the pine, that they lined these wells with, in the water.

REH: So then most of your childhood was in Texas, in different parts of Texas.

EMB: Until I was ten, but we moved so much. I was telling you about the moving, if you want me to rush a little bit.

REH: No, no, no.

EMB: Well, I was telling you as I was remembering it, as somehow it's kind of fresh on my mind this morning. That was the first time I ever saw a piano, that was in Bellville, Texas. Great big Mrs. P. Ryan had a piano with great big legs. It was flat and rectangular like this table is, you know, one of those flat pianos. That's the first time I'd ever seen that, piano.

Now they tell me I was too young to remember this, but I do remember it. I must have been about three, I guess, but I do remember this. So then Papa moved...at that time, you couldn't stay more than five years at a church; the bishop would move you. Sometimes if you were a young minister,

they'd move you every year, and that happened to Papa. Then after I grew about...when he went to Oakwood, Texas, another small place, he decided that it was...well, we went, I think, yes, to San Antonio, Texas, too. So much for that, Weimar and Glidden, and Weimar is the real town in which I was born. But in case people didn't know where Weimar was, I have always said, almost on my passport, that San Antonio, Texas, was where I was born, but I was really born in Weimar.

So anyway, Papa decided that...when I was in school, just the first few grades, he realized that I was going to have to move at the wrong time of the year, because the conferences were held in the fall, in October, when the schools were getting ready to open. So he sent me to Paul Quinn. Paul Quinn College was a school of the A.M.E. church, and nearly every diocese has its college. And Wilberforce is one, you see, that was one of the A.M.E. schools. Claflin, no, Claflin is Methodist, but Coppin is down there in Baltimore. Those, that kind of schools, Paul Quinn is still in existence, and just like Wilberforce has a good football team and all that, and is really a four-year college. Then it was called a college, but it was just about equivalent to a junior high school, junior college, I mean, because they did have what they called a scientific course where they taught Latin. But basically it was a seminary for ministers. And Papa had graduated from there in 1895, as a theologian, you see. They had real theologians, and real highly-trained people to come down from the North to set up that theological school for the A.M.E. church.

So Papa had graduated from this school, and so he sent me to Paul Quinn. I had discovered early, in Oakwood really, that I had a voice, because my mother had a voice. My father sang and my mother sang, you know, the congregational singing and so forth. And Mama sang in the choir...so I'm an only child.

REH: I was about to ask you that.

EMB Yes, an only child. She kept me with her all the time, and I was always around grown people. So that she covered a box with cretonne and flowers and stuff, and put me...that was my seat in the choir. So when I got ready...the choir sang, I stood up on top of the box, and sang alto. I had this big alto voice. So then that voice came in handy in singing with the school chorus, the choir. They called it the Paul Quinn Choral Club. Wiley College had a choral club. That was a Methodist school in...where is Wiley?

REH: I've forgotten, but I know.

EMB: Well anyway, it's still there. Then Bishop College had a choral club. These Negro colleges had these choirs, these choral clubs, they called them...men and women were in them...sang for money, and sang for entertainment of the teachers' association and so forth. It advertised your school, you see. So then if you sang in the choir, if you made the choir, you see, you had to be good enough to be in the choir, according to Miss Meg Roberts who was the head of the choir...you got your schooling free. So I was on a scholarship at ten years old, at ten, I was there, and plus they had the fourth grade. From the second, third, and fourth grade, you were in college, you know, because they had that type of title. And not only this, it gave you a taste of honey. Just as the reason that it bothers me when they talk about doing away with the Negro colleges now, you see. No matter they don't measure up academically to Harvard, you see.

REH: They're still needed.

EMB: You see, it gives you the taste, the desire for learning, and then you go on later. And not only that with me, it gave me a background of classical music, because they gave scholarships to the good singers. For example, a grown lady, Mary Jones was the name...the A.M.E. Church gave her a scholarship and sent her way up north to us in Chicago, Chicago Musical College.

REH: I was going to ask you also to tell me a little bit more about your mother and father. What it is like at home? What kind of life...I mean you told me about moving around, but maybe there's something you'd like to tell me about your childhood and being at home, and what your parents were like.

EMB: Well, you know in the South in those days...I don't know that it is now because...the minister and the doctor in any town were the leading people in the community. The minister preached saving, preached parenthood, preached rearing your children, preached obedience to your parents. He was the preacher-teacher, and my father was very, very good at that. He also served as the doctor sometimes, you know, and the counselor of the community.

My mother sometimes was a substitute teacher, but not a regular job because the minister's wife...it was quite a

good thing for you to say that your minister's wife does not have to work; we support our minister, you know. No matter how much you might need, you just didn't work. You stayed at home and you received the sisters and brothers that would come to church, and you would contribute your talent wherever you could in the church. So Mama's was singing. She was the leader of the choir; she was also president of the missionary society, generally that was the minister's wife's job in church.

After I would come home in summers from Paul Quinn...I didn't do it very long, because pretty soon we moved to California...but I was a Sunday school teacher at ten and eleven years old, you see. So you contribute whatever talent you had to the work of your father's in the community. And you had to be an exemplary girl, because Mama always said, "You have to have people to love you, because you mustn't be a spoiled preacher's brat." You know, preachers' children were generally spoiled. That was what people said.

REH: That was what people thought they were.

EMB: Yes, that people said they were, and you know, you might have felt yourself a little...you felt your oats a little bit too, but Mama always kept that down in me. I was never a spoiled person. So, this was...I had a home that we...I was like an adult in that place, all the time. Nothing was kept from me. I was just, well, I had a happy childhood because every holiday we went to grandpa's farm, you know. He always had young children and young people working on the farm; and somebody else's child was there, my cousins and so forth and so on. He had a marvelous wife; my grandmother was so great. They milked eight cows twice a day.

Grandma would take you...you learned about nature. The older cousins would take you through the woods and you learned about leaves and names of trees and names of animals, and that sort of thing. Grandma had, I'm sure she had three hundred heads of chickens in her yard, a big yard, and chinaberry trees in her yard. The peacocks...I was in Nairobi just two weeks ago, and saw, was out at the foot of Mount Kenya. There was this marvelous lodge there with flowers and animals and birds and so forth, and they had two sets of peacocks and peahens out there. And I thought about my grandmother's yard. Every successful farm lady had a pair of peacocks, a pair, a peacock and a peahen. This tail was just...well, I learned my nature studies at that farm.

I knew the names of the poisonous snakes and the non-poisonous snakes, and bugs and things like that. I was not afraid of any of them, but you knew which ones to be careful of.

So anyway, that kind of thing. We went the first part of the Christmas, right on Christmas day and that first part of the Christmas holiday to Mama's...one side of grandparents. Then Mama's sister had only one child too. She had only one sister; and then each of them had one child. These cousins, my maternal grandmother, that part of our family was a matriarchal family. The other was a patriarchal family, everything over there was what my daddy said, so and so, all of them. There were six or eight of them. And it was always, "What my Papa said," you know, "my daddy said this, and my pa said this." Over here it was grandma, over at Mama's in the Choctaw family.

REH: That's interesting, yes.

EMB: Grandma, so she taught us, these two little girl cousins, to love each other like sisters, and we did. The other one just died about five years ago in Texas, or so. I went back to see about her. But anyway, we were real close, very close. So that was the way I spent my holidays, at grandparents' homes, and just enjoyed it so much...a happy, happy life was with them. So that as a grandmother now myself...as soon as I had three daughters...and as soon as my children began to have children, I began to think of...I discovered a house in Chicago. That's the reason I have this big house that I own now, so that my grandchildren can remember their grandmother.

REH: Visiting their grandmother, yes.

EMB: As pleasantly as I remember mine, this is why.

REH: Well, we'll go back. I sort of broke into you when you were talking about being ten years old in junior high level at Paul Quinn College. So we can continue on with that again.

EMB: I was in the fourth grade then, although it was at that level, I was explaining that it was not really college. But yes, after being in the choral club and after the experience there, I guess, it was from 1910 to 1912 or '13, it must have been more than that because it was when my father was transferred to California, to Los Angeles. It was the beginning of the first World's Fair, and I think, that was

1915 in California, '14 or '15. We went to Los Angeles. That was the year that a Hawaiian craze, Aloha, was sung. People were playing ukeleles and singing that song, you know.

REH: But that was quite a change, coming from a comparatively rural life to go to Los Angeles. How was that?

EMB: But you see, Waco, Texas, was not...I came out of a rural life, yes, but I had been to San Antonio, you see, which is larger, and I had been to Waco, which was a town.

REH: Your father's pastorates, yes.

EMB: That's right. And so, but the funny thing is that new experiences were never a shock to me. I never suffered from any cultural shock with any cultural changes that I made.

REH: That's why you like traveling perhaps, yes.

EMB: I suppose, but I've never suffered from a cultural shock because of change. Mama had to go to school one time in Los Angeles, because I was copying after a girl that was talking back to the teacher, you know, and this is a free country kind of thing. But I was not reared that way, but I copied her. When the teacher sent for Mama, and I never had to do that again after Mama got through with me. But anyway, I was copying then, you see. I didn't think the woman was, a white teacher...those were the very first white teachers I'd had. But it didn't make any difference to me.

REH: Well, talk a little bit about that because...

EMB: There was nothing to say, except that they were white and I was copying a Negro girl, who said...you know, talking back to her because she was white. And I was acting like Mabel Whittaker, and talking bad myself, you know, to this woman. And that was very, it wasn't me at all; I didn't feel that way. And so, they sent for Mama. Mama was as embarrassed as she could be. I never had to have her sent for again, never. But that was, it was my fault to try to copy this girl who was acting like the woman was...she was just talking to her that way because she was white, really.

REH: Let me ask you something else. Before you went to Paul Quinn, you went to a public school, and was it a small town that had its own teachers?

EMB: Yes, it was all Negro teachers, all Negro teachers, and that's all I had ever had. But when I went to Paul Quinn, there were people there who were friends of Papa's, and the teachers, some of them, had been classmates of his, and there were all kinds of...but I was never awed by white people. The lady that bought our milk in Oakwood, was a white woman, you know, and that didn't seem to make it...although I knew that you drank out of segregated fountains...you just didn't want any water, so you drank your water at home, you know. And you went into the "for colored" section when you went up to get in the railroad station to go on the train. But we just went there and went in time to get on the train, you know. It was always, that was never...you accommodated yourself to that, like all the grown people did around you.

REH: Yes, and then they protect the younger people, yes, from some of the experiences.

EMB: Yes, of course, there was a time, I think, either Bellville, I heard about the fact that there were...no, it was in Oakwood that I heard that the white people objected to Papa's administering to the sick in his church. And so, the Negro doctor who was in town, told the white people that Papa was practicing medicine without a license, when he was administering to his sick people, and administering the sacrament and so forth.

But I also remember that they said they were coming for him, and I also know that there was a man and his sons that were beaten and practically lynched that lived out not too far from us; I knew that that had happened. I also had heard that they had said that they were coming after Papa, and Papa and some of his trustees got their guns and went and told them to come on, but they never came. But that was just sort of some of the things that happened during those days, and it didn't affect me one way or the other, except I knew that Papa could take care of himself; he never got afraid and all that.

REH: That was your Papa.

EMB: Yes, my Papa. But that, I might have been bitter or something like that, if they had hurt him, but they respected him. And they did not come. They respected him and his guns, I guess, and knew that he would use them. So I had nothing against white people for any reason whatsoever, except the fact that somehow they didn't know any better than to be prejudiced and make themselves sick, I

thought. But I've never been bitter about them. And I knew that, except for those who might be die-hard, when the law says you shouldn't do this, but all those who didn't do it...who straightened up after the laws got straight, they were all right with us. This was the kind...but that childhood never...being in a segregated situation, never did bother me. I let it...I just was showing off, just like a kid did when I got to Los Angeles, but it wasn't that I was mistreated or anything different, but I was just showing off because this girl had done it. But that was the only time that...changing from all Negro teachers to white teachers, I did that, and that was my fault because I was just showing off. But other than that, the changes in any cultural situation never has fazed me, never has fazed me, except that I was very happy when I first got to Brazil and saw everybody who was brown.

REH: All kinds of people, yes, yes.

EMB: And that thrilled me, but you had race pride. That word was used a lot during my day, and Papa was very much of a race-pride man. He preached it all the time; he lectured it. I can remember on the 19th of June was always a big day in Texas. The 19th of June was the day on which emancipation was celebrated. It was emancipation in Texas because the crops were laid by on the 19th of June, so although the emancipation, I learned later, way later in life, it was actually January the 1st, that the proclamation was signed. They didn't tell the people in Texas, nor did they tell them in Missouri, until the fourth of August when the wheat was all harvested, you see.

REH: When the work was done, yes.

EMB: But the Negroes of Texas celebrated the 19th of June with great barbecues and great parties and great picnics, union picnics with the Sunday schools of all denominations, and that sort of thing. Papa was the great speaker, and then they would bring speakers from out of town, Roscoe Conklin Simmons would come down from Chicago. Booker T. Washington would come, Frederick Douglass, way back, before I...while I was a little girl, I guess, he was somewhere speaking. But those were the good days, you know, that you had these orators come and speak about the history of the Negro and that sort of thing.

So that, when I left Paul Quinn, I went to California. When I left California, it was just two years...

REH: Let's pin down a couple of things just for a date, or age, or something or other, so to keep...

EMB: Well, California, I left there at fourteen. When I got to Kansas, where I went to another church school, which was called Quindaro, Kansas, Western University. There again a university, that was a college...actually a high school and junior college. I graduated high school there.

REH: But all the time you were continuing to sing in various choirs?

EMB: All the time. Exactly, and they had a choir too. Then he, in summer, this particular person who was the head of music, his name was R.G. Jackson, from the Jackson Jubilee Singers. I was a member of that choir. Then I had the experience, my first professional experience singing, was in that Jackson Jubilee Singers, that was at Kansas City, Kansas, in Quindaro. We sang...he booked us on the Chautauqua circuit. Do you know the Chautauqua circuit? Well, this, it was out at Horner Institute there, that these choirs and choruses and lecturers and all got their briefing, and then you went out on a circuit. The circuit would last...it would be small cities, small towns, rural towns mainly because that was in the late twenties then. The roads weren't good; the radio hadn't come in yet.

REH: I was going to ask how you traveled.

EMB: That's right, you traveled by automobile. We had a bus, a Cadillac bus that they had fixed up for us. There was a quartet of men, and two ladies. Mr. Jackson's wife was the other lady, and I was the...she was soprano and I was the alto. Then there was a male quartet, and then the seven of us sang. Mr. Jackson was the pianist, and trained us. We sang classics as well as the spirituals, as well as the jubilees, and the quartet-type thing, as well as the solos and popular ballads, as well as classical things, songs. We had a whole...an afternoon program that we gave with the lecturer. In the evening, we gave a concert of our own. The lecturer was generally from some university, the one that traveled with us had traveled with Cecil Rhodes in Africa. And the other...he had done that in the past, and he talked about that. Then we did African things. Then he was from the University of Illinois; he was a professor.

REH: I need to get some sense of the geographical area, and whether...did you have white audiences or mixed?

EMB: Mainly white audiences, because you see, these tents, they had large tents under which they...and the tents stayed in one town a week. All right, it might have a chorus...they had the Jackson Jubilee Singers, that was the star attraction. They had something every day, maybe a play company, maybe a lecturer, like William Jennings Bryan's daughter, or Woodrow Wilson himself was a lecturer on that Chautauqua circuit.

Generally the tent was attended by teachers from colleges, who were doing that work for the summer, and students. They had crafts and so forth in the tent during the day for the children of the community. It was underwritten by the merchants of these towns. They paid the salaries of the people. They put in money. They had a fund out of which they paid salaries, and they had the Chautauqua come there for a week. Though we would come in, it was a one-night stand. We'd go there, and then we'd go to the next town where there was...this whole circuit.

REH: Another continuing, yes.

EMB: Yes, and the geography of it was one ten-weeks or eleven-weeks, that was a twelve-week circuit was a longer circuit. We covered, for example, Pennsylvania. We'd start in Ohio, Pennsylvania or West Virginia, that whole circuit, like four or five or six states at one time.

REH: This was mainly summer, right?

EMB: It's always summer, always summer because you go back to school. You made this money to go to school on. I got through the University of Kansas by doing this. Because when I married out of this Quindaro situation, because the teacher there and I had carried on an affair slightly, we had fallen in love. So Papa said, "Never run away. Never elope. Let me know." We went, Papa married us. I said, "Papa, I like this man. He's going to move and go into business in Oklahoma. And I want to be..." "But," he said, "you haven't finished school." I said, "Well, I'll do that later." I went on with him to Oklahoma. He went into business, that was marvelous because he was the head of the business department there at this school.

REH: Do you want to give the name for the record, or not?

EMB: Oh, his name was Curtis Brooks. It didn't gel. We stayed together six years, and made three children during this time. Because you are marrying right out of...how do

you know anything about birth control? You don't know, so you had them as fast as they'd come. So anyway, I had three, and am delighted that I did that. But that was the greatest thing about the whole marriage.

REH: So how old were you actually when you married then?

EMB: Seventeen.

REH: Very young.

EMB: Yes, actually by the time I was twenty-one, the third one was born in October, I was twenty-one in November. [Chuckles] So it came just that fast. But anyway, I was healthy and didn't mind having them, loved it, loved babies anyway. I didn't like dolls but I liked babies. But anyway, this was the intervention there.

So you went back home, and you took your...and the same Mr. Jackson and his wife, she said, "Why, girl, you look like an old lady." Here everybody was wearing bobbed hair, and mine was long. Dresses were short and mine were long. So she said, "Well, girl, you've got to go where there's some young people." She said, "I got tired. You left and you were gone, and I had nobody to associate with." She said, "I've enrolled up at the University of Kansas, up at Lawrence," forty miles away from Kansas City. She said, "Well, your mother and father will keep the children. Why don't you come on up, and enroll just for..." I said, "Girl, I've been washing diapers for six years. I'm afraid I won't make it." So she said, "Well, just don't go for credit, just go to observe and so forth."

REH: Well, I think I'm a little confused because you have gotten married and gone to Oklahoma, but now you talk about Kansas City, and raising the children.

EMB: So I came back because it didn't work.

REH: So that we're picking up after...

EMB: After the divorce, after I came back to Kansas City, and moved with my father and mother in their home. So then she comes and saw how I looked, and advised me to go where there's some young people. So then, Papa said, "That's what we can do. We'll keep your children for you. Leave them here." It's forty miles away. I come back, and I get a church to conduct the choir, and make that little change on the weekends, and with my children and family too. So then

I did that back and forth. In summers then, Mr. Jackson would take us on these tours, you see. He would invest our money at ten percent, lending it to teachers, and when the time came to pay my fees, I had it. So anyway, this was the way I got through the University of Kansas, and had a radio program also.

REH: So you majored in voice while you were...

EMB: Majored in voice, yes, and speech, and a minor in public school music, because I could have taught and was prepared to teach with that kind of background. So you were in the theatricals, from the drama department.

REH: Is that where you first started in the kind of thing that you'd call "musicals," or whatever?

EMB: Right.

REH: As opposed to singing in the choir, church choirs, and whatever.

EMB: Yes. So after this play, the one play that I was in, the dean of the school of fine arts...it happened to be my junior year, I think it was, yes, junior year...he advised me after seeing me in this kind of musical...kind of a play and a comedy too, and I had a song to sing in it...he advised me to combine singing and acting. So that means, Go to New York this summer and try your luck. So you get yourself a job at Lincoln University at Jefferson City, Missouri, and get your contract too. And you go to New York. Somebody had come to lecture in Kansas City, and said, "You know, you really should go." Another person had, somebody from a government agency, said, "You should go to New York and try your luck because...and then, not only that, there's a man you should know, and that's...the name Claude Barnett, the head of the Associated Negro Press. He would help you."

