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Black Women Oral History Project

Interview with

NORMA BOYD

November 13, 1976

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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
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The National Institute on Aging

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INTRODUCTION

Since July 1976 the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College, with support from The Rockefeller Foundation, supplemented in 1980 by grants from The Blanchard Foundation of Boston and the National Institute on Aging, has been conducting a project to record and transcribe the autobiographical memoirs of a group of black American women 70 years of age or 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when such a record has been created, it is not usually found in libraries or archives, the traditional repositories for historical documents.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.

Norma Boyd was born on August 9, 1888, in Washington, D.C., the second of three daughters born to Jurell and Pattie Bullock Boyd. As native North Carolinians who moved to Washington for the wider opportunities it offered, they were determined that their children would have the benefit of a college education. Miss Boyd completed elementary school in Washington, and went on to graduate from Armstrong High School in 1906.

The following autumn she enrolled in Howard University, receiving her bachelor's degree in 1910. As a sophomore at Howard, Miss Boyd was asked to join the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, which was formed in January 1908, incorporated in 1913, and which would become a worldwide organization with a membership totaling eighty thousand. One of the sorority's incorporators, she was instrumental in establishing in 1938 the National Non-Partisan Council on Public Affairs, a group which lobbied for the improvement of political, economic, and social conditions among minorities and which sought to secure, for all citizens, the opportunity to participate fully in all branches of government at the federal, state, and local levels.

After graduating from Howard, Miss Boyd completed a course at Miner Normal School, and thereafter was employed in the Washington public school system. She taught at both the elementary and secondary levels from 1912 to 1948, involving the students in the workings of the federal government as they visited congressional hearings and other governmental operations. She has pursued graduate work at Columbia and New York Universities, the University of California at Berkeley, and George Washington University.

During the Second World War, Miss Boyd became a member of the Pan-American Liaison Committee of Women's Organizations. She was admitted in 1946 to the United Nations as a Certified Observer representing the Non-

Partisan Council on Public Affairs, one of the groups which submitted recommendations for the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. While serving on the Non-Partisan Council, Miss Boyd became acquainted with members of the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington who invited her to participate in the Women's Alliance, one of the committees under the aegis of the church involved in community outreach. She went on to found, in 1959, the Women's International Religious Fellowship, an organization devoted to fostering understanding among the peoples of the world. Primarily directed at children, the Fellowship promotes friendship by sponsoring international festivals and a variety of educational and cultural programs in cooperation with the public schools of Washington, D.C. Although in her nineties, Miss Boyd still plays an important role in the Fellowship, directing many of its activities and setting a glowing example as a citizen of our world community.

Miss Boyd has traveled extensively, including a trip in 1949 to South America where she represented the United Nations, the International House Association, and Palco, for the Inter-American Commission of Women. Among her many honors are the 1947 "Outstanding Woman of the Year in Legislation" award from the National Council of Negro Women; the Bicentennial Woman award, presented to her in 1975 by Alpha Kappa Alpha; and an honorary doctor of laws degree from Bowie State College, conferred upon Miss Boyd in May 1978.

INTERVIEW WITH NORMA BOYD

A. Lillian Thompson:

Miss Norma Boyd, a native of Washington, D.C., is a retired schoolteacher, founder and incorporator of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, founder of Women's International Religious Fellowship and an official United Nations



Norma Boyd:

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Norma E. Boyd

(photo courtesy of Judith Sedwick)

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INTERVIEW WITH NORMA BOYD

A. Lillian Thompson:

Miss Norma Boyd, a native of Washington, D.C., is a retired schoolteacher, founder and incorporator of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, founder of Women's International Religious Fellowship and an official United Nations observer, just to name a few of her many accomplishments. We are at her home at 1602 Webster Street, Northwest, in Washington, D.C., today, Sunday, November 13, 1976. The interviewer is A. Lillian Thompson.

Miss Boyd, I'd like to begin our interview by asking about your family history. I don't know what you remember about your parents or grandparents or great-grandparents, but certainly that would be the beginning of your history. Would you tell me in your own words, please, what you remember, or what you were told.

Norma Boyd:

Well, my parents were natives of North Carolina. They came to Washington, D.C., shortly after they were married. I never saw any of my grandparents. My father was born in 1861. In his family there were six boys and four girls. His father had bought part of the plantation on which he was a slave. Evidently he must have worked just as hard as a freedman, maybe harder than he did when he was a slave. I do remember hearing my father say this, that his father, my grandfather, had told him that when he was a slave, the overseer once talked about hitting him, and his father jerked off his own hat and put it on the ground, stomped it and told the overseer that if he did, he would stomp him just like he did that hat. So the overseer was upset and told the owner. The owner warned him never to put his hand on him. Evidently my grandfather was a very determined man who had some sway with his owner.

Now that's the most I know about him, other than that he reared all of his children to be independent. Now, the younger children had the advantage of going to college down in Virginia. My father's sisters went to Boynton Institute,

NB: (cont.) that's in Virginia. Papa was the second child.