REH: That's amazing. You got the contract at Lincoln, sort of like insurance, back-up insurance.

EMB: That's right, exactly. So then I went. After I had graduated, after I had given a very well attended, unusually well attended, because I had a radio audience, graduation recital. Then I left, after graduation, and went to New York.

REH: Could I ask you some more things? Now this radio program was while you were a student, and this was a Kansas University radio program. What kind of things did you do?

EMB: That's right. I did Negro spirituals, things similar. I taught a quartet to do similar to the way we were doing on the road. And then sang Negro spirituals and the popular songs of the day, you know, that sort of thing. This quartet was behind me. We had, I don't know, it was once a week or twice a week, but something like a dollar and a half for a time, but something like this, but enough to have a little carfare. But in a way, it had gone out over the country, or all over a couple of states, Missouri and Kansas. People came to my recital, my graduating recital...and made lots of friends. That's been the story of my life, is friends, saying the right thing at the right time to the right person.

Because when I got to New York, that's what happened. I went to visit and stay a couple of weeks with Eva Jessye, who had heard about the concert. And so she wrote me, and said, "I want you to come to New York, my choir, the Eva Jessye Choir, is giving a concert." And as I told you the other night, I left home with my nose in the air, knowing that I was going to sing in New York. So after this concert, again they came to Eva wanting to know if she knew somebody who would sing these popular songs like they were singing in those days. So she recommended me.

I went and got to rehearsing for a Broadway show after two weeks in New York, you see. Generally, you go, you pound the pavement. You jump off the bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, or whatever, and are going back home defeated. But I didn't, and was lucky enough to get into rehearsing for this play, this musical, really; it was a musical. Those people who were in there, musicians like Webster, the trumpeter, William Grant Still was one of the violinists, Flournoy Miller and Lyles were the comedians, and the persons who were getting the show together. It was just remarkable the number of people who were in there, who were great musicians and great comics and great people in their own right, who had never been to Broadway of course. And this is my first time in the city, and lucky enough to get into a show.

REH: Now what show was this?

EMB: That was called Fast and Furious. I think.

REH: And what year now?

EMB: '31, still '31. In '32, you get into this drama that took you across the country and out back through Chicago, where you met this man again, and got closer, and engaged practically. Then you went on to California, where you got into a picture, singing in the background for somebody.

REH: Okay, well, I'm going to turn over and let's take this story a little bit slower and get more details.

EMB: Now where were we?

REH: We were just getting you to New York, and you were singing with the Eva Jessye Choir. So just start with there, and I wasn't clear on exactly when you first met Claude Barnett, and I also wanted to pick up another thread with your children at home with your parents. How old they are? What they're doing, and all this kind of thing.

EMB: My children are left at home with my parents. They were in elementary school, and then eventually in high school. My youngest saw me graduate; she was seven...

REH: From Kansas, you say.

EMB: They went to my graduation, because when I used to come back, you know, they almost kept up with my grades like I kept up with their grade cards. When I was coming back home so often, sometimes to sing with the Jackson Jubilees or during the week, so now my mother said, "Don't be coming back so often. You'll be flunking all the way down that hill." You know, flunk off the hill.

REH: Was the university on a hill, is that why?

EMB: It was on a hill, Mount Glory, yes. It was on top of the hill. So they called it "up on the hill" and "down the hill," and so forth. So she said, "You'll be flunking all the way off of that hill." So, yes, they saw me graduated. Then they never, never complained about my not being there, because Papa always kept in front of them the fact that your mother is taking care of you and loves you, and this and this and this. And so they did. This oldest daughter of mine, Sue, who's living with me now, kept the other two in line too, in reminding them that mother is supporting us and so forth, and loves us. So as I said, yes, I left them and went on to New York.

I met Claude Barnett on the way to New York. I stopped through, because in Italian class at the university, there was this white girl who was a major in Italian. I had to take Italian for my degree. This girl's name is Helsom. Her father was a person there in Chicago, and wrote me a letter saying that my daughter had spoken of you...she had graduated the year before...so if you are in Chicago, by all means, let me know, call us up. So I had this in mind. So I had friends that lived there. I said, "I'll spend the night with Louise and friends, and I'll call this man."

So Mr. Helsom invited me down to his office, which was in the gas company's building, across from the Art Institute, if you know Chicago. And he had an office there because he was a fund-raiser for the Negro hospital, called Provident Hospital. When I came down, he said, "Who do you know here?" I told him the friends with whom I was living. He said, "Well, there's a man you ought to know." Somebody had already told me this. "His name is Claude Barnett. He's a member of the trustee board of the Provident Hospital, for which I'm raising funds." He picked up the phone, and he put Claude on. And Claude, of course, being the Associated Negro Press, and always looking for somebody to interview, he made an appointment that I should come to his office because he wanted to interview me. We made this appointment, and not only that, Mr. Helsom called NBC, and sent me over for an audition over there, and this and this, and was trying to be helpful. Then he and his wife took me for sightseeing and so forth. They were very hospitable.

In the meantime, he also called a lady who was a sort of patroness of the arts. It happened to be Mrs. Maude George. Her husband was a judge there, and she had been a singer and so forth. But she was pushing young singers and so forth...and the head of the National Association of Negro Musicians there. And he had introduced me to Mrs. George on the phone. Mrs. George said, "The musicians are giving a dance for all seniors, this year's seniors, in honor of them. You should, could you stay over and go?" She said, "I'll get an escort for you." So she put Mr. Helsom on the phone again, I'd put him on the phone again. So she said, "Well, I'm going to have Claude Barnett pick her up."

REH: You were just destined to meet.

EMB: Destined to meet. [Chuckles] So we did meet. He did come, picked me up and took me to this dance. Instead of getting a taxi, he walked from 35th to 41st that night,

where I was staying, and we walked and talked and talked. Somehow out of a clear blue sky, I said...he said it was out of a clear blue sky, that I said, "Well, I'm really not interested in anything but my career and my children. I am not thinking of marriage at all." In telling the story, I will say he hadn't mentioned a thing about marriage.
[Chuckles]

REH: But you set the record straight anyway.

EMB: But we kept in touch. I did leave, and then he gave me a handful of letters to people, whom he thought could help me, newspaper people and so forth, in New York.

REH: Now what year was this?

EMB: That was 1931. I'm on the way through, going to New York now. I'm sort of back-tracking to let you know how I met Claude Barnett. But then after I went to New York and made all the contacts that I did, and got into these shows, I got that show that I've told you about rehearsing for. I kept in touch with him, but every experience I had, I'd write it to him in a letter. For example, I went to Lewisohn Stadium and saw the Hall Johnson Singers, and saw Hall Johnson conduct this great choir of his, and heard the symphony, and wrote and told him about this. He published it, my review of the concert. This is the kind of thing he did; when I'd write him a letter that he said was interesting, he'd publish it.

So then I was rehearsing for this show. It was the longest rehearsal of any show that had ever been, oh honestly.

REH: Oh, you were mentioning that, yes.

EMB: And these people who were hoping to get to Broadway, but had become, they were stars in the Negro world. But this was their opportunity to get to Broadway. As I told you, this first show was a revue, you see, and Zora Neale Hurston was one of the writers of some of the skits. She was secretary to the writer, Fannie Hurst, at that time.

REH: Now did either of the authors come to the theater? Did you have contact with them, or the material was just there and you rehearsed it?

EMB: No, she sat in the audience with me, hoping this thing would come off the same way we did. No, yes, she was there

always. Sometimes she wrote on the spot, or changed something on the spot for me. All of the people who wrote skits and did skits, they were there. For example, Moms Mabley was Jackie Mabley at that time; she was hoping to get, and did get on Broadway, and wrote her own material. Dusty Fletcher, the other comedian...Tim Moore, all people like that. Then, as I said, in the orchestra, was Webster Clayton, trumpeter; William Grant Still as a violinist, not as a composer which he is, but he was a violinist. So all hoping...and here I am a green one, the very first time, and then getting into something that's on the way to Broadway like this. I felt highly...I realize, I look back on it, I was really lucky all my life.

The whole career has been like this mostly. Because in between times, I went on out to California. I went...this is Zombie, this play I got into after this other one had flopped. I got into a play called Zombie about Haiti, and got the part. Freddie Washington, all kinds of real actresses had been trying out for it, but they couldn't speak French. And you didn't really have to speak French, but you auditioned in French; and you spoke a patois after you got the part. But I got the part because I spoke French.

REH: You had studied French partly because of the singing anyway, so, yes.

EMB: So then I went back by, and we played in Chicago.

REH: So Zombie was out in California, but then still in New York.

EMB: No, Zombie was in New York. You see, because when I walked out on the stage the last night of this flop, which is about two nights, the second night, we'd been rehearsing eight weeks, but when you walk out, there's somebody in the back of the house who had come to the performance to see me. They were impressed with what they saw that night. You're playing your heart out, you know.

REH: Yes, of course.

EMB: That's one of the things you tell kids, "Always do the best you can when you've got somebody looking at you." It's not always the front seat.

REH: You never know who's looking, but...

EMB: So this man had me to come to audition, and I got that part. Then that was the part of a Haitian woman. So we played on Broadway. It was about two months, it was a good run then. Then we left there and went to...on the way to California, stopped in Chicago again, and then of course, I had a Stage Door Johnny, every night he came to take me home. Then we really did. I changed my mind about the marriage business. We got to talking marriage, and I had an understanding that one day we would. This is now probably '32, and then went out to California. It closed because the woman, the star was really...it was kind of like Sunset Boulevard. It was an oldtime movie star, silent picture star, trying really to make a comeback for talkies. And it was taking place out in California. But she didn't make it. But anyway, it was a good run for me. It exposed me to California.

The phone rang one day, and it was Clarence Muse, the great actor, who wanted to know... He said, "Claude Barnett has told me you were out here. I want to see you. Furthermore, can you sing 'St. Louis Blues?'" So of course, you don't say no. You can't. You say, yes, you can and you learn how. But anyway, as I tell the children when I'm telling the story, that I tell them my father always said, "Anybody who can sing the spiritual can sing the blues, because it's all in what you're thinking about." So I began to think about the right thing, and sang the blues. When he took me out to this stage, audition on this sound stage with Leo Forbstein of Warner Brothers, I sang this. I thought I was going to get a part in a picture, but what I got was a part to sing in the background, and your voice comes out of the mouth of Joan Blondell or somebody.

REH: Oh, yes, so you weren't on screen, just...

EMB: I wasn't on the screen, but it was money to keep your pot boiling.

REH: Now what picture was this?

EMB: Well, I think it was called Ladies of the Big House. It was something that Joan Blondell was going to...they scarcely told you where your voice was going to be used, almost like a blood bank. [Chuckles] You don't know where it's going to go. But anyway, it was. But the next time...you kept doing that. You did that a lot, dubbing your voice for others.

Then finally, I think that was when Roosevelt was running for his second term, "If I am reelected, I will remember the forgotten ones." The first World War, the soldiers were coming back, the depression was starting, and people were lining...

Helen Edmonds: Was it '33...'32?

EMB: Oh, it was the first time, all right. So he was saying, "If you reelect me..." [H.E. sings] Yes, I think she knows that song better than I do too. So that got to be the subject of this segment in the picture called The Gold Diggers of 1933. So it was a big spectacular picture that had a number of segments in it. One was people swimming, Busby Berkeley, the kind of spectacular thing that he did. So this, I got that from an audition. They gave me the song to sing, and I took it home and learned it, and came back. There were several...they had a way of giving you a tryout, and then doing a sample of it on the picture. Sometimes they'd let somebody else see your sample, and they would copy theirs, you know, they've done that a lot to people. Lena [Horne] said they did that to her once with Ava Gardner, and gave Ava Gardner the picture. Well, with this, they did somebody else's tape and showed it to me. But I did my version and forgot that girl's version. So then I...my version.

So I did the Remember My Forgotten Man and the Negro newspapers, if your mother remembered me, it was because the Negro newspapers made me a number one person in their lives, you see. Because it was the first time they had seen a Black woman up there, not in a menial job.

REH: Well, tell a little bit about what your role was in the picture, when you were actually seen on screen?

EMB: This was it. This was a picture, such as this, and I was about to tell you that it was down on the ground, see, this was a tenement house. She was up in the window, and down on the ground, you could see these soldiers, they were really on a treadmill, just going...in this bread line. Standing by a lamppost was Joan Blondell, the star of the picture, as the fallen woman, repeating the verse of the song which says, "I don't..." What's the words, Helen [Edmonds]? "I don't think that I deserve a bit of sympathy. Save your sympathy, that's all right with me. I was satisfied to so-and-so and so-and-so, until they came and took my man away," and that sort of thing. "Remember my forgotten man. You put a rifle in his hand, and then you

sent him far away. You shouted 'Hip Hooray' but look at him today." That sort of thing. So you're going to come over humming all this thing. [Chuckles] She's answering, you know, she's going to hear that.

REH: Well, the typist will take it out.

EMB: Well anyway, okay. So I do the same thing when I'm interviewing somebody. But this was the kind of thing that that song was. So this woman sat in the window, and then my voice was all through the whole picture after that, you see. I sang the song. One of the critics in Chicago said that she came through, it cut through like a trumpet, the voice did.

So the Black newspapers that Claude sent...it was syndicated, the criticisms and so forth. And when it was shown, this picture, The Gold Diggers of 1933, this segment caused Negroes to line up in front of those theaters, where it was showed all through the South and all through the south side of Chicago, all through Central Avenue in Los Angeles, all up and down 7th Avenue in New York and downtown at the Palace Theater. Around the corner, they were, you see, because the Negro newspapers had said, in other words, "This is our new star. This is our star." It was a small part comparatively, except the voice did go all the way through. But you got several glimpses of me there, and this, just a woman in a tenement, right next window was a white woman with a baby, the next woman was a poor person.

It was almost pathetic to have such a small part, and so grateful for the stereotype to be broken, that the Negro people were that grateful of that. They patronized that picture. They took their children to see it. They sent for me to come to...[H.E. again] Does he? [E.M.B. explains comment] She said, "John Hope Franklin makes note of it in his book."* She said, "Page 404."

REH: Page 404, okay.

EMB: This, and then it's one of these lecture concerts started.

REH: Let me ask you some general things too.

EMB: Because teachers would have you come, you see, to talk about how did you get it. How did you get the thing? What and how do you do it? How do you get successful like this?

*John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 2nd ed. rev. and enl., p. 508. New York, Knopf, 1956.

So you tell. You make up a little formula. So I said, "Well, one of the things that... There are three things. There's a formula that I've worked out. It takes about fifty percent preparation." So I could tell the kids, "You better get the whole hundred, because you don't know which part you're going to be called up to use." Then I said, "It's fifty percent preparation, twenty-five percent contacts. Who do you know? And twenty-five percent initiative." Because at that time, there were Ph.D.'s walking around without jobs, and unless you know how to sell yourself...

REH: But after you've gotten the contact, you've got to move yourself then, yes, yes.

EMB: Initiative, and then preparation. To stay there, you've got to know what you're doing. So this, I've had grown people to tell me, "You know, Mrs. Moten, I remember that formula."

REH: Really, yes, yes.

EMB: Yes, all over the country, which made me feel that...you know, it's very satisfying when a person says...even at this day and time. Because you have people in high places now, that were little boys and little girls.

REH: And it meant so much too.

EMB: And the little girls, and they tell you that you influenced them, you see. It's very, very...

REH: When you started talking about that influencing, one of the things that I wanted to ask you, was about influences on your life. Obviously your father was very important in your life.

EMB: Yes, my husband too. And Eva Jessye, R.G. Jackson, the man I told you who arranged the singing thing, the opportunity to make money, and to go to school, and go through college. He and his wife encouraged me to keep up.

REH: Now was Eva Jessye, apart from being the director of the choir, was she in a sense a mentor, guide, or just what?

EMB: No, no, Eva Jessye was a good friend. Eva Jessye was a person that people had confidence in about her appraisal of talent. So they would go to her. She would say the right thing at the right time to the right person. That was the kind of friend she was.

Then to cap it all was the statement the other woman made the other night, I had never heard her appraisal of my doing "Bess" before. This woman made it at that scene, at the affair we had the other night. When she said that, it really meant a lot to me, really, really. Because Eva would tell it like it is. You know, she will tell it like it is. She has a dramatic sense that borders on to, like your husband borders on to that kind of sense, an artistic genius type of thing, a reaction that she has out of nowhere, that is not altogether scientific, but it is a more spiritual reaction. That's the kind of thing that she has, and a natural composer. I don't know that she has studied all that much, all the composition she got was from this man, my mentor, R.G. Jackson, but before my time she was there. She never went to any higher school of learning, other than there at Western. But she got it just by doing it.

REH: She just had it.

EMB: And she is really a good composer, I mean, in serious music.

REH: But I was so surprised to find she was still living. I was happy to find that she was still living.

EMB: Yes, and in good health, ninety years old, with all of her same teeth. Really, it's amazing. And of course that helps people, it makes people think that you haven't changed much, you know, because sometimes you get these plates that don't fit or whatever, it changes the...

REH: It changes the structure of your face.

EMB: Yes, it does. But that is one of the secrets, I think, of looking like you haven't changed is, and that's the way she is. She's a remarkable woman, has her ups and downs and so forth, but none of us will let her suffer, all the lives that she's touched. She's touched a lot of lives, just the same as she's helped me, in saying the right things. She's done the same thing with other people. But you are grateful for people like this.

REH: Was her choir in the Gertrude Stein's, "Four Saints?"

EMB: Yes, same, same Eva Jessye. Not only this, she has the happy faculty of making nonreaders look good. You know, when you go before these conductors and you're supposed to know that stuff, she has taken them off and spent the night

with them in her apartment, training, teaching them by rote to read this.

REH: Very difficult sometimes, Gertrude Stein thing. Virgil Thomson...

EMB: Virgil Thomson music, and that nonsensical words of Stein. She taught those people by rote that stuff, because they couldn't read all that well. She's something else, really. But now that was one of the people that had a lot of influence on my life. [Background voice...short digression follows]

There's not a major white university in the country that does not know Eva Jessye, that's true. Yes, this is true.

REH: She's been artist-in-residence at Michigan, many, many...

EMB: At many of the universities, yes, it's true. She used to live out here in Massachusetts, in Newton actually.

REH: Yes, right nearby. Okay, we'll get you back to California with Joan Blondell and your being the first, really the first appearance in, what shall we say, not stereotyped role for a Black woman. I was going to ask you something else. Somewhere along the line, did you have agents or did it just, word-of-mouth took care of a lot of...

EMB: Up to that time, it was word-of-mouth or seeing, "Who is that?" and finding, up to that time, yes. But after Flying Down to Rio, which was the next picture...you see, I didn't even get screen credit in that one that made me so big with the Negroes. I didn't get screen credit for that. You didn't know who did that, who that woman was. But Leo Forbstein...no, no, Lou Brock...

REH: Did you get voice credit or anything?

EMB: No, no credit, no screen credit. No credit on the credits that come at the end of a picture; that's screen credit. None, when your name wasn't anywhere in there. Later they added it. Later they added it because so many people asked. So that they asked, "Who was that woman that sang this?" Over at RKO, the music department asked, and they found out. They had me come out.

They wanted me to be in Flying Down to Rio. I got that part and sang this song "Carioca." There were dancers that did the dance "Carioca." There were three hundred whites and about twenty-five Blacks, dancers. The dancers did the swing part of it, dressed in black and white. These three hundred dancers, they did the tango and they did also the "Carioca." Because the tango was the "Orchids in the Moonlight." Because it included Argentina too, because there was an Argentine who was a leading man, a leading man. Then Dolores Del Rio played in it. The dance, the "Carioca" part, was done by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

REH: My goodness, now this is about what...1935, '33 to '34?

EMB: '34, it came out in '34, because in '35, I went to Rio, went down to Rio to appear with the picture.

REH: I wondered about the picture being shown in other areas.

EMB: They had it all over the country, all over the world really, but down in the Caribbean and South America, they sent for me to come and be there.

REH: So what did you do in this particular picture Flying Down to Rio?

EMB: I sang in it, and I had the costume of the woman from Bahia, with a basket of fruit in her hair. That was before Carmen Miranda, but Carmen Miranda dressed like this. It was because the Bahiana of the northern part of Brazil did dress like that; they carried the fruit on their heads. They had this lovely wide skirt. They were hand-painted skirts that they had on us. They treated that picture, the set and all, just as though it were in color. And color hadn't come in then. It was beautiful. The hand-made, those little black and white and colorful blocks that they put, on the streets of Rio. Really, they had those on the set. It was really marvelous. The set was just exactly like the beach and the front of the Copacobana Hotel in Rio de Janeiro.

REH: I've never been there.

EMB: Well, I was there and it's exactly like this. I hadn't been there, because this set was in Hollywood. But it was exactly the replica. I was there in '35 or '36, because this was the first time a president of the United States had been down there. He went down in '35, and I went the year after, in '36.

REH: Were you ever a dancer in pictures?

EMB: Never, no.

REH: Just singing. The voice was it.

EMB: The voice. It was only singing and acting. [H.E. again]
She said, "Excellent interrogator."

REH: So your role in Flying Down to Rio, Bahian woman, and what more do you want to tell me?

EMB: I was going to tell you that the same thing happened with that picture. The Negro people were proud of it. And they hadn't forgotten, you see. The Gold Diggers was still showing at different places. And this was the same way. This picture was the very same way, well attended, and you were invited to colleges and universities. I was at Yale once too, and at white and black colleges. Jeanes teachers...

REH: I know, yes.

EMB: Do you know the Jeanes teachers?

REH: Yes, yes.

EMB: In Warren, Arkansas, little teeny places in the rural part, they exposed their children to role models, such as I. This is the kind of thing that made my name so well known among Negro people. I was not known among white people until Porgy and Bess, except in universities, you know. But I'm strictly a product of the Negro race.

REH: That's wonderful.

EMB: The Negro people made me their star. There are folks who still say that I am their star. Sometimes when Claude and I have been in bed way late at night, looking at the television and see this picture come on, these old pictures, you know, and such a short segment it is. Claude said, "Now isn't that something to make a whole career?" And it really did. I had a whole long career, just over having been in those pictures.

REH: I mean it just gave people a sense of their own worth. I suppose, that was part of it, to have someone up there that they could see doing something that was beautiful, something that was artistic, and then again, just to be able to do it.

EMB: Yes, it hadn't been done by one of them before. They really...and you see, the thing that bothers me now, is the fact that...it bothers me a little. It bothers me that in all of their protesting for more and more visibility on television and so forth, in the media, they don't realize what it wasn't before. They don't realize that it's a competitive business, and they're getting more than a lot of white folks get now, because the Negroes are on there in every phase.

We don't own a thing, just a few. There are a few now who do own their own radios and televisions, and getting in on this cable, you see, the Negroes. But Earl Dickerson, a friend of mine in New York, and much of an activist, he's now ninety, said that you must remain angry, "Always stay angry or else you won't get any place at all," and all that. So he doesn't want me to talk about the advancements that we've made. But I know from what we have come, and see these kids on here, like the Cicely Tysons and the Poitiers, with their own companies, and directing, and behind the camera and owning the cameras. It makes me feel very good. This friend of mine who says, "You must remain ever an activist, and always stay angry."

REH: Well, you just know there's still so much further to go, so.

EMB: Well, how much further except owning the TV itself?

REH: Yes, why not?

EMB: I would hope so, but let's go ahead and own it. Then you can hire as many Blacks as you want, but they don't. They tell the white man what to do with his stuff. But now, I can't say that out loud. I'm saying it on there because it's for everybody here. But I think we need a little more of a positive attitude about how far we have come.

REH: What has been accomplished, yes.

EMB: Yes, and it's been a short time, comparatively short time, you know.

REH: Yes, yes.

EMB: That you went around the corner, that you stood in line to see one woman do something that you hadn't ever done before, sing one song. And that you made a star of a woman who sings one song, and it's not a maid song. Now you have people who are in opera, who are retiring from opera. You have people who are in these, making hundreds of thousands, getting in on these soap operas, Dynasty. You have your beautiful clothes and this kind of thing, competing with the best of the whites, and aimed there. These people making hundreds of thousands of dollars in the media. It's a competitive thing. They are measuring up, and they're competing. I feel very happy about it, and I'd like to sing it from the housetop, but no, they say, "Stay angry, stay mad." [Chuckles] Let somebody else stay mad, I think somebody should point out from whence we have come. I really do think so.

REH: Yes. Well, I'm glad you've said it. Then obviously in that period of time we speak of, the hundreds of thousands of dollars, were you perhaps getting fifty dollars a week for being in a picture? What kind of...for the kinds of roles that you had? How did that work?

EMB: I'll tell you, the kind of role I got was a hundred dollars a day, and just short...not too long after that, then you would get a picture contract. But at that time, you didn't get a contract for the picture. Lena [Horne] got a picture contract. Bill Robinson got a picture contract, or which was the run of the picture. But mine was, you got paid for what you did as long as...

REH: Whenever you came in to do your...

EMB: The length of time it did to do your role, you see. That's what I got. You got a hundred dollars a day, and that was supposed to be top. You were a featured artist. Because you see, at that time, Katharine Hepburn was getting five hundred a week only, on the stage, the very same time I was getting that.

REH: This is interesting, yes.

EMB: The same time, seven fifty a week was a good salary, see. Now Bill Robinson got seven fifty a week for several, several weeks, however. But mine was a hundred dollars a day, and I think it took five days to do it. But this was the way that...without an agent, what I got.

After Flying Down to Rio, a man whose name was...the producer of the picture, his name was Lou Brock. Lou Brock said, "You know, my wife and I have decided that..." She used to be on the set a lot. He said, "My wife and I have decided that if you were white, RKO would sign you up. You'd be signed to RKO as their star. But since I know they're not going to, I want to sign you to a personal contract." And he did. Then is when I had a first-class agent, who was a manager. Then he can get you an agent to do this sort of thing.

REH: Yes. Now what was Brock's role?

EMB: Lou Brock was the producer of that picture of Flying Down to Rio. So he had a director. He was the producer, that's the top person, then the director, and the dance directors, and people under that, all the other people. So he signed me to a personal contract, which gave me fifty dollars a week whether I worked or not.

So then, the first thing he did was to get me a job in radio in San Francisco, where NBC, that was their headquarters on the West coast then; it later came down to Hollywood. So I was there for two months with my own radio show, and started out with Meredith Wilson, who wrote "Seventy-five Trombones," or whatever it was. He just died last year. Meredith Wilson had me on what was called "The Carefree Karnival," which came across the country. It was before the coaxial cable, but we played it twice, once for the West coast and one for the... But while I was there, it got so that you could play it once and it would come across. We played it at eight, and it came back here around eight, nine, ten, eleven, about eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock here. So it was during the time that I was there, that was a once-a-week show, "The Carefree Karnival." I was the soloist. He had a big orchestra. He was a marvelous orchestra leader.

And he had a comic and his wife, that was the comedy team of...this is the woman who played "Granny" on The Beverly Hillbillies. Anyway, Irene, she and her husband. She played, and then there was another man, another comic, Senator Claghorne, who played. Then there was a group of singers, the white choir, that backed me up. He used to make marvelous arrangements of songs and spirituals, and other kinds of songs for me to sing.

It was during the time there in San Francisco, that Radio City was built and opened. It was opened, and so that being an NBC outlet, we did the "West Coast Salute to Radio City" from San Francisco. I was the commentator. I read the script, and I was the commentator and the MC for the evening. Somebody again, East, asked, "Who was this woman? She's evidently colored." "I don't know, but who was she?" he said. So of course Meredith Wilson was a very generous man and very--he built me up to the sky and so forth and so on. So after the engagement there was over, Lou Brock sent me East to Shewing, an agency in the Paramount Building, called Robins and Shewing. They booked me in all the theaters and women's clubs all up and down New England, and the theaters around, and then eventually into the Palace Theater. That was the crowning thing for vaudeville in those days.

I was at the home of a friend of mine when I left you the other night, and went to Wilhelmena Adams's house. She's ill and kind of infirm. We were recalling those days, when it was she who made me know, just like Helen [Edmonds] does, the importance of certain things that happened in my life. Helen is the one who made me know that to get an honorary degree from Atlanta University is something. I said, "Oh, you can't be calling me Doctor Moten because of this honorary degree, and you got yours from Heidelberg and worked for it, as Doctor." So she said, "No, but it's important that you got an honorary degree from there. You were honored by your alma mater. They don't give a degree, but they gave you a citation of merit. Then Northeastern Illinois University gave you an honorary degree. Spelman has given you an honorary degree. So it's time to take on the Doctor." Well, she let me know that kind of value.

It was Wilhelmena Adams, to whose house I went the other night, who was the person in my life, during those days in New York, who let me know, "Girl, in show business, when you have top billing on Broadway, with your name up in lights, you have a photograph of that." So she made me get a photographer and photograph this. We were reminiscing on those days. I didn't know the value of recording those moments in your life and in your career. Because you have sometimes to show it to prove that you were there. So anyway, this is the kind of thing that happened, and Lou Brock was the cause of that. I was booked all up and down the East coast.

Then I finally just drifted away and began to, between Claude and me, book myself. So one time I was on the East

coast here, and had done all up and down these rich little towns between here and Connecticut, and all of them down, Hartford and all down, back to New York. I said, "But, gee, now while I'm out East here," I told Claude, "I think I'm going to get an appraisal of my voice actually." People talk about how good she looks when she walks on the stage, and how good she looks, but I want to know can I sing. I want the New York critics to say so. So I said I am going to rehearse...I began to rehearse. I rented a studio in Steinway Hall in 57th Street. My accompanist and I rehearsed there for four to five hours a day, you know, rehearsing some repertoire, rehearsing a concert. We went to Town Hall. So we did this.

I was heard rehearsing the Carmen arias, arias for Carmen. Well, upstairs at the Columbia Concert Bureau, they were casting for Carmen.

REH: I'm continuing the interview with Etta Moten Barnett after a brief interruption. We're going to take some of the material that we have just covered. So please continue.

EMB: I was saying, as the telephone rang that I was rehearsing four and five hours a day. Then upstairs, above the Steinway Hall where I was rehearsing in this studio with my accompanist, rehearsing to go, to try to get to Town Hall, they were casting for a Negro version of Carmen. They called it Carmen Jones. So this young woman who was there at the Steinway store, and who had rented me the studio, said, "Well, you know one thing, you were singing Carmen. I can hear you back in the studio there. You were singing Carmen arias. Would you mind if I called upstairs and told them there that they should hear you?" I said, "Wonderful, that's all right." I told her I didn't mind if she called them, and they did.

So they had me come, and they arranged. They heard me sing these...Judson was the head of the Columbia Concerts then. So Mr. Judson said, "Well, I'm very much interested in this voice, and very much interested in what I hear and see." Told me what suit to wear and all. "You wear the suit you've got on now. And I want to set up an audition for you, because I want to hear...first, I want my conductors..." He controlled all of the philharmonic orchestras across the country.

REH: Judson did?

EMB: Yes, yes, the Columbia Concerts booked them all, and Judson was the head of it. Now how they had, I think it was because he handled the business of Oscar Hammerstein too. He had written the Carmen Jones, you see. He said, "I'm going to have Hammerstein, Smallens, Merkin, my foreign bookers and all to hear you, because I think I want to sign you to a contract. So that Pierre Monteux, who is the conductor, who is the specialist in Carmen, can train you to do the Carmen, and then you can sing it. Then we'll put the people from the Met around you, and have it as the summer concert at Lewisohn Stadium with the symphony."

I did my little mini-concert for the group. Oscar Hammerstein was there. He came up and brought the lyrics to the Carmen Jones...odd lyrics to the tune of "Habanera," "Seguidilla," and the "Gypsy Song." It seemed impossible that this could fit in with the real Bizet. So anyway, I sang it for them. Smallens who said, "Well, now gentlemen, this is all right, this is good, but I am in trouble down on Broadway."

Porgy and Bess has been playing down there, the revival, it's 1942 now, you see. [He] said, "Porgy and Bess has been playing down there for six months, and Anne Brown is getting ready to leave, and more than seventy people would be out of work, and I would be out of a job. And I want this woman to sing 'Bess' for me." Well, that was the end of that. To make a long story short, when I got back to Chicago, he sent the music to me...the cut version of the operatic version that they're doing now. It was cut. They made it more for the theater, with regular theater segments.

REH: More popular in a sense, is that what you mean?

EMB: No, it was for popular consumption, and therefore, short. He didn't change it at all. They just cut out some of the operatic form, and the time version. So it was for popular consumption, in that, it was a theater time, a play time, for a play in the theater.

So he sent this to me. And I learned it, the music, and came back, and in ten days, watched it on the stage. At the end of ten days, I went on the stage doing it without a full orchestra rehearsal at all. But many people, all of the people who had to play with me, would come down and rehearse on their own time with me. Then I got some different business to do. Because of my personality, the director changed some of the business that Anne was doing. He conducted it, I mean, directed me according to my own temperament.

Because you see, it had been said that Gershwin had my type in mind when he wrote the thing. But it was already written. It wasn't written for anybody. I want you to know that. He had it written because he wanted to do this great opera, this great folk opera, and he didn't, I guess, didn't care who did it. But he had in mind a figure for "Bess," and I fit that temperament for him.

REH: I was going to ask you, you said that you were going to get an evaluation of your voice in a sense. You wanted to know, "Could you sing?" Now did you go through with some kind of...getting some people to tell you something, or did the evaluation come in the sense that you kept continuing to get roles?

EMB: No, the type of evaluation I wanted was in concert on my own, seeing what the critics of New York said about my singing voice. I never got to do that though. I never got to do that, because my career and everything took a different turn from being "Bess" in Porgy and Bess for three years after that.

REH: Oh, that long.

EMB: That's right, '42 to '45. We were six months, a year on Broadway, then across the country, all the way to Seattle, Washington, and back, through Hollywood and back to the City Center, and a whole run there, and then on the road again, to Chicago twice, and then to South Bend, Indiana, and then we closed there in 1945.

REH: Yes. I need to ask you what's happening with your personal life while all this is going on.

EMB: I'm meeting my husband, just like we're lovers. We meet each other and have a rendezvous, wherever I was. And because he was special assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture at that time, and he and Dr. Patterson were going across the country and around to see the AAA [Agricultural Adjustment Administration] work and so forth and so on. He was still the head of the Associated Negro Press, but he could go wherever he wanted to...

REH: He had a certain freedom to move around. Yes, yes, but we never did say when you finally decided you were going to get married, and when you got married, how all that came about.

EMB: During this appearance with the picture Flying Down to Rio, and I did the Negro theaters, one of the Negro theaters was in Washington. It was during that time, that I was playing with the Flying Down to Rio, you see. You are on the stage, the picture's on the screen, and then you do a turn about ten or fifteen minutes with an orchestra.

REH: Oh, that's interesting. Was that like publicity?

EMB: No, it was publicity for the picture, and of course, for me too. But it was making a personal appearance with the picture, star of the picture, and it happened that I was featured in the picture. They often did that, you know, movie stars often went with the picture. They called it "making a personal appearance." It helps to draw people to the theater for the picture. Now that's what they had me doing.

REH: Did one only go to big cities or did you go out to small places too?

EMB: We went to wherever the picture was playing. With me, I went to small cities too, because that's where it played, in Negro theaters. Washington was one, Richmond was another, Norfolk, Virginia, was another. That was, down that coast. So when it played, two things happened. One thing happened that was interesting and history-making that Helen [Edmonds] has referred to, right there in Washington. It happened on the 31st of, I believe, October. It was when, or was it January, I believe, it was F.D.R.'s birthday. They had balls, birthday parties there, big balls all over the city. They had one downtown. They had a theater downtown, a big theater benefit. All the people that were gathering, that were playing in the city, would go to this theater and do a turn. I went down to whatever the theater was downtown, and Duke Ellington was playing. He played for me, my music, that was singing the "Glory Road" and some other twelve-minute thing. And then I came back to the South, what do you call it, the Negro part of town, where they had the Negro dance and party, celebrating his birthday.

There was a person there, whose name was Mrs. McDuffie. Mrs. McDuffie was the wife of the valet, and the man that F.D.R. had brought with him from Albany, New York, had met him in Atlanta, and that was his barber and the man who put him to bed, that was the last person who spoke. Mrs. McDuffie was a very well-trained woman, a speaker, and a person who campaigned for him. But to be with her husband, she was

an upstairs maid in the White House, see? All of them, both of them, on very good terms with the Roosevelts themselves.

So Mrs. McDuffie was here as the representative of the White House, at this place. So she said, "Miss Moten," when they introduced us, "the President always has himself rolled down to the screening room to look at the picture you were in. He loves seeing you sing 'Remember My Forgotten Man.' I wondered if you would mind coming to the White House to see him?" she asked. So I said, "Well, I would love to. Nothing would please me more."

Well, there again I didn't know what an unusual thing that was, because pretty soon, the very next day at the theater, came this note, hand-delivered, from the White House, from Mrs. Roosevelt inviting me to the White House, as though she had just discovered that I was there, and not referring to Mrs. McDuffie at all, and inviting me to come up that evening, I think the next evening, to sing and to meet some of her guests at the White House. She would send a White House car, and did, for me and my accompanist, and asked me if I would bring some music along. I did. I took about a thirty-minute little concert with some Negro spirituals, and "Remember My Forgotten Man."

My accompanist and I went up there, and went upstairs to the residence part, the second floor, a small living room, not as large as this one, with a piano in it. He came, was rolled in with his long cigarette, and blinking with his pince-nez glasses, and saying hello, and joking and carrying on. There was Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor, who did the sculptured heads of the three presidents, and Mrs. Vincent Astor, the beautiful one, one of the prettiest women in the world during her day, and the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace at that time, and the daughter, and the mother of the children, Sissy and Buzzy. They were the little children who were there at the White House then, staying with the grandparents.

He came in, that's all that was there. So I talked about Eva Jessye and the spirituals. I sang some of her spirituals. She had a lovely volume of spirituals, called "My Spirituals," unusual in that they were spirituals from around the Kansas area, not the deep South. So I sang several of hers and talked about her, and then sang...and told him how "Remember My Forgotten Man" got to be written and about this thing. He said, "You don't have to tell me, I see the picture all the time." So I was supposed to stay

a half hour, stayed an hour, and came out and there the press was. It was one of those unusual things that I picked up on it, again, in my life.

Then I went from there, because I had already been invited to a party for some of my socialite friends in Washington. They all wanted to know how it happened. When I told them that Mrs. McDuffie, the maid and I met, oh, they wanted me to soft-pedal that, you know. Don't say that, just... I said, "That's the way it happened." And not only this, if I had waited for the regular way you get into the White House, I didn't know this, but you generally have to go through Steinway Hall in New York, and they book you into the White House. Oh yes, that was the way that was.

Then they said, "You know, you're the first colored person that has sung there." I said, "Is that so?" "Yes," they said. But the funny thing is the week afterwards, the first person would have been Lillian Evanti, another Negro singer, who lived there in Washington. And don't you know they were mean enough to be glad that I had been to the White House? But it was one of those things that they were again proud that this first Black woman to sing at, to be invited to the White House, and to sing there. But it was nice, it was lovely, and I appreciated it. But there again was something else to make headlines about. Well, that's the way that happened.