Now, my mother lived in the same vicinity, and I recall (my father told me this) that if he was going to visit my mother, his father would let him have the best horse on the place. But if he wasn't, nothing doing. So the families must have been very close. My mother was this type of person--to know her was to love her. She was full of fun and had very high standards. She used to say that she'd tell the boys they need not worry about it if they didn't like her because she ceased to like them the day before. There was always a horse at her hitching post. So you can see how jolly she was--that kind.

But when it came to ethics and morals, you wouldn't find a person with higher standards. She trained us that way because that's the way she was. She always told us that when you went out from home, you reflected your home training. So whatever you did, you were talking about yourself. If you behaved yourself, you were saying you came from a good home. If you did anything wrong, you were saying something was wrong at home.

Another thing she instilled in us was that no one in all the world was any better than we were. At least the only people who were superior to us were the people whose conduct was superior to ours. So we grew up with that understanding. We were poor, but in our house we planned well. My father owned his home ever since I can remember.

ALT: That was here in Washington? Let me ask you, why did you come to Washington? Do you know?

NB: Yes. My father said he came to Washington because he felt in Washington they would be freer than they were in North Carolina.

ALT: Did they move to the Northwest section of Washington at that time?

NB: Yes, when they came to Washington they lived near his uncle. His uncle and his wife were living near Saint Augustine's Church. And that's on 15th Street near R, you know. I remember hearing that his uncle's name was Amos. He and his wife had a little store, you know, where they sold candies and little pies and things like that.

ALT: Were you born at that time?

NB: No, I was born later. My oldest sister, all of us were born here. My parents came up here not long after they married. I don't know what work my father did when he first came to Washington, but I know he was always interested in horses and I imagine, now this is imagination, I don't know this, that he must have had some employment of that nature. But now his brother came up with him. His brother could pass for white. Papa could have too. So when his brother got up here and found out being white gave you more opportunity, he just went on the white side.

ALT: Was his mother white? If not, who was white in the family, do you know?

NB: My grandmother.

ALT: Your grandmother was white.

NB: My father's mother.

ALT: Well, that's unusual, isn't it?

NB: Um hmm. So when my father's brother got up here, he went white. After he'd been up here a while and saw what the conditions were, he just went on white. Now my mother was brown. Some of Papa's brothers were brown. See, in their family some of them could pass and some couldn't. You know. Now, my grandaunt, Uncle Amos's wife, was Catholic, and my parents were Baptist. She was Mama's best friend here. When my oldest sister, Orrie Belle, was born, Uncle Amos's wife asked my mother to let her have Orrie baptized. You see, the Catholics think you have to baptize a child right away. My mother agreed. When I was born, two years later...

ALT: You were the second child?

NB: The second. Uncle Amos's wife, I seem to recall her name was Elizabeth, had me baptized in the Catholic church, also. My mother was concerned about the impression the Catholic church was making on Orrie, and decided she would not have any other of her children baptized Catholic. But something unusual happened when Genevieve, my youngest sister, was born three years later. She was very, very small, and the doctor did not expect her to live. In fact, he had told my mother that he would be there the next day to write her death certificate. Aunt Elizabeth was concerned and asked my mother to let her stay with Gen all night and pray with her. She did. And, do you know, when the doctor came the next morning, Gen was okay and remained healthy until nearly the time she retired from teaching.

ALT: Now, you didn't say what year you were born. I don't know whether you want to give that information or not...

NB: Why? I have it in my book.

ALT: All right. What year were you born?

NB: August 9th, 1888.

ALT: Do you know the economic status of your family at the time you were born, or the type of work that your father did, or did your mother work? What was that like at that time?

NB: My mother, no, never worked. My father was the breadwinner and my mother was the manager. And then another thing, in my family the first thing you do is try to buy your own home. I don't know anybody in my family who doesn't own his own home, but they are always budget-minded. They're always ambitious. And my mother was a number one manager. Now she sewed, made our clothes. She was just what an ideal housewife is, and my father

NB: (cont.) was very happy to see that she managed, because he knew that was the way we could get ahead.

ALT: Do you feel that you were poor at that time?

NB: Poor? Yes!

ALT: Were you?

NB: [laughter] Sure!

ALT: Did you know that you were poor? Say, did you feel that you were different from other children or was just everybody poor at that...

NB: Everybody was poor. [laughter] But you know, you didn't feel badly about it. I mean, I've never known myself to be hungry. I've never known myself not to have the necessary things, like dresses and things like that. But we didn't have any surplus of anything.

ALT: Now you said that your mother decided after you were born, I believe, that the other children would not be baptized in the Catholic church. Was the church a part of the family life? If so, what church?

NB: Saint Augustine was a part of it then.

ALT: The Episcopal church?

NB: No, that's Catholic. But you mean of my family life?

ALT: In your immediate family, yes. Was church a part of...