REH: Now when you were mentioning the names, you didn't mention Mrs. Roosevelt's presence in that living room. Was she there also?

EMB: Of course, of course, oh, and the President too. They were both there, certainly she was there. Then that happened in Washington. When I left that particular theater, I think it was the Lincoln Theater where they had this movie there, there was a Jewish man whose name was Aldridge, I think. I forgot his name...Leffwich, a name like that, but anyway, he owned a series of theaters, especially played for Negroes. So it was such a hit there, that he wanted me to go down to Richmond and to Norfolk, where he was opening theaters. I think he opened a theater in Richmond the first time, and I played there. Then I went to Norfolk.

In Norfolk, I didn't realize how close I was to Capahosic, Virginia. My telephone rang there at Dr. Bird's, where I stayed, you didn't stay in hotels because you had to stay with friends. I was staying at Dr. Bird's house there. The phone rang, and it was Claude Barnett, who was over at

Dr. Moton's summer home in Capahosic, Virginia. He said, "The Motons, Dr. Moton said that he'd like to invite you over to spend the weekend with us when you're finished there." So then Doctor got on the phone, and the housekeeper said that I would stay at the lady's house up the street, up the road from them, and would I come? So I said that I would. Claude reminded me that we were planning to marry in August, and this is June, so we can talk about the wedding plans. So we went over.

Whenever Dr. Moton had something to do with the Republican party, he generally had Claude and several others come down, Dr. Imes, G. Lake Imes came down for kind of a conference with him. So they were there for this type of conference. They fished in the daytime, and they sat on the lawn by the York River. There was a lady at your affair the other night who told me, she was getting ready to move on the York River, at that very place. Because when I mentioned it, she remembered that.

Now what were you going to ask me?

REH: I just wanted to be sure this is Robert Russa Moton. I just wanted to be sure.

EMB: Yes, president at that time, of Tuskegee. Claude Barnett was a graduate of Tuskegee from 1906, and had been interested since the days of Booker T. Washington, and was then a trustee of Tuskegee, so of course, had always been sort of the mouthpiece for Dr. Moton and all the presidents up to that time, of Tuskegee. The Associated Negro Press was at their service always. He was just crazy about Tuskegee. Well, anyway, he was down for one of these conferences, and they invited me over and I went. They met me at some kind of courthouse, name of the place. So I stayed up the street and would come down for talks on the lawn and so forth, overlooking this wide, four-mile-wide river which flowed by. Boats would go up and down, pleasure boats, because it emptied into the Chesapeake Bay, as you know.

So we went out fishing. I went fishing with them out in the boat. Doctor had a motor boat and a captain, a man who took care of the boat, Captain Ed. So Doctor and Claude...it was a good size boat. Claude was up in the front of the boat, and Doctor and I were in the back, and fishing, and Captain so-and-so baited my hook. And of course, I pulled in many more fish than they did, twenty-six of them. I've got a picture of that too.

So Doctor said, "How's everything coming between you and Claude?" I said, "Oh, fine, we plan to marry in August." He said, "August? Why not marry while you're down here? Come on, let's go get married tomorrow." You know we did? We went into town to this so-and-so courthouse, I forgot the name of the place, and got the license. And you had to be married by a Virginia preacher. Dr. Imes was a Presbyterian minister, I think. He was there. But so, G. Lake Imes took part of the ceremony.

There was the help in the house. This great big white, big wolfhound, and I'm in an ordinary suit. Claude, I think, he did have on a coat. And Dr. Moton and the cooks, and the people with the aprons on, and that was the wedding party. Claude said I made this up, but truly, just about the time...we had no music or anything, but just at the time they were about to say, "I pronounce you man and wife," by this little creature who couldn't hardly hear nor see, but he did say, "I pronounce you man and wife," to get within the law, that boat came up or down, and blew. I said, "That was the music." Claude said that was my... He said I made that up.

But it was a very romantic thing, and we got married there, and then got on a boat down at Chesapeake Bay somewhere, and came up the ocean to New York. I got on the train and went to...back to Chicago...oh, where did I go? No, I was living in New York at the Y. He went back to Chicago. Then I got together, had my announcements printed. And we sent out announcements we're already married.

Shortly after that, the very next season, I don't know how long, but shortly after that in, that was '34, so it was '35, I went to Brazil. We decided, he decided that since I had this going, to go ahead and keep the engagement, went to Brazil and to Argentina, and came back, and went on tour, concerts.

REH: I was going to ask, do you feel that he was particularly sensitive to women's needs just in a general sense, or was his sensitivity and concern for you as a person? Do you think that allowed him to let you just go on with your career?

EMB: Let's see, I think he was sensitive to women's needs. I know that he wanted me to go on with my career, because that was understood before we married. I know that he began to know how to book me and that sort of thing, and to write

letters and to write publicity material, and make brochures, and that sort of thing. He really became my manager then in booking me for concerts and lecture-concerts, and that sort of thing, through his own contacts and those that were interested that I would gather up. So, no, and also I think from the way he treated his women correspondents, I think that he was not a chauvinist by any means, not a chauvinist by any means, because he had one correspondent in Washington who, he saw to it that she got to be in the Press Gallery at the White House when...

REH: Now was that Alice Dunnigan?

EMB: Alice Dunnigan, that's exactly who it was. So he, you seldom see it in her writings, but he gave her her start. He gave her her start, and made things possible for her to open other doors.

REH: We're almost finished with this side, so maybe we'll just stop here and pick up tomorrow.

REH: This is February 12, 1985, Ruth Hill continuing the interview with Etta Moten Barnett. Now that you and Claude Barnett are married, maybe you would tell me a little bit about his beginnings, his background, and how he got to where he was at the time he married you.

EMB: Claude Barnett was an only child too. He was the only child of Celena Farthing Barnett and his people were from Mattoon, Illinois, southern Illinois. They had come there from a place in Indiana, called Lost Creek. Now Lost Creek was a settlement that was set up by Negroes who had come across the country, some of them in covered wagons, as his people had, come across the country from North Carolina. Anderson was the family name on the maternal side. That was a matriarchal family. So they had come by covered wagons, and stopped in some place in Tennessee, and made a crop, and then came on across to this place called Lost Creek, which has been written about. Those pioneers have been written about by a young man named Hogan [Lawrence D. Hogan], a historian, and who incidentally has written about Claude Barnett and the Associated Negro Press, the Black press in general. [Lawrence D. Hogan. A Black National News Service: The Associated Negro Press and Claude Barnett, 1919-1945. Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985.]

So Claude's people were there; they went to Mattoon. His grandfather had set up the public school for Blacks, of course southern Illinois was just as segregated as was any other Southern town. So it seems that...I have this registration book of his, that was written in Spencerian handwriting, you know, the kids' names and so forth, that were in his school, in his classes. So it seems that his grandmother was very feisty, and had said that she was not going to send her children to any Negro school. And she sent them across town to the white school, away from her husband's school. But anyway, that showed the strength of this lady. She had seven, let me see, five daughters, I think it was, and one son.

Claude was the child of the third daughter. She was a wonderful woman. She was, it seemed that she was in Florida. She lived with white people, and served as sort of a companion to them, in homes, as well as taking care of the children. She chose families where there was a library, so her little boy could read and have access to this library. She was an aristocrat at heart, no formal training really, except that she was well read, well read, and followed all kinds of religions to know about them. The Rosicrucians, I know she read about, and attended group meetings of the Rosicrucians, and found out what that was about through that.

She was an inquisitive-minded woman all of her life, even to the aged section of her life, when I knew her as my mother-in-law. These aunts reared this boy. She brought him to Chicago because she had a sister who was married and living there. It was into that home that she took him, and then went and got somebody else to work for. That happened to be in the home of Sears, of Sears, Roebuck. So she sent this young child to Knoxville College to go to school. He didn't like it, and his grandmother told her to send and get him. He wrote his grandmother that he was lonesome and he didn't like the food, and so she made him come home.

So she took him out to work with her at the Sears home, out north of Chicago. Sears was a gentleman of the first water, said Claude, and he patterned his life after him, with this gentleness and this old-time courtliness. And if anybody knew him in his, all of his life, all of the women just fell for him like everything because he had this courtliness, and he knew how to be errant and so forth. So this was the influence in his life, the Sears of Sears and Roebuck.

He used to tell stories of Mr. Sears. I mean just by serving him his breakfast, he would have him sit down with him, and he trained him by example how to eat, and how to handle his knife and fork, and how to be, as I said, courtly, and just affected his manners and manner of living, and his tastes. As we were married, he would send to Vermont to get the syrup directly and this, because Mr. Sears used to send to Vermont to get his syrup. This kind of influence was his.

So then finally he got to be a teenage boy. He was very tall, six feet four-and-a-half. So he was early a tall young man. So he had to have his suits, his mother had his suits tailored, early, from teenage. And he began to have his shoes made. Claude had a good taste in clothes, the very best worsted suits and that sort of thing in his clothes, and hand-made shirts and all this stuff. And he used this as an excuse, because he was so tall, he couldn't buy them off the rack, because the sleeves were always too short, which is true. But it cultivated a taste in him for the finer things in life, that kind of finery. So he wasn't a fop, or that kind of thing, but it was just quality that he liked. He got the influence, the father figure was Mr. Sears.

Then Mr. Sears told his mother that it was time for him to know something about his own people. So he had read about this Booker T. Washington and that school, that he had in Tuskegee. In fact, she ought to send him there. So they sent him to Tuskegee as a young boy. He graduated from Tuskegee in 1906. Tuskegee then really was Tuskegee Institute, and an industrial school. His diploma was in steam-fitting, but he couldn't turn on the radiator at home, you know. I said, "Well, you just came from that as a joke," because he didn't know anything about steam-fitting. But he always used Tuskegee graduates as artisans in our home. If you were from Tuskegee, a shoemaker, you had your shoes fixed, or you're a plumber, that was who he was going to find to use in our home.

He graduated from there, came back to Chicago, and began to work in the post office, which was the safe job and still is in Chicago, because they have a large post office and many branches, and many Blacks work there. As I say, the benefits are good and safe, and many of them were real estate owners from working there, the same way of course with the sleeping car porters, because it kind of started there with Randolph.

But anyway to get back to Claude, he began to work in the post office, and worked in the periodical department there, and reading through this, I say reading, as well as sorting. He began to read the advertisements, and then he began to read the fact, notice the fact that there was not much in the papers about colored people, and Negro people.

So the war came, 1919 came, further back than 1919, but the first World War came. And he did not go to war because there was a time when the committee that selected you would say that you can be exempt because you are of more service to the country out of the Army. His mother had moved then to California. He decided to go out there.

It was something concerning the first World War, the country was in a turmoil. So he went across to visit his mother, but he went to Mr. Abbott of the Chicago Defender, and told him that with his experience with the ads and so forth, that he could take and sell ads on the way out, because he was going to stop in these different towns where there were Negro newspapers, like the Kansas City Call and Nebraska papers, and all the way out. So he did get this assignment from Mr. Abbott to sell ads for the Defender, and he did this all the way out to California.

It was during this trip that he realized that from city to city, and town to town, Negroes didn't know what each other were doing, because the white papers didn't have.... There was this silent agreement among them, there certainly would be no pictures of Blacks, and nothing except that which was sensational would they get in the paper, nothing that they did socially or that sort of thing, was in any of the newspapers. So he saw this lack. By the time he got out there, he had in his mind to have a syndicated news service. [H.E. speaks; E.M.B. responds] Yes, we should show this to Clarence [Williams]. Because I wish we'd had this to show to Clarence, you know, when I was telling him about the book yesterday. I didn't have anything to show. [H.E. again] You didn't think about that. [Another interlude] Oh, I see. Thanks for showing this, because this isn't getting around as fast as it should. You can't get good reviews, whether or not, we got a couple of good reviews, but no reviews at all. Amazing. But anyway, it's very well done.

So he saw the need for Negroes knowing about each other through syndicated news. So he started the Associated Negro Press, having studied the format of AP. It was started in 1919, that year. That was a very, only one of its kind for

those many years, up to 1965, I think, when he closed it and retired, and started writing his memoirs, and got a couple of chapters. He died in 1967. They're unfinished still. But when he started that news service, it was one of its kind, and it got to be very, very reliable because it was built on him.

REH ...a man of integrity.

EMB: Exactly, it was built on his integrity. He had stringers. He didn't have a lot of money, because he didn't charge very much for it, for the newspapers. The newspapers used the news because it was always well documented; and he didn't have but one or two suits, and that was never a suit because of an inaccuracy of his own but some of the newspapers, they were repeating his stuff with that. And one or two were sued, but other than that, it was always a reliable source of news.

The newspapers used it, the magazines, even when they themselves, most of them were weekly, but when they themselves got to the point that they could have the ticker tape thing in their offices, then the UPI began to appeal to the Negro public, the reading public. UPI began to reach over into Negro newspapers and get their reporters, and so forth. UPI was, now was it UPI? INS, International News Service, INS started doing that, and recognizing this public that they were neglecting. So they would put the ticker tape into an office. But even after they had that kind of daily ticker tape news, the secret of Claude's success was knowing how to select news for his audiences, his readers, and that is a special knack with the Negro paper. Because, you see, he himself had as a Republican, and as a person in politics, and in the reading...of course, everybody was Republican then, you were still paying the debt to Abraham Lincoln for setting you free. So all of them were...then because of the integrity of this news service, he was called upon by the national Republican party.

Now his papers show all of this; they are at the [Chicago] Historical Society. Helen has used his papers in her writings. And as a Republican, she has delved into a lot of the historical, the news and the facts that are there. So it was a nonpartisan paper though.

It was a nonpartisan organization, the Associated Negro Press. One of his editors in the office with him, was actually a card-carrying Communist. He said that it was all

right with him, but just don't mix your politics into this paper. The same as he did not mix the Republican politics in there, except as a news vehicle. And then he did as much for the Democrats as he did for the Republicans. As a matter of truth, after we married, he became a Roosevelt Democrat, because that's what I was. Then of course, he himself felt that the Democrats were doing more, were turning things around, doing more for Negroes than the Republicans did. Republicans were getting more like the Southern Democrats were, you know, Bankhead and all of those. So anyway, this was his world.

Then he was interested in Africa, because he had classmates who were Africans at Tuskegee in his early days, and he was a prolific writer and a correspondent. He wrote to them. He received African newspapers all the time. He wrote to people whose names were in the paper, got acquainted with them, and knew all of the potential leaders in Africa, before they became leaders, and a number of them who came over as students, like Nkrumah, Azikiwe, and Ojukwu from Nigeria. They came to Illinois University.

His aunt, one of the sisters of his mother, was a housemother down at Illinois University, and knew these African students. She always saw to it that they'd come up to Chicago, and meet her famous nephew. And Bess was always very proud of Claude, all of the aunts were. When they'd meet these African students, they knew what his interest was. They'd see that they got acquainted with him.

He kept up with Africa through the newspaper, long before we ever went there. He knew these people by correspondence. As I said, when they were potential leaders, Azikiwe himself was one. He carried him on his stationery, as a correspondent from Nigeria. First, from the Gold Coast, where he was in the colonial days, and then after, Nigeria. He knew the folks of those people; he knew their plans also. So that when we went there in 1947, he knew people and was able to just follow along by thinking and seeing what their plans were about getting their own independence, and came back and reported it to the Black people. This is in a nutshell what Claude Barnett was, the kind of man he was, and that was his background.

REH: Yes, another thread that we need to pick up, is your children. I think we left them very, very young, with your parents. As I recall, we did not get their names and something that you'd like to tell me about them.

EMB: Yes, the oldest daughter's name is Sue, Sue Barnett Ish. My husband, when they became of age, they themselves changed their names to Barnett, Claude adopted them. So it was Sue Barnett Ish, it was Sue Brooks, because her father's name was Brooks. Then the second girl is Gladys. The baby girl was Etta V.; she's named after me.

Then there's an Etta in everybody's family now, because when Sue married and had a baby, one girl, she's Etta too, Etta Sue. So the youngest daughter had, the middle girl does not have children, but the youngest daughter had four. So I have five grandchildren. And they're grown, the grandchildren are grown now.

But now to go back to...when Claude and I married, and the girls were, as they finished high school...when the last one finished high school, we brought them to Chicago to live with us. Then they went to Hyde Park High School. Sue finished high school in Kansas City, and Gladys did too. Etta V. came and finished high school in Chicago, at one of the good high schools at that time in Hyde Park. So then Sue went to, I sent them to Talladega College for their undergraduate work. Then both of them went to University of Chicago for their graduate work.

Gladys was my daughter who suffered from all of the foibles of a middle child; and they wrote books about that. What caused me to have in my bio that I went to Northwestern University, was because I wanted to find out what to do with Gladys. I didn't find out at all because they don't have a cure for the middle child [Chuckles]...and their troubles. So now she's, let's see, Sue is sixty-five on February 3rd of this month, and Gladys will be sixty-five eighteen months from then. She is now in Denver, and has, because she would prefer to have been my only child, she just cut herself off from the family, severed herself several years ago when she was about forty-something. So she's in Denver, and has chosen some bad marriages, and that sort of thing, and caused herself to become ill. She was not well. So anyway, you figure just two out of three is a pretty good average.

These other girls have accepted what you gave them, their training, and so forth and so on. They are doing well. Sue is in the Department of Human Services. She married quite well, and had a good life with a very fine husband in Memphis. He practiced there as a surgeon, went under the College of Surgeons.

One of the interesting things that happened in their lives, and our lives together, was that we four, Claude and I and Sue and Stanley, went to San Francisco when he was inducted into the College of Surgeons, as a specialist. And a classmate was the brother of Nancy Reagan, whose father, Dr. Loyal Davis was the head of the National College of Surgeons at the time. So Nancy's mother and father and Sue and Stanley and I, and all of us, had a lovely time in San Francisco together, because Mrs. Davis, Nancy's mother and I, had been in radio together for several years in Chicago, while Nancy was off in college and Doctor was getting established as this famous neurosurgeon, which he became later.

So I've never said that to the Reagans who are in the White House now, but that is my close association with her mother. Because we were personal friends, because whenever...she just could not stand discrimination. Any time she thought that I might be going into a situation where I might be discriminated against, she wanted me to let her know. You talk about Miss Lillian, what's his name's mother? You know, Carter's mother. She could not hold a light to Edith Davis if she got started, because she just couldn't stand it. She just was very much against discrimination, and she let it be known in very good strong language.

One of the occasions was, I said, "You know, I'm getting ready to send, my granddaughter is coming up from Memphis to go to private school, to Latin School, similar to the one here in Boston." So she said, "When Nancy went to Latin School, they didn't have any Negroes there." She sounded like a Southerner, but I don't think she was Southern, but she was a dialectician. She spoke the Negro dialect better than I did. As a matter of truth, I didn't try on the show, she did, and she was the one who did it. But she said, as I think of, she said, "Now, if you have any trouble, you let me know. I don't want no foolishness from those damn people," you know one of those kind of things.

This is the kind of person she was, and is, because she's ill now out in Arizona, I think, in a home, because Doctor has died. But Nancy made on over her father, step-father who adopted her, more than she did her mother, like she probably was prouder of him or something. But anyway, her mother is the salt of the earth, really. So that was the fact that the boy went through, and was a classmate, in that sense, with Claude, I mean, there was Stanley Ish, Sue's husband.

Sue's husband, that was in October one year, the next year, he was a corpse, from a very, very fast growing lung cancer. So he died one year, and my husband died the next year, and my mother died the next year. So we were widows together. Of course, she moved home and sold her place, sold out completely. She and her daughter came, well, the child was already there going to school. Her child graduated from Latin, and was accepted at Stanford, and graduated from Stanford, and then got her master's at Berkeley in health planning. She's now getting another master's in business administration, M.B.A. She's in Cleveland at the Western...Helen [Edmonds], what's the name of...Wesleyan, Case Western Reserve. Yes, that's right, it is Western. That's where Etta Sue goes to school. Case Western Reserve, that's right. That's where she is now.