NB: Later it was, when we got big enough to go. But it wasn't a Catholic church. We went to the church that was nearest us. I think it was a Baptist church first. I don't remember early. But when I got older, it was the Episcopal church.

ALT: Then you started school at about age five?

NB: Oh, let me tell you. When I got ready to go, I was kind of sickly. I was very fat. Well, chubby. I have a picture upstairs I'll show you. Now, I looked Chinese. My eyes were small and I was the color of a Chinaman. And we always lived in an integrated neighborhood, because I remember a lot of Irish were in our neighborhood. And I know that because when they'd say, "Ching, Ching Chinaman,"--you know how children do--and I'd say, "I'd rather be a Chinaman than a poor white Irishman." [laughter] So there were Irish, Chinese and colored in our neighborhood. I've always lived in an integrated neighborhood.

ALT: Did you have an awareness of being Negro as opposed to white way back then, or were you just children playing together, calling names?

NB: We were just children playing together, calling names.

ALT: Now, what about school? Did you go to public or private school?

NB: Oh, let me tell you. Private school? No, no, darling. When I was five years old, my mother took me to the eye doctor. My right eye was weak, I mean, crossed. My mother took me to the Eye, Nose and Throat Hospital. It was on 15th Street. The doctor gave me very strong glasses and it was never noticeable. Well then, that's when she was getting ready to put us in school. The first school we went to--we had moved from 15th Street to the 200 block of R Street, Northwest--and the first school I attended was Slater School. Miss Eva Chase was principal of Slater School. Slater School is there now.

ALT: Oh, is it? I was going to ask you that. Was it integrated?

NB: Oh, schools were not integrated until the fifties. We lived in an integrated neighborhood, but in a segregated environment. I recall walking past white schools to get to ours. I understand that the white schools were less crowded than ours, and you could see that the buildings were much better. The white teachers were trained in different schools than the colored teachers. The colored teachers were trained at Miner Normal School where they received excellent preparation under the leadership of Dr. Lucy Moten. All of the teachers I had were dedicated, and the children got their work. My mother was the kind of person who came to school to see what was going on. She was acquainted with all of our teachers.

I have never seen a better psychologist than my mother. She got the best out of everybody. I remember only once hearing my mother raise her voice. My parents were well-adjusted people. I was brought up in a poor home, but a very happy home. I used to say if ever I married, I hope my children would come up in as happy a home as I did.

After we had been at the R Street address for three or four years, my father decided to buy his own home. At the time, he was in the livery business. You know, at that time to go into the livery business, all you needed was a horse and wagon. They didn't have large motor vans or automobiles in those days. I can remember my father taking us to and from school and other places in the wagon at times.

Papa and Mr. Martin Mitchell, who worked with the Lothrop's, co-owners of the Woodward and Lothrop Store, bought some land near Brookland in northeast Washington and had houses built next to each other. I must have been in the third grade when we moved out. We continued to go to Slater School, although we had to walk long distances. We could have gone to a school nearer home, but the teachers at Slater felt it would be better for us to stay there since the teachers and the school program were superior. And so we stayed there.

ALT: Now, do you remember any particular experience out of your elementary school days that has been a lasting influence on your life? Any teacher

ALT: (cont.) or anything in particular that...?

NB: Oh yes. I remember my first grade teacher. I couldn't stand her. This is why I couldn't. Her name was Miss Gilberry, and I was just starting to school. My sister was in the third grade, and she and some other girl were fighting on the school grounds. The girl was beating her, so I went to help my sister. [laughter] Although we were not allowed to fight in our home, I went to help her, and Miss Gilberry said she was going to put me in the dungeon. Well darling, I ran all the way home, oh, I was a wreck. My mother came to school and asked Miss Gilberry never to say anything like that to me. If she wanted me punished, she could punish me in another way, make me stay after school or something like that, but never tell me she was going to...I nearly had a fit. I thought she really could put me...but you know, then I couldn't stand her from that minute. [laughter] She was always...

ALT: And that's your significant experience!

NB: When I got to the third grade, I had a teacher named Miss Clark. And do you know, later on I taught with Miss Clark in junior high school. She was lovely. She was one of the Martins. Well, everybody in Washington knew the Martins. They were a set of teachers. My fourth grade teacher was Miss Robinson, and she was very funny. However, all of them were strict. And you know, Miss Robinson and I taught together when I first started teaching. Her room was across from mine.

ALT: Is that right?

NB: Isn't that funny? It was across from mine. Then in the fifth grade, oh, I had a fifth grade teacher that was a humdinger. She was a brilliant woman, but extremely strict. This is the way she organized her class. The smartest child sat in the first seat in the first row. In those days you didn't have chairs that you moved, like you do now. The seats were fastened to the floor. The entire time I was in her room, another girl and I occupied that seat. One month I had it, the next month she had it. We just swapped seats, see. The teachers in those days could go out of their rooms to teachers' meetings, and anyone could walk through a building and not hear any noise.