She shocked us the other day by telling us she's already married and already pregnant, and going to have a baby. So that's going to be my first great-grandchild.

Etta V.'s, my youngest daughter's oldest son, is going to be a father, June the 8th, we think, that's Etta V.'s birthday. He's expecting one. So I've got two on the drawing board, [Chuckles]...great-grandchildren. So this gives you the background of the children and Claude, who was very, he was a little bit, quite a little bit ahead of his time. [H.E.: And I take my credit; two of your grandchildren graduated with me.]

That's right, two graduated at North Carolina Central, the two of them did.

REH: When we left yesterday, I think you said, you were married, you took the boat up to New York, you went to New York and your husband went to Chicago. So I think we need to pick up your career at that point, and continue forward in whatever way you want to do.

EMB: Yes, and also I think we decided that we were going to, the plans had already been made to go to South America, to appear in Argentina and in Rio de Janeiro with the picture that was playing down there. And I did that. I was two months in each place. I came back, and of course, and went to, always falling back on the concerts, and the telling about whatever experience I'd had since the last time. So that was the trip to Rio, and the talking about the people and the differences, and things you'd learned about people was added to the Hollywood experience. So therefore you do

lecture-concerts, talk about the music, and then add this music to the folk music that you have. After that particular tour, I was able to have three- and four-week tours at the time. I scarcely did more than that, because I didn't like being away from home so much at the time. So you could control it, and this is the way we did.

That was up until the thirties now. We're in the thirties. In the meantime at home, sometimes with these flurries with radio, where I was on the radio with Mrs. Davis and another white cast of singers. I would fit in because I was the person who, this was a small community and an imaginary community, "The Crossroads." It was sponsored by Quaker Oats, and so the Aunt Jemima was a white woman. And Aunt Jemima's friend was Mrs. Davis. This "Cabin at the Crossroads" was done. Of course, they would kill us if we did it now, but it was done then. I was always that visitor who had left "the crossroads" to go out in the world, and I would come back and I would sing and tell them about where I'd been. Actually, it was much nicer, yes, it was nice to tell.

So I would go and come back from a tour, and do this sort of thing each week. That went up to '38 or later, in the forties. So I was up this way during that time. That's when I think I told you, did I tell you about how I went into Porgy and Bess.

REH: Just briefly, but we need more details on that.

EMB: Yes, because this is one of these tours, you see, the coming up after you had made these contacts. I had this agent who had taken over from...Lou Brock had no use for me anymore. He, too, his life changed. I don't know, something happened to him, his wife separated. But anyway, we weren't client and agent anymore. But I also kept the contact with Robins and Shewing, and whenever I wanted to have an engagement, and wanted it negotiated financially, I would get it. Then I'd have them negotiate the finances. This is the kind of thing I did with a series of concerts from Boston down to New York on this, these small towns, Milford and those, all up and down. And well-to-do women's clubs, they'd have afternoon things or early evening things. I would be the whole program, you see. Those were very nice engagements, and that kind of thing.

So I found myself in New York at the end of one of those tours, and that is when I decided to get an appraisal of my voice. At some time, I think I told you about that.

REH: Yes.

EMB: That was at the end of one of those tours, after the South America and all like this, then after marriage. The tours began to...he [Claude] finally took over in learning the business of making itineraries and so forth for me. Then it went into Porgy and Bess, and I went on the stage. I think I've told you about going onto the stage without the orchestra rehearsal. Well, that caught on, and I stayed in that for three years.

REH: Yes, that was on Broadway.

EMB: Broadway, yes, the Majestic Theater. I stayed there for six months or a year, I don't know, but it was quite a long time. Then we went on tour, came to Boston, then went to Chicago, and Cleveland and large cities, and then to Chicago to sort of... We did Chicago twice because we did the country twice in those three years, because we went to Chicago and then on back out to the coast, all the way out, all the Western states and back. Claude joined me once in Oregon when he was out there, and back in Los Angeles. Then we came back.

We didn't go much into the South. I don't think we went, yes, we did. We went to Austin. But we covered the United States very well with it, and even the University of Kansas, because in 1945... '43, I believe it was, was when I was able to, we played the university. The president handed me my citation of merit, which they had bestowed, but which they didn't get to give me before. The citation of merit was given by them, the alumni and faculty and trustees, in lieu of an honorary degree. They don't give honorary degrees.

REH: At Kansas?

EMB: That's the University of Kansas at Lawrence. So they gave, I was their graduate in 1931 from them, so in forty-something, they gave me a citation of merit. It's given to those alumni who have done well in their chosen fields. That was then, all of that happened then. A number of interesting things happened, discrimination and that sort of thing, in places where you didn't expect it. Yes, we did go through the South, Jackson, Mississippi. I know Todd Duncan ran into some kind of discrimination, and that just devastated him; and he couldn't work that night. He went around to the box office to pick up tickets for friends and was jostled by some white people.

REH: Had he not experienced much discrimination? Or was it just that particular thing?

EMB: It was the surprise of that, you know. Here you are, they are standing in line to see you, and you, just because you are not white, you receive this. This is the reason it was such a shock to me, because of the place it was. It was in Pocatello, Idaho, you see. And there's not many Negroes there any day especially. So you get there, and you go into the hotel and all of the white, you know, the stage hands and the woman that handles your wardrobe, the wardrobe mistress, they go up and sign and get the keys and go on upstairs, you know. But at the time you were about to go, the stage manager is with you because he is being courteous, and they've called him and told him that I was not to register, because the owner had said that whenever I did come, after he found out that the star of the show was Black, they said that I was to make a certain telephone call, to call the YWCA. That I was not to register there.

He said he couldn't quite understand it. So the woman, the registrar came out and brought me the book. She said, "You see, you were registered here. I want you to know it's not my fault. The man's son had registered you, but when the father came and found out that you were a Negro, he said, [Voice softens] 'We can't do that.'"

Well, you're standing there and people are passing you by. And you're embarrassed and you're humiliated, and you melt in tears, you know. So they began to ask the maids if they knew anybody where I could stay, this and that. So they told her, told the maid about a person who was a former employee of that man, they might have a place for me. So this, but when I called this telephone number, it was the YWCA. The woman said, "Don't move." She said, "Just refuse. You tell them that I have no place for you. I am not going to have you stay at the YWCA. You can stay there." She said, "It's just discrimination."

Then they told me that Paul Robeson had been there to sing at the university...we were at an auditorium...but he was there to sing at the university, and they would not put him up. The professor had to come and get him, and kept him at his home, and it was not too long before that. She said, "There is still discrimination." She said, "Just tell them that I have no place for you, and don't move." But of course I did, because there was nothing else to do. They gave me this address, it was...and I slept on their couch.

It was a small house; [Chuckles] they didn't have any extra room, and it was cold, cold, cold. And I slept on the couch, and I told them...I used my prerogative that twice a week I could put my understudy in, I didn't have to sing. So this is one night I did not sing. I told them I wouldn't sing to this audience, and I really couldn't because I was so...

REH: Emotional, yes.

EMB: Oh really. So this was the only time, and the reason it did me in so is, it's such a surprise. You just didn't expect that this was there. Then you began to think of what a world you were living in. It was just, it tore me up, really tore me up. But it's the surprise part of it that bothers you, that shocks you. So I didn't sing that night.

I was prepared for it when, the other place I met it was, I just simply didn't sing there, and that was at Salt Lake City, and they are really prejudiced, and prejudiced with their own people...

I don't know where this...I digress a lot, and I don't know from what.

REH: Well, you were picking up on how you got into Porgy and Bess, and suddenly we leaped into, and you were talking about the tour, touring for three years. And it brought back these memories.

EMB: Yes, of discrimination. From Porgy and Bess came, you see, that was '45. At the end of Porgy and Bess, I found, before the show ended, I was having hoarseness, and just a lot of hoarseness, and having to stay out, and put the alternate really, the last year, we had an alternate. Each year you made a new contract. It was better and better, and it's a very, very hard thing to sing. It's really opera. You don't do opera every night, you see. It had devastated my voice; it just had ruined it completely.

So when I was in New York, I went to a specialist, one Doctor Ruskin. He told me that if I were his wife, he would not do it himself. He would not try to remove the cyst. "If you were my wife, I would send you to the very best person who does this. That's Dr. Chevalier Jackson, down at Temple University." The man who invented the laryngoscope, that you stick this light down in, and can operate by the light in the throat. So he sent me there. I went there. That was evidently between, one of the layoff times, because

I didn't need but ten days. As a matter of truth, I went down and he took this off at the hospital.

I came back to New York that same night, but I was just not to talk. So for those two weeks, I went to movies in the day and shows at night, where I wouldn't have to talk to anybody, went alone.

Then later, in that year, to continue to rest my throat after being in the Porgy and Bess, we went to Africa. Claude was a trustee of the Phelps Stokes Fund. In the Phelps Stokes Fund, each trustee was given an opportunity to travel in Africa. They had a school at, the Phelps Stokes Fund did, at Kakata in Liberia. You would go and inspect the school and make your appearance and so forth, and get the feel of things. So Claude went, and I went along for the ride, and was not to sing. But later, I went back, we went back because we made friends.

We went to Liberia and to the Gold Coast and to Nigeria, and of course to Dahomey and so forth, and Togoland, the little countries in between, all down the West coast and then back through London, back home. That was a wonderful experience, of course, I've never been the same since, because we've been back dozens of times since. We'd go back every year that Tubman was re-inaugurated, and he did about four times, every four years.

REH: Now what year was this that you first went there?

EMB: Nineteen forty-seven, you see, because that was after the Porgy had closed in 1945, and then the throat business, and then the rest of the throat, the resting of the voice, you see. Then by the time, '47, I was ready to...so I gave recitals for the benefit of the soldiers or whatever, wherever, in each one of those cities.

We went into the interior in each of them, by boat with President Tubman, went through, all down the river. There are large, large rivers in Liberia. We went part down the ocean, and part into that river, but flying with this yacht of his, big boat of his.

He took his...he always had elections. At this particular time, it was his annual conferences that he had with the people in the interior. At that time there were, I think, five provinces. This was one, and each one had a district superintendent; he represented the government where he was. We went to Sinoe; we went to Cape Palmas, that's the

farthest town down on the end of that. Then we came back. He stopped off at Sinoe for his annual conference, he, the president; and then he sent us on down to pick up the superintendent at Cape Palmas, but in order to see Cape Palmas ourselves, because Firestone had plantations of rubber all up and down there. They would tell us about the people and the customs and so forth, and we found...

So we came back to join him and see him conduct this annual conference, where the people in several different tribes, he'd have to have two and three interpreters to interpret English into their language. He would say this, it would be said three different times, because this room would be full of those different tribal people. I think there were about twenty-seven different tribal languages at that time in Liberia. That was a great experience, the first time in Africa, to have gone to this African country that, the only republic on the continent; the other one as near to it was over, independent one was, Haile Selassie, over in East Africa at Ethiopia.

So this one was very much on the style, sort of democratic thing like the United States, but not exactly. He had a vice-president and same type of cabinet as we have here. But these provinces were like counties, county seats and small, small states. Oh, this Liberian situation, he, President Tubman was a person who the indigenous people, as well as the Americo-Liberians, who lived in the urban center, Monrovia, the indigenous people kept him there because he took care of them.

At an inauguration...no, I'll tell you about these conferences first before I tell you about the inaugurations, because his conferences were our first experience, his annual conference.

These people would come in from miles around, would walk in in their regular field clothes, dress-up clothes or whatever. Sometimes I saw a girl, who was, a half a dozen or eight, or ten girls who were going through the secret society rituals, and their bodies bare, but to them it wasn't because it was covered over with white clay and with designs drawn in this, but their little bobbies were showing, you know; and from the waist down, they were painted all over with white clay and that made them invisible, as far as they were concerned. So you heard people...we used to say, "Not washed behind the ears," but the unwashed girl is still going through the puberty ceremony, you see. When she is not grown yet, and when she gets through with this

six weeks with older women, telling them about tribal things, and teaching them how to be wives, and teaching them how to cook the traditional foods, and tend to husbands, and telling the history of the tribe and that sort of thing. That was the training that they got.

It's called "bush school," because they would go away from their families, up with this committee of older women, and learn this tribal, get the tribal education. So those girls would sometimes be in...at one time when we were there, we ran across them going through that type of ceremony.

But at this meeting, this conference, he came down on this yacht, brought his refrigerator, a great big refrigerator run by kerosene. Then they would kill a cow, and have beef for him. He lived at the home of the superintendents. We had come up from the farthest place, down in Cape Palmas, and we got out of the yacht, and went in. There he was sitting on the porch with his big cigar. With us had come a woman with a newborn baby and the superintendent, I thought that was the superintendent and his wife and newborn baby. I found out differently later, but this woman and the baby came on and walked right straight on through without turning her head to say hello to anybody, and walked to the back bedroom, which had been prepared for herself and the newborn baby. The baby cried and carried on because he had always cried, on the boat even coming up. But it was newborn.

So he had us to come out on the porch with him, and talk, and ask us how we enjoyed the trip. Of course, I told him that I had found it very interesting down in Cape Palmas, that we'd been out on the rubber plantation with the Firestone people who had entertained us and so forth, and that the superintendent and his wife had come up with their baby. I said, "The little baby is just as cute as it can be."

So I went the next day to...this is Sinoe now, this is not back in Monrovia at all, this is in Sinoe, another one of the closest, another one of the towns. These people had gathered there; he had us sit up near him. He sat like a judge, but at a table, and they came up one by one, the superintendent of the place was right near him. But they came up one by one and told him that the superintendent had made them...they had different complaints..."made me give him a quart of my oil," of palm oil, "and the soldiers came and if I didn't do what he said to, he'd cut a part in your

hair to show that you were, to mark you..." All kinds of complaints like this. He listened. Again he said...oh, a sack of rice, he had to give part of his crop to this man, and then go and help him do his crop. He told him that, "You give every gallon of oil back. You give back every bit of rice. You apologize for cutting his hair," and some other sentence that he put on his representative.

It made those people treat those people better, because he listened to everything that they had to say, and those people loved him. And therefore, he stayed there until he died. He stayed until he died because at one of the times when there was, one of the people suggested, "So why do we have to have these elections? Why should we have to vote? Let the man stay until he dies. Don't bother." So he's gone, and that's what actually happened. This was the first one, the first of his, at the end of a regime, the first regime, the first period, the first four years. This was getting to be another one, that they were going to vote for him. Because they took the whole ballot box, and they had, although you couldn't read, they had the picture of the person that you were going to vote for on here. Then you put it on the side of his picture, that you were voting for him.

Then at inauguration time, he would have a whole week. See, they came from around the world, representatives from around the world of the other governments. The United States government always sent a group, and France and England and all, and the African representatives would come. Although there weren't many independent, they had representatives who came. At that time, he would have different programs and a garden party with gray morning suits that had been ordered from Spain, made by the tailors there. Women had on fine dresses that they had ordered from Europe.

Then he had a regular day that you wore only national costumes. Everybody wore African costumes. That was the day that all the chiefs came in with all their wives, and he had a place set aside for them, a living place and a place to camp out, and those big umbrellas and all. It was African indigenous day, and he always set that aside. They were the stars of that day. You could come if you wanted to, if you're a visitor, but you wore a costume, you know. It was wonderful. He was they said, a benevolent despot, really, and they loved him.

So Tolbert was the vice-president at that time. The things that...the people who were poor, were very poor. The Army was a little rag-tag group of people; they just guarded the borders between Sierra Leone and Togoland. So they were not well provided for, they said. But the people who were rich were very rich. He, himself, I think, only Solomon was any richer than Tubman when he died. His wife had coffee that she exported to Germany. The women...people who were rich were rich, very rich, and the people who were poor, were quite poor. The chiefs were wealthy. There was just no middle class, no middle class.

But they were a happy people. They were almost content, except those who were trained and got too sophisticated enough to know that they would strike. His son made a dark strike against him, but he could always quell that. It didn't happen, really. It was never successful until after he died. Then those people who were rich began to not provide for the poor. He shared his wealth, not equally, but he had to satisfy because he went out enough to check the poverty. They had their markets and they had their produce and that sort of thing, and you could get well-to-do at what you were doing if you knew how.

But this matter of taking over and taking from everybody, didn't start until Tolbert. And that is what caused this awful takeover of this young sergeant, just the past few years. They just got tired of him, and the Army. Then of course, other countries around had been doing that; the military had been taking over, for example, in Nigeria. They had a military government in Ghana after Nkrumah died, and those kind of uprisings. And of course, the communication being so good, they would hear about this. So therefore, they got so that they took over, and they did. But it was really, really because of the corruption in it. They didn't handle it like Tubman did, the Tolberts didn't.

REH: Well, we need to get back to, I guess, your personal life again.

EMB: That was a trip to Liberia.

REH: And that was an aside. And I guess, tell me a little bit about how long your career as a singer went on, and the kinds of things you continued to do.

EMB: Well, I'll tell you, my career as a singer tapered off. It tapered off as my husband grew weaker. With these travels, I noticed him fading for about five years before he

actually had this stroke that he had. He began to fade. I know we would go to... I began to get involved on boards and in civic work there in Chicago, like with the Lyric Opera, and with South Side Community Arts Center, and with the DuSable Museum of Margaret Burroughs, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews, I was always in and out of interest with that. I spoke for them all over the country, and because of, race relations was always an interest of mine, always an interest of mine. That stemmed from my father. So that, when I tapered off from singing and not being away from home as much, I became more closely involved with organizations. I began to get active with my sorority again, the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and their programs.

Then in 1970, I was chosen as an honorary member of The Links, Inc. Then when I went to Cincinnati to be inducted into that, and came back and was made by the national president, sort of a consultant to the international trends part of their program. Then I began to affiliate with a North Shore chapter of the Links in their international side, and kept them, sort of liaised with them, between them and the national organization. Then they invited me to become a full-fledged member, and so I gave up the honorary status and became a full-fledged member.

Then I was appointed head of the international program. And I've been that almost ever since, I was head of international trends. Then in 1971, I guess it was, the very next national, it must have been '72, I had a resolution that we take part in and become involved in International Women's Year. So then I was, that whole decade, I gave up the international trends at the end of a term, and hooked up with them, and then kept the international decade, because when the decade, well, after it, six of us went to Mexico City for the International Women's Year closing. Then when they decided to extend it to a whole decade, then we were involved in that for the whole ten years. Right now, I was just in Nairobi, concerning the one that is coming up in July. So that the end of the decade is there. The next conference in 1996, I'm going to hand it over to them, but that's after a decade.

REH: What kind of work are you involved in as the chairperson for the Links, the international program?

EMB: For the international program, I'm trying to interest Links in attending this. I constantly have tried to interest Links in learning more about international affairs,

becoming better acquainted with international affairs, and the youth becoming interested, because we do have a youth department too. But under the umbrella of international affairs, we hope that the arts, the youth, and the national and the civic will all come under this International Women's Decade, and that includes being interested in women's affairs, women's issues, which concern women and their whole families, you see. You keep them abreast of what's happening at the United Nations, where women's issues are concerned. Then you recommend literature that is all out concerning women's issues, the world over and especially here, nationally. The International Women's Decade Conference is being planned now, and you try to keep abreast of that and keep them abreast of it. So we're trying. We'll probably take a chartered plane full of people to Nairobi in July, that is what we're trying to insist about now, and trying to interest them there. And they are becoming interested, very much so.

REH: Now does Links have chapters beyond the United States?

EMB: No, we haven't organized any outside the United States yet. We have in most of the states and the District of Columbia, but not outside the United States. Alpha Kappa Alpha has, the Deltas have, I think the National Council of Negro Women, I don't think has either, but the Links does not have any.

REH: Well, you and your husband, I guess, had about twenty years together. I wanted to get into something that's real personal, about how becoming a widow affected your life, whether there were changes? I guess, how you approached that, and how that affected you.

EMB: Well, it was, the finality of death is one of the things that shocks you. It's the thing that you have to build up a philosophy, against the shock. It happened that I had, because I believe in, and definitely believe in the presence after death. I felt that as long as I had memory, he would be with me. This is the way I feel about that. The finality of the physical is, it kind of gets you at the time, but you have to fall back on this philosophy that you've already built up through your religion. That death is not actually final, the physical part, but that the spiritual part is ever there. So you have memories, and this is, I feel that he hasn't really left. So that, and having the children, having my daughters. The physical loneliness was not there, because you see, we were

accustomed to being apart a lot. And the physical, the having a body next to you all the time was never true with me anyway. So that, that was not, you didn't quite miss that as much as you might have, but as I said, you sure had to fall back on this philosophy that you had built up within you, based on your religion.

And of course, I don't know what would have happened if I had been alone, you see. But I do know that having the children and their children, and then getting involved with these organizations, was the saving grace, the saving grace. And you continued to travel, not as much by any means, but you'd go. You traveled to conferences and that sort of thing, that's as I do now. Every now and then for Links, you were called to come to one occasion, and to be the main speaker for this. And that is still happening, and for the sorority too, and for organizations. There's quite as much involvement now, as there was when you were getting paid. But this, the involvement, I think, was the saving grace for me at the loss of his presence.

REH: But you had already begun some of that kind of work, and it was a continuation.

EMB: Oh yes, yes, this is true, and this even probably more so.

REH: Had you stayed close to the church in any way through the years?

EMB: In a way, yes, you had. As a matter of truth, when he died and when Sue's husband died, and when she came to move to live with me, oh, she lived with me a year before Claude died. Then after I was not able to go to church regularly during his illness, then when she was in Memphis, she was a very active church person with the Presbyterian church, which is a people's church, you know. They are quite involved with the business and the spiritual part of the church; and their pastor is the spiritual leader and the people run the church. So she was an elder in the church.

So when we decided to, I decided that I had given, I had paid back the A.M.E.'s for being born in one of their parsonages. I felt that I would go where, go with Sue, because she was active in the Presbyterian. So there was one, lovely, beautiful church near us, with a famous, a landmark now with famous windows, and it's just a beautiful place in which to worship. I decided to join that church with her. So there was no need for us to go different ways, you see.

So that's where I went with her, and have kept up the interest in the church but not working in it, like I did as a girl nor as I didn't feel as responsible as, except you pledged. There you pledged your money, and you pay it, and attend meetings and so forth. So I have, yes, kept up with the church, with my church work and church attendance, and church obligations because that is just a part of your life, like breathing in and breathing out.

REH: A long time ago, we talked about influences on your life, and I'm sure your husband, Claude Barnett was. Is there anything you can tell me about either how he might have affected your philosophy of life or, well, some of the kinds of things that you felt he may have influenced you in.

EMB: He was a man of few words. He wrote, but he did not talk out much. When he did talk, it was about facts and about historical things that he had lived through, something about somebody that he knew the background of, this was the great wealth of knowledge that he had about things and people, that made his news service so interesting. That he knew the background of a news item that would come in about somebody. He knew what caused that to happen, and that kind of thing is what journalists don't get in books. And there's that kind of selecting and knowing the background of things, that young journalists, graduates from Medill and Medill, I think was the name of the journalism school in Northwestern University, and it's one of the famous ones. They sent him their students there to get to work for the Associated Negro Press, to get that very knack from him.

People would come on their own, graduates would come on their own, and spend a little time at the Associated Negro Press, to get this type of getting background of a story, and knowing what caused it to happen, and that sort of thing. So he was more of an information-type person, rather than a philosophizing-type person, you see.

He was religious in a way that was deeper. You know that a person had to be religious to do what he did, and to come from the way that he would come from, to think like he thought. But he never was a person to, he didn't know the Bible like I did. He did not have a philosophy about life like I did, that you can vocalize, you see verbalize, but he must have had one, because he lived a good life and he was a good man. So that, just to watch his, he was a stabilizer for me, a stabilizer for me, not by word, but by deed, and by not saying things. He was just there. When I would see him, would calm you. I'm the opposite, you see.

REH: Yes, I gathered that the other day at the program in New York...the enthusiasm, the excitement.

EMB: Yes, yes. But he's calm and he had that influence with me, you see. We complemented each other just like that. He liked my enthusiasm, but he could just sit quietly and enjoy it, and sit quietly, and I would become calm if I were agitated. So that he was a very peculiar type of influence, but a great influence on me.

By and large, this has wound up the, you know, you've brought it down to today and what I'm doing now, and have been doing for the past two years.

REH: Well, just one of the things, maybe you'd just like to spend a little time talking about your various travels in Africa, and any highlights, and the people that you've met. However you want to approach that.

EMB: Well, I've told you about meeting Tubman and getting acquainted with him and Mrs. Tubman, and the political... I didn't tell you the secret, of the surprise when I finished this tour with him, Claude and I. We went back to Liberia, up to Monrovia, I mean, from this... I told you about this newborn baby with this lady getting on. So when we got back to Monrovia after this tour with the president, we were the guests of the treasurer of the country, William Dennis. There was another Dennis, who was a Foreign Minister, but this was William Dennis, the attorney. Mrs. Dennis was also the head of the hospital there, the doctors' hospital. She ran it, in charge of it.

So she and I were talking about the trip and how I'd enjoyed it and so forth. She said, "By any chance, was there a mother and baby came up on the boat with you?" She said, "With the name of Brewer?" I said, "Yes, there was. That was Mr. Brewer's wife," the superintendent. She said, "No, it wasn't. That was the President's baby." I said, "Don't tell me." She said, "Yes, that's... [Voice fades]

I said, "Well, the baby's got those big eyes. He looks like..." I said, "Who would have thought?" She said, "Yes, there was another one born while you were away, in the hospital. There was another one of his babies." [Chuckles]

So later on, when they were married, and of course, he had a list. They sent us a list of the gifts and so forth.

and there were two or three gifts on for the baby, after they had had it, you see. It was an interesting, interesting thing because of the stoic manner that he received her. He didn't receive her. She didn't pay him any attention and he didn't pay her any. She walked straight on down the hall, and right on back to her room. I didn't know that they knew each other. It was agreed. Although his mother was a Virginian, he was part American. He was built like the epitome of... And the best example in the world of how silently and attentively an African can listen. It's just, it's noisy. It's so silent, you know, it's kind of what your husband's got, the same. But really, it's amazing to see how intently and how quietly they can listen.

REH: You think they just listen exceptionally well, different from other people?

EMB: It seems different from anybody I've ever seen, really, that he can listen, and everything is so quiet as he listens. As you talk, as he listens to whatever is going on, certainly if someone is talking to him, he lets you finish your statement. In listening to these people who were making those complaints, he was so quiet, and he listened and he was attentive to every word that was said. By the time he finished, his mind was made up. He immediately started giving the sentence, when he finally came to talk.

This was the stoic way he received this newborn baby. He knew she was coming, and naturally knew that she had gone down there to give birth to that baby. But no word was ever noted, not a flicker on his face. It was really amazing. So that was the surprise of that particular situation. And nobody said a word, except that she just inquired... And nobody whispered. You didn't hear any whisperings about "Ooh, the baby, the president." But everybody, I guess, knew that Antoinette was pregnant. So, they only had that one child, but he was so crazy about her. Her name was Cuckoo, they called her Cuckoo, her name was Wilhelmina really, named after her mother. But Cuckoo is now a lovely young wife, and survived all the coup, and is married to one of the officials. The wife, Mrs. Tubman is there too. She travels a lot in Europe and so forth, probably one of the wealthy women in the world. But she is still there, nobody bothered her. But they did bother the Tolberts, and almost dragged Mrs. Tolbert through the street. But that Tubman regime was really something else.

Then I learned a lot about Africa during that trip, a lot that trip. We made many, many lasting friends. That first trip in 1947, and of course, we went back in '52, and went back in '55, went back in '57 to the independence celebration of Ghana. We met Dr. Banda, the head of, it used to be Tanzanika; it's now Malawi. He was there. His little white wife was there. She didn't come with him. She came, Nkrumah brought her down from London to take care of his children, after he married. He married an Egyptian. It was almost an arranged marriage, but he had me know that it was a marriage, he loved her. He had fallen in love with her.

REH: Maybe we just want to say a word about each of the countries, the people you met over the various visits.

EMB: So this is, I have left Liberia, of course, I've met the Dennises and the Americo-Liberian families, Tubman and his cabinet people, as they changed. They would visit back and forth when they'd come to America, and Mrs. Tubman, of course. Tubman also was like Solomon, with his wealth and his women. He had lovely...treated everybody well, built beautiful homes, sent you to Europe to study if you needed to, if you wanted to, gave you a way of making a living, and took care of all of his children, all of them. They had five. They had one, just this one with Antoinette Tubman, but she was the mother of all of those that he chose to bring into the mansion, and they did. It was understood... the President's children. Besides all those big-eyed ones that you saw all over the country as you traveled, it was marvelous. [Laughs]

It was the social thing to do, when a big man was traveling, to furnish him with a bedmate for the night. And something like that, I don't want this... But that was not immoral as far as their morals were concerned. It was just one of those things that happened.

It was the custom, because I know I had the first touch of that before I reached Liberia. We went down from London, it was 1947, remember, no jets, just planes. We went across the ocean with that propelled... Then we got into a small Junker, a small kind of a German plane. They hopped from one place to another; they didn't even travel at night. You'd stop at rest houses, and come down, and then next morning you'd go.

Then we went down to Bathurst in the Gambia, and then to Sierra Leone. We spent a couple of weeks in Sierra Leone,

met the Caulkers, and Claude went up into the interior, and saw the chieftains that there were, met a woman chief, a paramount chief. I gave a recital at a women's college, and then went to Fourah Bay College. That was about the only college in West Africa then, Fourah Bay, a church-oriented school, but college. I think all of them did their Cambridge examinations, examinations for there.

But Ghana was Gold Coast still. Nigeria didn't change its name; it was always Nigeria. That which is Benin now is called, Benin then, was a city in northern Nigeria. Benin, the country now, was called Dahomey then. I was sorry they changed that name because it was old, and it meant so much to us as a people. Then Lome was a city in Togoland, the main city. Now we drove from Liberia to Ghana, by way of Togo and Cotonou, those cities in what's now Benin, Dahomey; Togoland and Dahomey were small countries, slices of countries on the map, as you know.

When we got to Togo, the small country that had been mandated from one country to another...Germany had it for a while...there was a person whose name was Olympio. Olympio was then, when we were there first, the head of U.A.C., the United Africa Company, which was Lever Brothers. The Lever Brothers were all through Africa, and as the commercial company. So it was U.A.C., going down to U.A.C., that was the grocery store, owned by Lever Brothers, going to U.A.C., that was to have your car fixed. The U.A.C. owned nearly everything.

He was the manager of U.A.C. in this place. So it was he that they sent us to, as our host, and who arranged for us to have a car, and put us up in the small hotel, and then we had a guide who took us, who was a young African, who happened to be the assistant to the governor of this little town, little country.

The governor was in a beautiful African-looking palace, white, and great ivory tusks at the bottom of the stairs. He came down with his bloused britches, and boots, and a monocle. He came down the stair with a cigarette holder and so forth, and met us, just like I was in a movie set without the trumpets, you know. So he told this young man to, well, he and Claude exchanged pleasantries.

The first thing, he served us tea and drinks, whatever, and then he told him to take us around and show us the town, without much to show except that there were large cathedrals and small huts around. That this poverty here, but this was

the way they wanted it. This is the way they wanted it, the Africans. They knew nothing else, this was the way of life. So we went into one of these cathedrals. We were just going to spend the night, you see. From him, we would have his big car, and go to the next place. And then the next place would put us in a car, and send us to the next place, and on down to Nigeria, on down to, I guess, it was Ghana or Gold Coast.

I think Gold Coast was next, I don't remember until I look at the map, but anyway, he took us to one of these cathedrals. There happened to be a choir practice going on. The women were there with babies on their backs, and their head ties and so forth. And little boys were there for the soprano voices. They were singing, and this young man's brother was the head of the choir, was the conductor of the choir. He had studied in London, and was a real musician. The choir was singing the tune of Handel's Messiah, and it was the "Hallelujah Chorus." They were beginning the "Hallelujah Chorus" from the Messiah, but in the vernacular. It was just fascinating to see, and they were up in the balcony because they had an antiphonal choir, one up here in the front and one in the back here. But they were just rehearsing up in this front one. So we were standing down, and up in the balcony was this singing going on.

So he, in the vernacular, said, spoke to his brother, and told him that this American journalist and his wife were here visiting, and were on the way down the Coast...that Claude was a journalist and the wife was an artist and singer. So he told them, and then they asked him to have her sing. So I didn't know what to do really, and so I asked him if there was a song that goes well as a solo, and then for the choir to answer, is one called "The City Called Heaven," which I sing a lot. I said, "Well, they might not understand that. So," I said, "I'll take the chance, and if I sing, the choir would, if they know they had to tell them to do it."

When I sang "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" in English, and they answered me back in the vernacular, in the same tune, I nearly had a fit. It was just simply marvelous. It made goose-pimples come up, you know, because they answered. This universal language and music thing was just carried out. It was really, really an interesting, interesting thing to have happened. That was a lasting experience. I've never forgotten that.

Then we went on down to the next place, Cotonou, and that was a French-speaking place too. This man was like...LeJean was his name. He had a wife who had been a person in the theater in France. She was a redhead, and she was just quite the star, and buried in the tropics in Africa. All of it was just like out of a movie set. We spent the night there with them. Of course, they had a conversation with Claude. We went on.

He too put us with a driver, and his flag, of course, rolled up because it was the governor's car. When we got into the city limits, and got down into the city, the kids began to look and see this official car, looking to see who was in it and so forth. You could tell even then, this was 1947, that there was something afoot, that they were thinking about... And the young people, I'm talking about the young people, young people who were aroused, like our young people were not aroused until the sixties. They were aroused then politically, like our kids were later. But they were being propagandized and fired up by the leaders like Azikiwe and like M'badiwe, and those young men who had studied in America were the ones who, now those had much more dignity and quietness, but just as much determination as those who had been from London, you know, had been educated in Europe. That was when we got to, because this was out of the Gold Coast, we went to these small, these small countries here, because next was Nigeria.

But in Gold Coast, Claude met at night with men and leaders and lawyers, and I remember Judge Koarsah who retired as the chief justice, was a small judge then. And he knew that these people were organizing to talk independence, to talk independence. They were talking about sending to London to get Nkrumah, who was this young man, and have him to start a political party, in order that they might have a base from which to work, to ask for this independence. They met privately and secretly, and told Claude their plans and so forth and so on. So we had, of course, the governor general, the colonial secretary and all, were courteous to us and had us up at the house, the governor's mansion, and so forth. These friends always wanted you to accept, always wanted you to accept, because they too accepted garden party invitations and so forth. But politically that was separate, different from this.

So then when we went to Nigeria, we found on the street, they were open with that. They were open with their... They had started wearing, boycotting the cigarette tins, the English cigarettes, and boycotting English goods, and that sort of thing, and wearing the clothes of, the

dashikis and so forth and so on, and wearing the national dress more than they had before, and just sort of boycotting that which is British. They made speeches about it and against it, against the colonial rule, but now that's Nigeria.

Yet in 1957, the first country that came through and asked for independence, that went to London, and worked out a constitution and so forth and so on, which is their custom, was Gold Coast. They were the first, but they had laid their groundwork so that when they went to make their request, subtle demands, they were ready. They had their groundwork laid. The British, when they know you're going to have to make trouble or going to, they give it to you on a silver platter, and they help you to arrange the show. They put on a big one. They really put on a big one. But Nigeria, at that particular time, in '47, looked like they would be the ones coming through the next year. But they didn't come through until after Nkrumah was there.

REH: Really, you were there at a very interesting period of time in that first visit.

EMB: It really was, and you saw things happen. Then Claude began to write about it, and he had correspondence with them. The British asked him to take Azikiwe's name off of his letterhead, and of course, he courteously told them that nobody told him how to run his business; and it didn't bother about removing it at all. But he was a writer, and he was writing all the time about the plans. And he was writing from Gold Coast too, because although he was Nigerian, he was writing from Gold Coast. Nigerians also, I noticed, were even up at the Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, they were the people who seemed to have had the training in secretarial work and banking and that sort of thing. They were all over the place working in other countries always, that interested me too.

But so many of the potential leaders, and the man Olympio, that I told you was the head of U.A.C., got to be the president of Togo, when it came into independence. He was the president. Of course, he was assassinated by some of his own people. But Olympio was the man that we knew when we were there, as the head of a store. There were many well-to-do Africans even then. There was one woman, Mrs. Binka Koka, headmistress of a school there. Then there was another in Gold Coast, who had a beautiful mansion on a hill. He got his through, he also was a head of, a buyer for the Lever Brothers. He had children educated, had two sons then away in Scotland, taking medicine.

The Nigerians went, well, all of the Africans do go in for education, and education abroad. The British somehow, if there is a good colonial power, they were the best. They left their people in much better shape than, say, the French or the Belgians. The country itself was much more developed, because I think they thought they were going to stay there forever. They really had it better than home, and they fared better there than they did at home, the servants and everything. But, you can tell why they didn't want to leave. I was out in East Africa a couple of weeks ago, and the homes that these African officials stayed in, were the homes that they had, out in the highlands and so forth, beautiful, beautiful mansions, and built for longevity, really built for eternity if you like, and grounds, and well-kept grounds. These Africans have them now, they've bought them.

REH: What were you doing in Africa so recently?

EMB: I was there as part of a women's task force that was got together by the African-American Institute; the women's department of African-American Institute is having a lot to do with helping the planning committee. The African planning committee invited us, while we were there, to conduct a health seminar, a two-day seminar for better health. We called it "Better Health for the Rural Kenyan Woman." So that was a very, very well-arranged affair.

Then part of us, there were thirty-three of us, part of us were there in behalf of our organizations, inquiring about and seeing to rooms and so forth, and accommodations and that sort of thing, and programming for our organizations. There were several different organizations there, including Good Housekeeping and American Association of University Women, National Council of Negro Women, the Delta Sigma Thetas, and the Alpha Kappa Alphas; and the Women's Department of Mayor Goode of Philadelphia sent a couple of women, a woman head of the National Foresters Wives, and Girl Guides and Girl Scouts and girls clubs heads, and Planned Parenthood, and then the head of Hunter College, Donna Shalala and then Dr. Manley, former president of Spelman and his wife, Audrey, who is in our health department. She was on the program there, and the Planned Parenthood were the first ones on the program. Then the Minister of Health there and many of the government organizations were in attendance at this two-day seminar on health and mental health, and all kinds of health assistants were there too. That was a very, very fruitful seminar.

Then we had tours. We went into the interior, out to the rich valley and beautiful countryside. What a beautiful

country! It's very much like our Arizona area and the Painted Desert and all that, all mixed up with miles and miles of green, green tea bushes. They were as smooth as the top of this...[Indicates an object], but they stood this high, but just as smooth. They said they picked the first two top leaves, that's the best tea. Isn't that something? I saw it green, and it's the most beautiful thing to look at, just as far as you could see. That area, they export tea and those people know what to do.