ALT: So what's different today? You wonder, don't you?

NB: Darling!

ALT: Did you whip the children then? What was it that made children so respectful of authority? Other than the home training, too.

NB: Well, they could whip them.

ALT: They could?

NB: Uh huh. They could, but seldom did. They...

ALT: So it wasn't the whipping that made for this respect?

NB: Oh no. No. You respected your teachers. It was your home training too, I guess. Then later on I found out they had schools for children who wouldn't behave. And special teachers for them. But there were very few. I didn't know anything about that until later on--years later--when I saw that they had those kinds of schools. The discipline was marvelous. For one thing, every child realized that the teacher was doing the very best she could for him. When they passed you, you knew your work. No teacher passed a student just to get rid of him in those days.

ALT: You knew the work.

NB: You knew the work. My fifth grade teacher was Miss Martha Liggins. She was a very strict disciplinarian. I recall the first day my class entered her room, and there was a boy who had been kept back. The teacher asked him to sit in the first seat in the last row. When he refused, she took him by his shoulders and made him sit in every seat in that row. That was something that none of us ever forgot.

ALT: Where did you go to high school?

NB: I finished...Oh, let me tell you something I left out. We lived in Brookland about five years, when the B & O Railroad bought our home, and we bought another one on Montello Avenue in northeast Washington. That was an integrated neighborhood.

ALT: Do you think that was intentional or just the type of location he was looking for?

NB: It was the type of location he was looking for.

ALT: Oh, just integrated throughout?

NB: No, Washington was like that. You would find some of the neighborhoods were integrated, but the schools were different.

ALT: And did the children play together on the block? Or did you segregate yourselves?

NB: We segregated ourselves.

ALT: Oh, so it was just the physical integration only?

NB: Yes. Now when we moved to this new neighborhood on Montello Avenue, the Mitchells bought a house at 1227 T Street, Northwest, but the friendship of my family and the Mitchells was very deep. The five years we had lived next door had built a permanent bond. The Mitchells had no children. They felt that we were their children, and when Mr. Mitchell went away with the Lothrop's in the summer, I would stay with Mrs. Mitchell. She paid me ten cents a week for spending change.

ALT: That was a lot of money.

NB: Before we moved to this new address, our house was the home for all of Papa's sisters and brothers who were coming up from North Carolina. We used to say that our house was a "Do Drop Inn." It was "the house by the side of the road." Our house was the stop-off place between North Carolina and New Jersey. The first of Papa's sisters who came through was Aunt Lucy. She came after finishing Boydton College and took sewing lessons at a school in Washington run by Mrs. Addie R. Clarke, while she waited for her future husband to finish medical school. They were married at our house, then went to Jersey City where he set up practice. Later, Papa's youngest sister, Elizabeth, came and lived with us. There she met her future husband. So, I knew Papa's family very well.

My mother had three sisters. Her oldest sister, Aunt Jane, I never knew. Her second sister came up and stayed with us for a while. Later, she went back to North Carolina and was married. Her youngest sister, Aunt Bettie, was married before she came here. She lived in Washington until she died. She had two sons who lived with us after she died. So I knew my mother's people also. My grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side, I never knew. Or my grandmother and grandfather on my father's side. They died when we were little children, I think.

When we moved to Montello Avenue, my father had a job in the district building. At the time we were living on Montello Avenue, Reverend Bennet was minister at the Episcopal church near us. Most of our friends who were neighbors went to this church. This church became our center of activities. We would go to Sunday school and stay for church. Our extracurricular activities were carried on in the church hall. All of the people in our neighborhood had similar goals for their children as my parents had for us.

Although white and colored did not play together, we didn't fight, either. The white people in the neighborhood and my parents were friendly. I recall how the white women used to come to our house to tell my mother about their troubles. We would say to our mother, "You seem to be the father confessor for the neighborhood." This was the pattern throughout our lives here. When my mother passed in December, 1915, the neighbors--white and colored--gave her flowers made in the form of a wheel with a broken spoke. It stood six feet tall.

ALT: Were you in high school at this time?

NB: Yes.

ALT: When she died?

NB: Oh, I was teaching when she passed.

ALT: You were teaching then? Okay, let's back up then.

NB: All right. Let's back up.

ALT: Back up into high school. Is there anything that you remember about the high school period, or that stands out in your mind as having had an impact on your life?

NB: Oh yes. My older sister went to Dunbar--of course Dunbar was the school. It was the only high school for Negroes then. Later they built Armstrong High School, which I attended, where they taught the same subjects, but they also taught shop work.

ALT: A vocational type school.

NB: All of the teachers at Armstrong were of the same caliber as those at Dunbar. For instance, my mathematics teacher was Mr. Bassett, a graduate of Princeton University; my English teacher was Miss Angelina Grimké, who was educated in Boston, Massachusetts; and my German teacher was Miss Otelia Cromwell, who had studied abroad.

At that time, Washington, D.C., was the intellectual center for Negroes in the United States. Mrs. Mary Church Terrell was on the board of education. When I was a child about ten years old, I decided that I wanted to be like Mary Church Terrell.

Along with all our regular high school courses, I took sewing. Our mark in sewing before graduation was determined by the type of work we did on our graduation gowns. My dress was beautiful with lace and tucks, and all that. I got the mark A for the course. We had our pictures made in these dresses.

ALT: When you went to, this was the vocational school?

NB: Uh huh.

ALT: Did you plan at that time to end your education after high school, or did you know that you were on your way on to college?

NB: Oh, I knew. We knew when we were small that all of us were going to college.

ALT: Now was that your father or your mother who made that determination, as you remember?

NB: My mother.

ALT: Your mother?

NB: Uh huh. And my father agreed. My mother ran the house and her daughters, and whatever she said I'm sure he agreed with it, you know, and was all for it. We knew the budget in our house. I knew how much my father made. I knew how much everything cost. My mother would give me carfare--it was a nickel then--and I'd walk to save the nickel. Because I knew all of us

- NB: (cont.) were going to finish college--the three of us were going to finish college. We were going to teach. All of us were very different in temperament. My older sister was business-minded and decided to take a business course and make that her career. But I was going to teach and Genevieve was going to teach. We had decided that, you see.
- ALT: In thinking back, would you say it was unusual for your mother to have had this ambition for three daughters, when so many people thought the girl's place was in the home, and it was the boy who needed the college education? Did that seem unusual, or did most of your friends go on to college?
- NB: Most of my friends were going to college. You see, in D.C. the best thing a person could do here was to teach. So all the girls wanted to teach. The boys were the ones going into professions. The boys would teach or go into law or medicine; they had aspirations along all fields. But the only fields at that time, or the main field for women, was to teach. And women could not teach who were married, you know.
- ALT: Oh, they couldn't? I didn't know that.
- NB: Oh no!
- ALT: A married woman could not teach?
- NB: No, it was long after I was teaching that married women were permitted to teach.
- ALT: Why couldn't the married woman teach?
- NB: Well, it was a law. They didn't employ any married women to teach.
- ALT: Is that right. Heaven above.
- NB: Oh no.
- ALT: So the law then controlled a woman's life to a large extent?
- NB: Yes, yes.
- ALT: Because she had to make a choice, either marriage or a career, but not both. Isn't that interesting.
- NB: Well, you know, it was. But do you know what I am persuaded to believe is that the home ought to be responsible for the children. If the woman is going to work, she should not work until her children have gotten to that stage in life that they can be responsible. When I taught, I'd see these children with the keys around their necks. Well, that meant that when they went home, there was no one there. It meant, as a rule, when they left home, there was no one there; that the mother had gone out to work. Well, I believe that early in childhood, early in life, a child's pattern is set. I think that's the reason teachers didn't have such a hard time with the

NB: (cont.) children.

ALT: Now, immediately after high school, you went right to college?

NB: Yes, I finished high school in June and entered Howard University in the fall. I knew I was going to teach, so I went into a regular college course.

ALT: This is Howard University?

NB: Um hmm, and it was there I joined the sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. I went there in 1906.

ALT: I want to ask you about the sorority, but before we get to that, I wonder if you could tell me what was Howard like when you went there--as a university? What do you remember about it?

NB: Oh, yes. Everybody on campus knew everybody else. The professors knew all, whether they taught you or not. For instance, my sister was there two years ahead of me. She was in the business department which was a two-year course, and she left when I came. Professor George Cook taught her. I hadn't been there long before he said to my father, "Your younger daughter, Norma, is very different from Belle." And Papa said, "What is she, she isn't in any trouble?" He said, "No, but she just is so vivacious-- she knows everybody on the campus." You see, I was outgoing. I always have been. And my sister wasn't. She was very businesslike.

ALT: Are you saying that the school was very small at that time, or was it because of the personal interest that caused them to know everybody?

NB: Both. It was because of its size and personal interest. The classes were small. Now, there may have been evening classes and other classes-- they had a medical school and a dental school and all--but I'm talking about the regular classes that I was in.

ALT: Did they have the boarding department then, or where did the children live?

NB: If you were from out of town, most likely you would be living in Miner Hall. Those of us who were living at home, of course, only went to the campus for our classes or for whatever activities we wanted. You knew nearly everybody on the campus and everybody knew you.

ALT: Now what type of social activities did you have?

NB: Oh well, we had dances, football, basketball. I remember the basketball games used to be held downtown, and we would all go down to them. We always played football with Lincoln University on Thanksgiving Day. Those were the big games, you know. Everyone had to go to chapel at twelve o'clock each school day.

ALT: You mean every day?

NB: They had chapel every day at noon and you went to chapel. Dr. Wilbur

NB: (cont.) Thirkield, who came to Howard as president the same year as I did, would preside at chapel.