Then we went to, up farther, past the Kikuyu country to a place where the president Moi had, who was the vice-president when I was there, when Kenyatta was president at independence. He's now president and has a new young group of other tribal peoples, besides Kikuyus around him. He was up there dedicating a health center, beautifully built health center. He's determined and has promised to have just as fine facilities for the rural people, as they have in Nairobi for the city people. And Nairobi, incidentally, is a crowded city, with large marvelous buildings, and many more than when I was first there, and large hotels, big intercontinental hotels.

We were just talking about... While I was in, my recent trip, I met somebody whom I had met when I was first there at the independence of Kenya. That was Dr. Kiano and his wife, Jane. She is the most beautiful African woman I have ever, ever seen. She's tall, and looks like Nefertiti, just long neck, and she wears the same kind of turban. She had one of these gorgeous homes that they had bought. It was really, really beautiful, grounds and swimming pool and lights, and all out in the highlands, which was the best part of what the whites had had, what the British had had for themselves.

We had a lovely party at their home, and they entertained in honor of one of the three women who is in the Parliament. Members of Parliament. The Parliament is just about fourteen or sixteen people, and they have three women. And of course, we have four hundred and some in our legislature, in the House of Representatives, and one Black woman and I think, about four of the others. I told them they were much ahead of us in that, [Chuckles] much ahead of us.

So it was...every time I go to Africa, it's wonderfully

stimulating. It's very stimulating to me. So when you go back after all these years, and see the improvements and see the differences, every place I've been, there's been improvements. But of course, I haven't been to Liberia since they had the new coup, nor have I been to Nigeria since they've been in trouble politically. But I have been out in East Africa and in Zambia, we went to most of the independence celebrations.

In Zambia, I was appointed by the president to be one of the members of the American delegation, the representative. Most of the other times, we were there as guests of the government that was getting its independence, because of Claude's acquaintance with the leaders and so forth. But at the time I went to Zambia, I was one of three of the American delegation. The other person was Engelhard, who is the diamond king of the world and a friend of Oppenheimer. No, he's the platinum king, and Oppenheimer is the diamond king. His wife is often in W, Women's Wear Daily, and his daughter does a lot of philanthropic work, Mrs. Reed. She's an Engelhard. Jane Engelhard is the person who is the wife of Charles Engelhard, who headed our delegation. The other person who is on the delegation was Mosler of the Mosler Safe. He was, and I was the only one of us. It was very interesting, very interesting to see.

Kaunda was one of the people honored there, that they had in New York, Kenneth, when they honored me at this affair, the anniversary awards, the thirtieth anniversary awards of the African-American Institute on the 27th, I think it was. Kaunda was honored. And Bobbie Kennedy, posthumously, because of his work in South Africa, Kaunda, and Lee of Mobile Oil, and Andrew Young. It was nice. Teddy Kennedy received for his brother.

REH: I was going to ask you about your feeling about the women's movement. And we'll let you define women's movement in whatever way you want to.

EMB: Well, it started, the United Nations...of course, it started, as you know, with Betty Friedan and this "Women's Mystique" [The Feminine Mystique] that she wrote. But the United Nations in 1971, decided that 1975 would be International Women's Year. They had its culminating meeting in Mexico City. While in Mexico City, they had this United Nations meeting.

Then along with that meeting was then another meeting called the Tribune, which does not have delegations. The other had country delegations, the same as they do at the United Nations down along the river, down in New York. But then this, then they voted and discussed and debated according to their own country's philosophies. If they wanted to vote on something or against something, they contacted, they were told from their native country, and ours was from the State Department. Well, this other meeting that went on, anybody interested in it might come, anybody, but you do register. That was called the Tribune then. It had its meetings across the city; the other was over at the university.

But our delegations would come over and tell us what was going on. We also would talk about our issues that concerned us. For example, you had planned to come there, and there were issues that had come up that were all over the country, where sort of a plan of action was formed by each country, because of the way, whatever your interest was. Mainly, ours concerned the discrimination against women and inequality in economics or inequality with having child care if you were in the workplace, or inequality in holding office and a right to as much education as anybody else has, women's rights in politics, women's rights in the workplace, that sort of thing.

Many, oh three dozen things, in the arts, discrimination in the arts, discrimination in, oh, as I said, all kinds of things, women's issues, even to freedom of choice about abortion, freedom of choice, sexual freedom of choice. Lesbians had great groups of delegations, delegates there. The abortionists had those, and the people against abortion were there. Everybody had his say. You had a platform from which to speak, and exchange ideas. Even the Russian women, who said they had no choice, they were there just the same. They were represented, and they never spoke against their government. Any of the rest of us always did. Then those Mexican women right there, and they did. They were angry because the head of that delegation was a man. We all joined in with them protesting that. Steinem was there; all of the leading feminists were there.

So then they found out that there were so many things wrong, that one year couldn't settle it. So that's the reason they made it a decade, the Decade for Women. Then each country was to have had a national meeting, to form national plans of action to work against these inequities for women, during the next decade. But in the meantime, at the end of five years, in the mid-decade, they planned to have another meeting.

That other meeting was supposed to have been in Tehran. The Shah's sister had invited us to Tehran. In the meantime, the Shah was killed and in the meantime, Khomeini came in and that sort of thing. So that was called off, and the hostages were taken, all that sort of thing was just happening. And that was called off, so far as Tehran was concerned. In the meantime, Denmark invited us to come to Copenhagen. So that's where the 1980, the mid-decade conference was held. We went to that one there. There was called, this other meeting that everybody could ventilate in, and was called the Forum. Now this one, so the second meeting now is called the Forum. Forum '85 will also be in...

REH: It's like the U.N. when they have their regular meetings, and have that sort of forum or whatever, yes.

EMB: Yes, they have their annual meeting. I went to the NGO meeting this time. But this one is even less structured than that NGO conference. You can have a workshop, this is what I want you to sign up for. You can sign up for it, or you can decide after you get there, you're going to have one. You go and ask somebody for a room, and set yourself up for a workshop, and put it on the bulletin board that this is where the workshop is going to be. It was just that free-for-all. They are trying to make this one a little bit more structured. That's the reason they sent out the blank that I gave you. So you send that on in, because they're making up those right now. That is the kind of thing, the Forum, is what we're looking forward to this time. Many things, there were many improvements that were reported at Denmark, but there's much further to go. We had a meeting, AAUW had a meeting the other day in preparation to 2000, and to the decade conference and to 2000.

REH: So this would be a time of assessment really.

EMB: Yes, what has happened, what has been improved, and what obstacle stood in your way to keep you from getting up, over which you had to come to get where you are. And of course, many bits of legislation have taken place to help us, you see, in America. There's improvement on all fronts, but there's not enough. Of course, then they now are planning strategies for from the end of the decade to the year 2000.

So I really would like very much to read to you some of the, I have some notes, some of the ways that we have had improvements, because I think history should show, it would be an interesting thing. Excuse me, I'll get this list. There is the National Plan of Action. This has a few views on its implementation.

There was a National Plan of Action in a meeting that this country held in Houston on women's issues, after Mexico City. So to take it... The fifty-six state and territorial conventions forwarded the recommendations summarized in this, for amendment and ratification by two thousand delegates, apart from gender, the most diverse elected body ever assembled. Following each item, there is a summary assessment by the National Women's Conference Committee of its status in March 1984.

Now the National Women's Conference Committee was a four-hundred-member committee, appointed by the president of the United States. I was one of them. So this formed an organization really, that met annually, all during the decade, on the national level as the United States women. So this is their summary of, taken alphabetically, arts and humanities, for example, "equitable representation in management, government, and decision-making. For structures in libraries, and museums and media and higher education, blind judging whenever possible. Strides have been made in public awareness of the outstanding contributions by women in the arts and humanities. Funding and recognition, however, have not kept pace with women's expectations. The National Endowment for the Arts, the Humanities have faced large cutbacks, severely limiting access and opportunity for all. Network and coalition activities have linked women in the arts and organizations."

Now network was, when we got back from Copenhagen, that was the buzzword. It came out of that conference in Copenhagen. Networking, and women began to do it more with organizations, reaching outside themselves and outside their own organizations. "Network and caucus in the humanities, and women's studies programs have advanced women's contributions. What had been an emerging focus on women in National Endowment for the Arts and in NEA programming has been curtailed, only because of the cutbacks since 1984."

Then there was battered women, and organizations set up stations for battered women as a result of these women's issues that came up. Then there was business support for women entrepreneurs through government-related activities and contracts, including of women-owned business and S.B.A. targeting. And that 1978 report, "Unequal Business Enter-

prise in America" prompted training programs to assist women entrepreneurs, that has improved. Then "child abuse, support for prevention and treatment of abused children, including training for public awareness and counseling, and service and justice agencies"; we know that that has improved, public awareness. And "child care, federally supported efforts and legislation at all levels to promote child care programs. Labor and business support in education and parenthood."

Then minority women, recognition in every plan, "recommendation applies fully for all minority women, with recognition of additional burdens through institutionalized bias and inadequate data. Enforcement of anti-discrimination laws as they affect education, housing, health, employment. Recognition of special needs of American Indian, Alaskan native women and Asian-Pacific American women, Hispanic women, Puerto Rican women and Black women," all of that has improved because it was brought to the attention through these national conferences, and that sort of thing. "Offenders and older women, education, effective appointment to office, and credit, disabled women," all of those subjects have...rape, that sort of thing. "Reproductive freedom and rural women, sexual preference, statistics and the welfare, poverty, continued committee of the conference, establishment of a body under public law"; this organization was established under public law to consider steps to achieve recommendations of this conference, and to convene a second conference.

So it started in '78, '79, '80, '81, '82, and in '83, we met in Detroit. Then the homemakers and the insurance and international affairs, media, and all of those subjects were out then, pointed up to and assessed as to the improvement. This is really the crux of the women's movement after it moved away from the bra burning and those types of extreme things that existed at first among the women's movement. So much so, that people didn't want to be called a feminist, because it meant that to them. But the feminist movement and the women's movement now, they have legitimate issues to discuss.

REH: In some ways, it's like the Black movement, in the sense that you really cry stridently to get attention, I guess, at first. And then you can become calmer and deal with issues. So I think there's similarities there, yes. Well, maybe you

would like to talk a little bit about community organizations, professional organizations. How you've been involved, whether just as member or officer, or what...

EMB: Mainly, I'm not much of an officer seeker. I am a cheerleader. I'm not a leader, you know, out-front leader. I'm a cheerleader. I can really cheer that... I can cheer for that which I believe in, you know, that in which I believe. So therefore, I can really sell it too. But this is the kind of thing I do in organizations. If I believe in an organization, that's why I belong. Then if I believe in what that organization stands for, then I'm ready to help out and help get other people to know about it, and help it to do its program.

This is the way I am about everything I belong to, really. The Links, in particular, I'm very much involved in that right now because of the international thing, and because of the International Women's Decade. And because it is going to Africa, the land that I love so much, I want it to be very impressive and I want it to be successful. I want many of the African-American women to go there, because the African women, the Kenyan women want many African-American women to go because there are not too many who attend the international meeting as organizations. Some of them attend on their own, many attend on their own, but not too many. Many more Third World women come, because their governments send them than our women, than Afro-American women.

But Links are going to be there in great numbers and so will the sororities, this time. The Delta Sigma Thetas have a four-year program on, on which I am on the advisory committee, called the Delta International of the African Diaspora. They are getting, wherever on this earth, people of African descent have dispersed themselves, they are going to find what they're doing, how they have adjusted themselves to where they are, what they're, how much they have kept their African heritage in their minds, what they have contributed to the country in which they find themselves. And they are all over the world. They're in New Zealand; they're in Australia; they're in France; they're in southern France. There's a museum that I just heard about recently, of course, it's been there all the time, at Nantes, France. Then there's one in Dover. They're going to go there and see what's in these museums, about this matter of slavery, and about the memorabilia of the early days of the African kingdom. Then certainly the West Indies and the Caribbean and in South America, they're going down there.

They're going to do travel, and do position papers.

research papers on these. The universities are cooperating with them. The African Diaspora is, the word is just creeping, popping up every place around. It's really most exciting.

REH: That will be exciting.

EMB: Most exciting. So this will be the beginning of their tour. They're going to take about thirty people to, and I'm sure there'll be about sixty Links going, and the Alpha Kappa Alpha women too are going, when we go in July to Nairobi. That will be sort of the beginning of their travel part.

REH: That will be a great contribution historically, that Delta program, yes.

EMB: That is exciting. That's just one, another thing I'm cheerleading, cheering along, because I think it's very, very exciting. So many, many people have...even more than the Jews, because there were more of us to do it, because think of the Jewish Diaspora. Now this is the African Diaspora. There has been a dispersion of Africans all throughout the world.

REH: All over, America, and goodness, yes.

EMB: So then many of them in South Carolina have kept some of their African words.

REH Yes, the islands there, the Sea Islands or whatever.

EMB: Yes, yes, they kept some of their African languages there. Because you know, Dr. Turner did a book on Gullah, Africanisms* and the Gullah language in South Carolina. Then of course, in Brazil, up in Bahia where I was in those pictures, those people are of African descent, and they know their tribes too, unlike us. We were throwed away from ours, or separated, but they know that many of them are the Yoruba tribe from Nigeria. And this Doctor Giralakaja that I met in 1947 there, in Nigeria, told me that he had seen birth certificates in Brazil, of where the people had been born in Nigeria, and were Yoruba. They keep up their African customs there. The Haitians keep up their customs too, so that that is well known. But a number of these places, small islands and countries, even in southern

* Turner, Lorenzo D. Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949.

France, just didn't think of having slavery there. The slave trade going on down there, but it did. They're finding this out, and they're going to find out even more.

People are just eagerly sending in material to Nanette Taylor, who is the head of it. She chairs that committee. Hortense Kennedy is the national president, but Nanette Taylor is the chairman of this particular committee. She has many of us who are not Deltas on the [committee], just since you have made the effort, and since you are interested in Africa and have some knowledge of Africa. They've asked me to be on their advisory committee. It's very, very exciting. She had a meeting in Washington not too long ago, to launch it with her committee.

So that is the decade conference. It will have several meanings for many people. This will be the beginning of this program. Another thing I'm wanting to do is to take eight young people, from between seventeen and twenty-five, to Africa, four boys and four girls. So that the young fellows will get a feeling of women's issues, too; they will be selected through the process of the Merit Scholarship, that's already set up. They will have been chosen from each area where Links are, of the country. This is part of the eastern area, Cleveland is part of the central area. For example, the far West is the western area; Texas is in that too. Then we have a central area that includes Illinois, Michigan, and those central states. And the far West, and then the South is part of Virginia, Mississippi, and Florida, and all down in there. That's the southern area. Then the eastern area is all the East coast. This is the East, down through the District of Columbia. So some youngsters too from each of those areas will be chosen. I still haven't got the money to take them, but I think I'll get it. I think I'll get it.

REH: Yes. Well, your involvements in organizations, like the National Conference of Christians and Jews, how did that come about and what...

EMB: Well, simply because of my interest in race relationships and human relations. They had an excellent program and a learning program, a teaching program, teaching methods and strategies for getting people to know each other, and to understand the differences and appreciate differences, and note similarities, and thereby appreciate differences. That kind of thing attracted me many, many, many years ago. They used to have me come to talk and do my recital, because it always tended toward that very same thing. Sometimes when they had, desegregating schools, and had trouble with housing and people moving in here, they would put me into an

auditorium in the center of that, out to the schools. And you just do what you had to do about persuasion. They'd end up feeling better. When they accept you, then they accept a lot of other things. That's the kind of thing that I did. I had a soft sell on human relations, and at persuading these children by...

REH: By just your presence, in a sense, yes.

EMB: Yes, and not trying to push anything down anybody's throat, nor calling names, but that was my style. And it worked.

REH: Let's see. You've been, I suppose, board member of some organizations. Is that your relationship to the DuSable Museum?

EMB: Yes, yes, and the South Side Community Arts Center, the Lyric Opera, of the Chicago Lyric Opera. When they were first starting it, they used to come to me, as they used to during the early days go to Eva Jessye in New York, they'd come to me and ask for... Do you know a tenor or a baritone that we would want as part of our company? They started out wanting to, you didn't have to ask them, they integrated. It started out as an integrated, but they wanted to do that. I helped them to, as far as recommending people. Some of them were still there, years after years.

REH: How long ago did that start in Chicago at the Lyric Opera?

EMB: It's about thirty years old now. It's about thirty years that they've celebrated. African-American Institute, the very same way. This was its thirtieth anniversary, and it's the first time they've done this sort of thing.

REH: The awards?

EMB: Yes, and it was a fundraiser too. It was so successful, they're planning now for next year, to honor someone and to have a fundraiser, and to get the people to know what it's about. So that was a kind of a thing that they needed somebody out of the Middle West, because it was started here, really in Washington, by Dr. Hansberry, another person named Stene, and a white woman. They were interested in the African students who were in the Washington area, and helping them to feel at home, and making them, sometimes helping

them financially, with spending money, or getting scholarships for them and that sort of thing.

It grew so that they opened an office there. Then when it grew in membership, because when Dudley came back, dear Dudley came back from being ambassador to Liberia, a Negro, he was asked to do part of it. And other people were asked from Carnegie Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, foundation people and industrialists, like Harold Hochschild of American Metals, the company that has copper mines in Africa, in northern Rhodesia, now it's Zambia. So that was the makeup of that organization, which started with Black and white, and it remained so. Then there came a time when Horace Mann Bond of Atlanta was in it. His son is on the board now. But they had no woman and they had nobody from the Middle West, so they reached over into Chicago, and I was both of them, as a woman and Negro and the Midwest.

REH: And you had the interest too.

EMB: Yes, it was because really of Claude's, Claude, really, I think it was because of him. So that was the reason I've been there for over twenty-five, about twenty-six years. They hadn't been organized long before they asked me to be on the board. But I come over every three months to the board meeting. I'll be back on the twenty-eighth for that board meeting.

REH: Yes, in New York, yes.

EMB: They have a marvelous stroke of understanding between the United States government and African governments. So they expose each other, each of them to each other by these dialogues. Then they have this women's division, which arranges women's conferences such as I just attended. So I've attended two conferences of A.A.I. When I was in Africa, I went to Gabon first, for the dialogue between the Congressmen and the ministers of Africa. Some of the newspaper people too, because the media, both as electronic and print were there. And the president of Women's College was there. She spoke on the women's panel.

Then I left there, and went over to Nairobi, where I met these other women who had come from New York, to that women's task force, a health task force, plus the women leaders of organizations who were looking toward the July meeting. That was a terrific program because, not only did they have that good two-day seminar, where people in the health systems there had an opportunity to talk to their

minister of health and the heads of the broadcasting and the media, to talk about getting some of their health materials out on the air, and that sort of thing. Everybody had a chance to ventilate. They wanted to see more of the, they said what was on their minds. Some of them hadn't had a chance before to talk to the minister of health. They had come from miles around, and that was arranged by the African-American Institute. So that was a double thing for all of us. Because I had a travel agent for the Links to see about our rooms while she was there, and get confirmation for the rooms.

REH: Well, do you in general still do a lot of traveling around, both in this country and abroad, with lectures or just with the committees?

EMB: No, just with the committees, just with the conferences that are called. So maybe it'll be at my expense, or maybe it will be at the conference's expense. But I don't make my living doing that anymore. I don't have an income from it at all, except you know, you don't go to a board meeting without, but actually your expenses are paid for that.

But that, it now, it's self-fulfilling. It's self-enriching. It keeps me from showing that I'm eighty-three, or feeling that I'm eighty-three. This is the secret. If there is a secret, it's looking forward to something.

REH: Yes, you are a very lively eighty-three.

EMB: Thanks.

REH: Yes. I guess I never directly asked you whether you were a member of a sorority.

EMB: I am an Alpha Kappa Alpha.

REH: That's what I wondered, yes.