ALT: What was his name?

NB: Thirkield. You had services every day and that was compulsory. So everybody got to know everybody else, you see. Then, on Sunday at four o'clock they held vesper services with outstanding speakers and a wonderful choir. The Howard choir was one of the outstanding choirs of the time.

ALT: Did they have a school of music then?

NB: Yes. The Howard choir was great to see, and on Sunday at four o'clock people would come back to Howard just to hear them. Howard was the intellectual center.

ALT: Now, you mentioned joining a sorority, the Alpha Kappa Alpha. How did that come about?

NB: Well, the girls who thought of this sorority were in the class to graduate in 1908. The sorority was formed about January 15, 1908.

ALT: 1908.

NB: Yes. And you see, my class was 1910. The class of 1908 took us into the sorority in February, 1908, without an initiation because they wanted the sorority to continue.

ALT: Had it been founded before you got there?

NB: Well, I came in a few weeks after it was founded. You see, this is the oldest colored sorority.

ALT: I was going to ask you, this is the very first?

NB: The very first. So they decided to have a sorority, but who was going to carry it on after they left? There were seven girls in my class--six or seven--and they asked us to come in. Now you were supposed to have scholarship and the idea of service to be a member. So they asked us to come in and we did. They called us founders because, although it was not our idea, we were in on the ground floor. It was not incorporated until 1913 and then I was one of the incorporators.

ALT: There must have been more than just seven of you on the campus who might have been invited to join. Do you know why they selected just you seven and not some of the others?

NB: Well, we were invited. They said they wanted scholarship, and maybe some of the others didn't want to come in, I don't know. But those joining were supposed to be people to be admired. See? And it gave you prestige later on to belong to a sorority, of course.

ALT: During those years in the sorority, what was the attitude of sorority members toward nonmembers, or the relationships, do you remember?

NB: Well, I don't know about on the campus, but I know a little later on, in order to get into the sorority, one negative vote would keep out others. And sometimes they did that.

ALT: For personal reasons or did there have to be some expressed reason for keeping a person out?

NB: Well, you don't have to say. I think sometimes--I'm being perfectly fair--I think in all organizations there could be a good reason they wouldn't want you in. Then I think the other reason would be they just didn't like you--someone didn't like you--but then you had to be sponsored. However, in those early days, I didn't find that a factor. For instance, my sister wasn't a member, but if either one of my sisters had been there, they wouldn't have wanted to join. My older sister didn't believe in organizations, and you could have begged my sister, Gen, to join and she wouldn't because she said, "Too many women together, it doesn't mean any good." [laughter] So maybe some of the girls really just were not interested.

ALT: Would you say the economic status of a girl had anything to do with her eligibility for membership?

NB: I wouldn't think so, because in those days you didn't have to have expensive things. Most people didn't have money, you know, I mean extra money. I don't believe that was a factor.

ALT: When did the initiation become a part of the agenda?

NB: The next year.

ALT: You thought up the initiation for the incoming group?

NB: Yes.

ALT: Do you remember what you did?

NB: [laughter] I do remember this. I remember Dean Cook went with us once when we went off the campus.

ALT: You were what?

NB: Dean Cook went with us once when we went off the campus.

ALT: What types of service things did you do? Do you remember?

NB: Now in those days they were interested in the Y. They had parties. They didn't do anything to raise money for anyone or anything like that until later on. And you see, I lived off the campus. Oh, they planted ivy all around the place, the ivy vine, and had Ivy Day--those kinds of things.

NB: (cont.) We had parties in one of the halls and had a play in the chapel. But the first serious thing I remember was when I was president of Alpha Kappa Alpha.

ALT: You were president? What year was that?

NB: I was president before I left college, and I was president again after I began teaching school. By 1912 the sorority had members who joined while they were taking courses in evening classes at Howard. Among them were Julia Brooks and Nellie Quander. They were much older than the original members and naturally were a great asset. Nellie Quander was a human dynamo and was the leader in having the sorority incorporated.

By this time, the school system had decided it wanted college-trained people in the intermediate grades and offered a course at Miner Normal School to train for this. I decided to take the course and came out number one! Going to Dr. Moten was something else. She had finished Howard University with an A.B., but she was principal of Miner Normal School. Anybody who came from Lucy Moten's school, you were efficient, but you had manners. She taught manners, she taught dress. Certain standards of conduct, dress and all were only among a few of the things demanded of you. All right. So it was really wonderful to come under her influence.

All right. I finished, and I finished in June, but I didn't get appointed until...there was no vacancy in the fifth grade until the next January, in 1912. But in the meantime, some of my high school teachers asked me to substitute. I used to go in the high school and substitute. Well, I remember it was funny. I was in Dunbar, coming down the steps one day, and one of the teachers there took to me-- she thought I was a student, you see. She didn't know I was a substitute. And she said, "What right do you, what are you doing coming down the stairway this time of day?" And I looked surprised, and the teacher who was with her just started laughing. She said, "She's teaching, she's substituting." [laughter] I thought she was going to haul me up, what am I doing coming down those steps at that time? You see? Well, it was funny.

There was a very close relationship between teachers and their students. I found it that way with me. Well anyhow, when the time came to get this place, Roscoe Bruce was the colored superintendent. Well, he had this job open for somebody else. He didn't want me to have it. He told me, no influence, ecclesiastical, political, or otherwise would get me the job. So I came home crying, telling my mama. My mother said, "He didn't mention my influence." She said, "My influence rules the world, and you're going to get it." And I did. Because she just took me to the superintendent, and the superintendent said, "Mr. Bruce, is Miss Boyd number one?" He had to say yes. And the superintendent said, "That's all I want to know." And so I got it.

Well, you see, my mother had always taught me that the two things I had to have was integrity and faith in God, and she said, "Those are the keys that unlock all doors. Never lie about anything." She said,

NB: (cont.) "If you make a mistake, and all of us are going to make mistakes, be the first one to admit it. Say, 'I'm sorry, I made a mistake,' and then everybody will believe you. And if you have faith in God, He'll work through you." And that's been the pattern of my life. I've always succeeded in what I have attempted to be. It's opened doors for me. I've gone all over the United States, speaking and all, and I've gone in places that I wasn't invited to, in conferences I wasn't invited to. Somebody would call me, maybe they were white or maybe they were colored, and say to me, "They're going to have a conference, and I think you ought to be there," and I'd walk right on in. Nobody's ever asked me out.

But I've always prayed. I've always prayed to God, "Speak through me. I'm not talking for myself. I'm talking for all people. Speak through me." And I've always been welcome, and I've always found somebody who I made an impression on.

So I finished the course in June, but was not appointed to teach until January, 1912.

ALT: How many years did you teach?

NB: I taught from 1912 to 1948.

ALT: And then retired? Did you enjoy teaching?

NB: Loved it. Loved it.

ALT: What was the most satisfying part of it?

NB: Having my children involved in everything I did. For instance, I organized a federation of student councils, and took them to Congress and the United Nations.

ALT: Now, were you involved in these activities yourself before you took the children?

NB: Yes.

ALT: How did that come about? When did you get involved in things related to the United Nations, for example?

NB: Well, I got involved in that through Non-Partisan Council groups, and the sorority.

ALT: The Non-Partisan Council group?

NB: See, from 1938 to 1948, I was the one who opened a lot of doors for Negroes in government.

ALT: Now tell me how the Non-Partisan Council was started.

NB: Well, in 1938, I decided it was time to do something for the children I was teaching. Now it was a teacher's duty not only to teach but to involve herself--to open doors for her students.

ALT: Go on.

NB: So I was reading in the paper one Sunday morning, the New York Times, that the southern congressmen were threatening the northern congressmen that they would expose the northern congressmen on how they traded on other legislation if they did not stop pushing the anti-lynching bill. And just like a flash, it came to me that some way should be found to see that the interests of the poor and the minorities were really represented.

ALT: Go on.

NB: And so I went to the sorority meeting, and we were going to have an executive meeting that very Sunday. When I got to that meeting I had decided we'd have a lobby, and the girls agreed with me. And in two months' time, we had a lobby opened at my house and employed two people. We only had \$135--never any money to do anything, of course--and it grew from that. I worked with them for ten years.

ALT: What did the lobby do primarily?

NB: Oh, darling. It was to get people, especially Negroes, integrated into every phase of American life. We had then 160 chapters and set up committees in these chapters all over the United States.

ALT: Were all of the members sorority members?

NB: Yes. And so then I started lecturing throughout the United States on our programs.

ALT: Now, what was the lobby's relationship with the United Nations?

NB: Well, it was not until 1946 that we got in the U.N.

ALT: This was later?

NB: Yes. In 1946 we were the first sorority ever accredited at the United Nations, but the Non-Partisan Council was active from 1938 to 1948. The United Nations opened in 1945 in California, and we were not invited. I decided that I was going to be in it in 1946, and I was.

ALT: This was the United Nations? What was the purpose of wanting to be there?

NB: Oh, darling. There you meet all the people in nongovernmental organizations who are accredited to the United Nations. There you meet people from all over the world. I think there were 180 organizations when the human rights bill was written, and I had something to do with it, I mean; it was sent to all these organizations for their comments.

ALT: I see. I see.

NB: All the meetings at the Department of State were off-the-record meetings, newsmen were never present. I attended these meetings, and all the issues on the agenda were discussed with the delegates. We were given an opportunity to make our views known. I was a participant from 1938 to 1946, and during this time the sorority had been involved in a legislative program as one of our activities, and we held many conferences.

ALT: What were these conferences about?

NB: That was during the wartime, and one conference was about women in the war effort. I have forgotten the exact titles of the others.

ALT: Was it to encourage more women to be involved or to...