EMB: I was made at college. It's not honorary. I went the hard way. Yes, I'm Alpha Kappa Alpha.

REH: Yes, are there any particular things that you'd like to mention that you've done with them or for them over the years?

EMB: Earlier on, I gave a music scholarship for those people who needed just that little push to keep them in school, or keep them, make them finish up, that sort of thing. That, I

did. I also used to do concerts for them, for the Alpha Kappa Alpha, well, for sororities in general, really. I've been special attractions for them over the years. Yes, and I've had their support in my career, quite a lot, quite a lot, all of the sororities.

The great thing about my career is, the support I've had from my people, I tell you, I am a product of the press, the Negro press and the Negro people, the Negro organizations, churches, sororities, organizations, period. Really, it's been remarkable. I'm really deeply grateful for that. Because I conducted myself, missed a whole lot of fun, to reflect good on them out of gratitude for that. I tried not to disgrace my family nor friends, and I did the best I could on that score, to maintain a good reputation.

REH: Yes. Well, I was going to comment, but that's an aside.

EMB: What were you going to say?

REH: Well, I was going to talk about some of the, what you would call them, "artists," these days who you feel that they are taking the wrong path in a way, that they are being as obnoxious as they can be, the characters that they portray are not in our best interests. And you feel that they're doing this and getting all the money, and then suddenly they'll change and become goody-goody and say, well, they never really meant it, kind of thing. I just feel very bad about what some of our people are doing.

EMB: Well, they are living in a different moral era too. It's only...

REH: Yes, but it seems like they're being, in some ways, the leaders for the wrong things.

EMB: That's really true. That's really true that when you're out there, you are a role model for good or for bad. They will look at you, and they will copy you. They will, "If she can get by with it, all right. If he can make all this money, and get this... If they can make all this money without any education, or without any, you know, then why can't I? Just one good record would do it." But I do know that it's, although I said I missed a lot of fun, it's really true, but the fun was different from the fun that they have to have now.

It was, to be decent now is harder than it was when I was coming along. It really is, because so much is committed to you now. You can go to absolute degradation before anybody will think that you're wrong, you know, or before you'll be judged. But then, you had to walk a straight and narrow path or you were living up to the stereotype that they had for a person in show business, in the theater. Well now, that is what bothered me. Here, this Methodist minister's daughter, and here, this father who was liberal enough to say, "Yes, go ahead, Etta, and try it." I did not want to prove those church people right, who thought that she's going to the devil if she goes into the theater, and this is what I knew I had to, I was ever proving that it could be done, and I think I did.

And also, it helped me because I already had children that I had to live up to. I didn't want them to come along and be ashamed to hear the name "Etta Moten" as their mother, you know, that also kept me, because I wasn't just working for myself. I was working for their future, to look good in their eyes when they finally got to know about me, or to hear about me, and to have a reputation that they could run into, that they'd be proud of, also not to, as was the word then, "disgrace my family," you know.

I had a lot of family pride, because the name "Moten" you were taught, was next to God, you know. That was the only thing you had, was your good name, and your family's name, and everybody before you had tried to make a contribution to the good name, and so you... I just didn't get a lot of preaching on that score. But you just knew out there, there were people who thought that if you went into show business, if you were in the theater... And theater to them also meant dirty jokes and vaudeville, and dancing, and kicking up your heels. Well, you had to live that down. You just had to prove, and you were living to try to prove something, and to try to make a good reputation for your kids.

So this, see, so many of them started out at fifteen and young. I wasn't. I had the advantage of that, of maturity, over a lot of people that were in show business. And now they have many more, the hardest narcotics that was used then was reefers and marijuana, and only people in bands, "band men," smoked those. That was left to them. Nobody else that I knew of, it wasn't the thing that you take a snort or a short, or whatever they call those things, as a child or as a kid, just to try it out or whatever. Nobody

just tried that out. You just expected, you know, somebody said, "Mmmm, I smell something, somebody smoking reefer." But you knew it was a band person, and it was laid to them. It was left to them. Nobody thought that they needed to try it out, you see. So if you saw somebody with dark glasses, it just meant, you just don't wear dark glasses in the daytime because it shows that you had...but that was as near to getting out of line as people ever got.

Practically everybody, and as far as openly living with somebody and saying, "This is my roommate," and this and this, as they do now, and having babies out of wedlock. If you had a baby out of wedlock, you kept it a secret, and people, or either you isolated yourself, because it was not the accepted thing to do. That's the same way with illicit love, you know, certainly there's always been and people do have it, but you don't flaunt it. You never did flaunt it in those days.

So kids now, I mean people now, these people that you say, and we know, are living free-love and living lives that we don't want our children to emulate, those people have many more temptations, have a harder time being straight because so many things are accepted that they, and then they call it being honest now. You and I know the same thing did happen with other people, but it wasn't flaunted. We thought it being discreet, but they thought it being dishonest. [Chuckles] And then they break your heart by flaunting it in your face. Even people's children now, you just have to accept things that you...

REH: I was going to say, you seem to be very understanding of people's differing moral standards, even though you yourself kept perhaps what some people would consider a straight line.

EMB: You have to be. Yes, and I am. I know that it's harder for them. I know that they call themselves being honest. Well, that's being honest, you know, but you don't condone it and you don't have it come into your home. This is all. If you live with him, well, then you just keep him there where you live with, and you come see me, but you don't bring him. This is the kind of stuff that you have to put up with, but you do put up with it, but you have to understand the atmosphere in which they're living, and the moral climate in which they're living. But people now... They just say that my daughter is living with so-and-so-and-so for a few years. She has a companion and I...

They'll tell you. A young man drove me to the plane coming here. I said, "Are you Nigerian?" He said, "No, I'm Ivoirian. I'm from the Ivory Coast." I said, "Oh, that's interesting." Then I asked him, "Are you going to school? And you, do you have a family?" "No, I haven't. I have a girl friend here that I live with, but she's Jamaican. She's not African, not from the Ivory Coast." I said, "Are you going to, you'll probably marry?" "Yes, we'll probably marry because she's very smart, I think," a biochemist or something like this. But you know, they live together, and you just, that's the way it is.

REH: That's the way it is, yes.

EMB: The way anybody'd tell you now. It's a different climate, a different climate. Your children, my children, everybody who's got any children, my grandchildren, are in it, you know. They have to do it their way.

REH: Maybe we should talk about some of the awards and honors that you've received through your life. The different aspects, I'm sure the singing brought different awards and honors, the women's movement...

EMB: I think it's a combination of everything, because these awards started, these serious awards, like honorary degrees from prestigious universities and institutions started late in my life. So I think it maybe is a reward for all that you've done, the collection of things that you've done. Some of it, for example, you get from... My interest in Africa, I think, the first award was from the African part at Atlanta U.

REH: There's an Africana Center or something.

EMB: Yes, the African Center gave me an award. Then the next year, the university itself gave me an award for the doctor of letters. Then Spelman brought me back, and I had an honorary degree from them. I think Doctor of Humane Letters? Doctor of Literature was the Atlanta U; this is the Doctor of Humane Letters from... And that, I think, was the overall life, and what they called the accomplishment, and the influence on young people, and this and this and this, and interest in Africa, and all put together. Because it was the most recent one, that was in '83, I think. Then I was brought down as artist-in-residence after that, and I had seminars and so forth, with the music students and their drama department. That is, and I spoke in the chapel to the students. And that had nothing to do with music, except to

talk with the music students and about production, and having them sing for me, and making suggestions to them about production, and drama and stage presence, that sort of thing. Then you try to inspire the whole group about who they were, and the responsibility of being a Spelman woman.

I have the thing that I talked to those folks about, because a breed apart, you know, the Merrill Lynch "Breed Apart" and "Excellence Without Excuse," because there is no excuse left for racism, and nothing matters. It's just an excuse now for not seeking excellence, and giving your very best, attaining the highest that you can, and giving a shoddy performance or not getting all that you can get out of the learning process. And you've got all the laws on your side now, and there's no excuse that.

I did that after I came, the week out in Denver. Links had a youth luncheon, the emphasis in the Links is on youth this year. I gave them, I tailored that speech to them about the excellence of all. And I got to know what's distinctive about them, and told them about the international meeting. Because you see, I feel, this is my feeling, and the reason I've suddenly got on this youth kick, and having them come and attend this international women's meeting, because it's the kind of meeting that is a good first international experience for anybody.

I feel that adulthood with American Negro children drops on them suddenly, adulthood does. They're out in the street, kidding, they're listening to jazz or they're listening to music, or they listen, they've got this thing up to their ear with this cassette business, without ever thinking about what Koppel says about the news. Without looking at Dan Rather, or without seeing what happened at Washington today on the news, without knowing what's happening in the world, or without feeling any responsibility about what's happening to youth even, their own peers. So that, suddenly when they come up or are through with school, or come of age, they have the responsibility and no rehearsal. So this is why I feel that we should expose these kids to what's happening, and certainly too late, often too late in life, never too late actually, but often we're older than we should be when we even think about the international thing, because we are traveling more than we used to. But we ought to care more about what, and know more about what happens over there, and its reflection on happenings affecting my paper when we sit down to breakfast, it is affecting us.

So that I feel that the more experience we can give young people as early as we possibly can... This is the reason as I was saying, that the United Nations says this is the International Youth Year, incidentally '85 is. So therefore, we wanted to bring boys and girls to this conference. I met the lady, the head of the youth there, Mrs. Muli in Nairobi, and I promised her that I'd bring these kids. I've got to get them there, I don't know how, but I will find a way to get them there. Some of these airlines will give me some reductions; some of these Black entrepreneurs will come through with some money, Johnson or someone will come through. So this is my, I'm on that kick now, this youth kick, and getting our young people... And through the Links and through organizations, and through networking with other organizations, I hope to, we hope in the Links to inspire youth to get with it, get with it, and get interested in... It's very interesting. It's not depriving you of your youth, to think about a few serious things right now, because it is serious.

REH: It is serious, yes. I wanted to ask you whether you ever had time for, what we would call, hobbies in your busy life?

EMB: Yes. I don't know, in fact, everything I do almost is a hobby. These organizations are hobbies, and their programs are fulfilling like a hobby would be. I think this is, I'm following hobbies when I follow these programs of these different organizations. For example, my interest and great joy in things African are fulfilled by participation in this African Diaspora, the program of the Delta. My interest in international affairs is fulfilled through African-American Institute, and being on that board. So I think the hobby part is... I don't play golf. I don't play tennis. I know both games, but I don't play them. But so far as that kind of thing, crocheting I could do. I could embroider, but I don't do any of those things. I have no hobby so far as that kind of thing, as making things.

REH: Yes, but it's nice to look at your life in that way.

EMB: Yes, so that it is a hobby, the fulfilling of things that I like to do, as pastime. That is, the things that I do on these boards fulfills that. My music now is taken out in the appreciation of what I hear, and knowing how to listen because of my training. I don't miss singing at all, except just every now and then, I would like to be... Sometimes I would want to join in or sing something, and what comes out, I don't want to hear, so I just don't sing. But when I'm

listening seriously to music, that fulfills, that is a fulfilling thing. And the fact that I know how to listen is a joy, because you know how to listen, you know what to listen for, because you've been trained. So I feel very much fulfilled with the way I'm living my life, and occupied, I mean involved, involved in the things that make me happy, that keep me happy.

REH: Well, I suppose, in summing up, you have presented little tidbits of your philosophy of life in a way, in response to different questions that I have asked, but maybe you would just like to pull it all together, and sort of express something of your philosophy of life.

EMB: You know I have a fear of being self-centered. How dare I, me, myself, feeling that a philosophy of mine would count. You know, how dare think such a thought. But the code that I live by, if there is a code, it is based upon a deep, deep, deep religious belief that is a private thing. It is a private, secret weapon of defense, of inspiration, just a secret weapon that I use for myself, for when I need it, and for the benefit of that or those in whom I'm interested. So that whatever I feel, is based on this way, way down deep, like a foundation, which makes me feel that whatever happens to me, is going to come out, not all right, but the way it should come out. To me, it will be all right. Because I would think that I'm so well protected that it wouldn't happen to me if it shouldn't.

REH: Yes, I understand that.

EMB: Do you, you see?

REH: Yes, yes.

EMB: Now that, I make it all right. I know that nothing is ever going to be put upon me that I cannot stand, bear, or deal with. I know that I will try ever to conduct myself. Now this is a groove, I've tried to conduct myself, to present myself to fellow man or to people, so that they will feel better after having met me or having known me. I will feel happy having contacted them. And if that doesn't happen, I feel that I am so well protected with this antenna that goes out from me, and can reach out spiritually to them, that He has endowed me with that protective thing that I know to back off, and act like they were never born, you know.

I never have occasion to carry enmity in my heart, because that I am afraid of, because I do know that that's unhealthy. That I'm afraid of, I throw that off, just don't ever let that settle on me. I try to not carry anything. In fact, I don't because that's unhealthy. You see, this is the reason when you get started talking like this, you start like you're sprouting wings and putting a halo around your head. But this is what you strive toward being. You know that you get as mad as hell sometime and you shouldn't, and of course, you do; and you have to ventilate it. But I try not to do it on anybody or against anybody. And if it is because of somebody, it's over real quickly. I don't carry it.

But the philosophy, I think, would sum up to be, "Be the very best person that you can, and be as happy a person as you possibly can, and create as much happiness as you possibly can in others, and make them glad to have known you." Of course, that's a lot of ego in that, you know, you want to be liked. And you want to be loved, and that was really... My Mama always, "You mustn't be like that, because people won't love you." That was her main theme, and the main theme was to be loved, and not have enmity of people because of something you did or something you said.

What I have to watch is my tongue, it's very caustic. It can be very caustic. You watch that, and you know the things that are wrong with you, that cause people to be unhappy or cause people to hurt. I only use that as a weapon to get, for self-protection. I know I have that, but I try not to use to hurt people, unless it's in self-defense. But I think it's all, it really is self-centered, because all of it, as you stop to think of it, is trying to make yourself a more satisfied person. It's trying to make yourself a better person. You're trying to make people love the self that you are, and approve the self that you are, that you create, and you're trying to create the best self that you can be. I wonder if that's right to be that self-centered, but you're all you've got, aren't you? And you ought to be your favorite person.

REH: You ought to be; if you can't live with yourself...

EMB: You try to be the best person you can be. And that's really what I'm trying to be. You know, look on the bright side of life, and be positive in my thinking. Certainly, I like to be positive in my thinking, and so live that I am sensitive enough to avoid serious pitfalls. So far that has happened. [Chuckles]

REH: Is there anything that you feel that I've missed, that you just want on record?

EMB: I'd like to go on this record as saying that I think that you have done the race and the country the best favor that ever could have happened, to have gathered these women together because of their experiences, there are others that you might have, and maybe you'll do another set before you grow older, because you're young now with gray hair.

REH: I'd like to.

EMB: Maybe you'll do another set there. If you could do sets of these women, and put these people before the people, the world, and in history like this, in a permanent form like this, it's about the greatest thing that could happen. And I want to congratulate you, and all those people who have contributed to it, making it possible for you to do it. And you and whoever else had the idea with you to do this thing. It was a great idea.

REH: Well, the idea was developed a little before I got involved in it. Letitia Woods Brown, who was professor at George Washington University, was on the advisory board of the Schlesinger Library. I think really the suggestion came from her.

EMB: Down in Washington, the George Washington University?

REH: Yes, so it had been going for about eight months or so before I got involved in it. So that was in 1977 that I was involved, and I've been carrying it ever since.

EMB: But it was a terrific idea.

REH: Yes, yes.

EMB: And you have done an excellent job with sticking with it. That's another thing, because I'm sure, because there's been times when Black was not popular, it might have always been beautiful, but it surely hasn't been always popular. And people were not contributing to it, because they had other things to contribute to, and had other priorities and so forth. But you have stuck with it, and then the purse strings began to loosen up and you got enough money to carry it on through. I think it's terrific, and I think this one is going to cause you to be able to do another set.

I'd like to see you do, now that you've done some of the older women, I'd like for you to see some of these unsung and unknown, and integrated kids that have gone out of our sight, that are just... You see, integration is good, but integration has caused us to lose sight of some things and people, and their accomplishments, that they're not labelled any more, you see. If we could do that with some women that are younger than me, than we who you are doing it for now. I'm delighted that you've put us in history, it's true. But and then, maybe you'll get some of those you have missed, but I would like eventually to see some of these integrated young people who have accomplished, and who have come up on the shoulders of these that you have shown, but have also disappeared behind ivory towers and behind the integrated walls, and they're not labelled "Negro" anymore. But they need to be brought out, and pointed up as...

REH: Yes, they're the forty-fifty-year-old range there.

EMB: And those women who've got higher degrees, or even are our grass roots women, and who have done great things just the same, and accomplished, but are unsung. Of course, some of us are unsung that you've dug up with this age group.

REH: Yes, we would have liked to have dug up more, really, but it's difficult.

EMB: I know, but it's such a marvelous device, and such a good way of having a repository of information about people who have done certain things, and a place that you could almost have a reference point on a category, that you wouldn't even know that that woman had accomplished. Every now and then, for example, right here in these big colleges and so forth, there are women who, one woman here is head of a department and on the faculty, the only Black on the faculty for the decision-making department of this MIT here. And the same way over at Harvard, I don't know, but you would probably know the other women who were there.

REH: They're there.

EMB: There are those women who are waiting for us to die, before they can be heard of, because some of us are holding out, and holding onto these places of leadership that they can't even get in and be heard of. But I would love to see you do that with such a young program.

REH: I think one of the interesting things that, to me, that has come out of doing the project, even though I knew a lot of it, I think there were young people in the 1950s and sixties, who almost thought that they had discovered...

EMB: Yes, civil rights and the things.

REH: So there's so much valuable information here about all the things that were going on in small towns, big towns, wherever, and that they really were building on the shoulders of those people, and they didn't realize that. So it's documented now. That's very important.

EMB: That's quite true, and it is important. It's true that probably some of these people who were in these higher places that I'm talking about don't know how they got there. They don't know how they got there.

REH: They don't know.

EMB: They don't know how they got there, because their own environment, and because they probably think that because of the sixties, think that they are there, but that is not true. But the fact that they have arrived, and it can be documented for others.

REH: I think the advisory committee to the project is interested in that possibility.

EMB: Is that so?

REH: But I think it will be a ways down the road. We have to really raise money to do a whole big project again.

EMB: Yes, but I don't think it'll be as hard to raise as it has been.

REH: Well, probably not, because of this one, yes.

EMB: I think if the Links knows. My daughter wants to hear from you, wants to write to you. She's going to write to you after I have talked to you, after the interview. She's out in Phoenix. She's taking a course to be a docent there at the museum. It's a three-year course after that, I believe, that they get to be a docent at the museum. But she wants the Links, her chapter of Links, to present this. Then after, she really will suggest it on a national level, that would go around to travel the country on a tour.

REH: Yes, well, the tour is going to be much longer than I had envisioned, in the sense, that maybe, well two or three years. But I keep getting letters from people who have heard about it, and say, "Oh, I would like it to come to my city." So it may be touring for a long time.

EMB: Yes, that's really great. Maybe when it comes back, it will be headquartered here?

REH: Yes, basically. The Schlesinger Library is the repository for the original tapes. Then we made archival tapes because the sound quality often isn't good. So we have the tapes cleaned up, and if people want them, and if the interviewee permits, these will become the listening tapes, and then we will have the archival tapes as back up. So the Schlesinger Library has the original transcribing, all the different versions and the final typing. We have thirteen institutions around the United States that receive the final transcripts, that was built into the funding for the project, that we could distribute these transcripts. Then other institutions are purchasing some. Some are purchasing complete sets, some just one or two volumes. But I think also, we need to do some curriculum development based on the materials.

EMB: I filled out...

REH: The legal agreement?

EMB: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW

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