NB: Oh, to encourage more women to be involved, to get out and vote, and in 1943 I had an international broadcast.

ALT: What was that like?

NB: It was called "Wings over Jordan," and I was a speaker in 1943.

ALT: What did you talk about?

NB: Oh, I'll show you the speech. I let them know that there was no way on earth for us to have a peaceful world until we set up some standards for ourselves. I received letters from all over the United States, from unions and all, complimenting me.

ALT: And then, it was after this initial involvement that you got your children at the school involved in the same type of thing?

NB: Yes. During this time I was teaching at Banneker.

ALT: Where? Banneker?

NB: I went to Banneker Junior High School in 1939, and I had the Junior High School Federation of Student Councils. I made reports to all of them. The children's parents were happy. The children knew what I was doing, and the superintendent knew what I was doing. And darling, those were the years. My day began at six o'clock in the morning, and all of my time was devoted to school activities and public involvement. I kept my children informed of my activities. Nearly every weekend I was out of town.

ALT: Would your travel be in connection with this, the lobby?

NB: That was it. You see, previously I had formed a student council in my school, (it was the first student council in a Negro junior high school) and then later, a Federation of Student Councils in the junior high schools of Divisions 10 through 13, the colored divisions of Washington's public schools. This allowed me to get the children in the junior high schools involved in our federal government operations.

NB: (cont.) We went to congressional hearings when a bill we were interested in was going to come up, so they could see how our government works. That gave me the greatest satisfaction, having my children involved in how democracy works. You must be a voter, but be an intelligent voter. We had set up certain standards. My children, when they were going to elect somebody for the student council, they would go to the board and put up a list of what they wanted their representative to do...

ALT: This was well-rounded education for them.

NB: Yes, I thought it was training them for citizenship. Then another thing I did, when they were talking about smart children getting short-changed by not having them in a class by themselves--I had my classes divided into smart and those who weren't so smart, and they worked in pairs. I asked them what they thought about it. And you know what they wrote to me? "If you're training us for leadership, you ought to train us with the people we're going to lead, so we'll understand each other." So those were the things that gave me satisfaction.

ALT: Now I know that you have traveled extensively. Did you begin your travels then, or was it in later years that you started to travel?

NB: Oh, darling!

ALT: That is, especially your travel abroad.

NB: My sister and I traveled during our teaching years. Our first trip was a cruise to the West Indies when we visited my sister and brother-in-law in Grenada.

ALT: Now when was it that you did this work for the United Nations?

NB: That was in 1949 in South America; Brazil and Argentina.

ALT: Okay. Was this about your teaching?

NB: I had finished. I retired before that.

ALT: Oh, this came later then?

NB: Yes.

ALT: Okay. Let's talk about retirement.

NB: Oh darling, I retired...

ALT: You retired to the rocking chair?

NB: Never. [laughter] When I retired in 1948...

ALT: Why did you happen to retire at that time?

NB: Exhaustion. For ten years I had been using every bit of energy I had, and my sister, Genevieve, had retired due to high blood pressure. Well, I went to a commencement at Howard University and almost collapsed. When I came home, Genevieve said, "This is it. You're retiring." When I said, "I don't have an ounce of energy, I'm just spent," my doctor said, "It's surprising you've had it as long as you have." So I retired. When I told the people at the United Nations, they asked what I planned to do. I told them Gen and I had decided to go to Brazil in June, 1949, so they made all the contacts for me.

ALT: The last time I was here, we were talking about your trip to South America. You told me that you were there representing three organizations: the United Nations had asked you to represent them; the International House had asked you to represent them; and you were also representing Palco* for the Inter-American Commission of Women. Would you tell me, please, if you were successful in these assignments and how did you carry them out?

NB: Oh, I was most successful in the assignments for the United Nations. I had an opportunity to contact all the boat lines for them. For instance, I went to South America on the Moore-McCormack Lines. I left New York on the Argentina, and I acquainted the officials of the ship with the work of the United Nations. I asked the cruise director if he would put on a show each trip concerning the activities of the United Nations. I consulted the librarians and asked them if they would put material in the libraries. I had an opportunity to do this on all the boats on which I traveled: the Argentina, the Uruguay, and the Brazil.

In Brazil, I set up a chapter of the International House. Also, I had by this time attended the Inter-American Commission of Women's conference in Argentina. There was one representative from each country, and my sister and I went as observers. We had the same courtesies as the entire group. We were invited to all the activities. Mrs. Evita Peron, the president's wife, served as hostess and saw to it that the women had every opportunity to see everything they wanted.

ALT: How did you overcome the language barrier, or was there one?

NB: In Brazil, they speak Portuguese. Well, we had studied some Spanish before we left, and my sister was better in Spanish than I was, but if you speak Spanish, the Portuguese will understand you. However, all of the people on the trip, all of the contacts, spoke English well.

ALT: So that wasn't really a problem. Did you have any continuing relationship or follow-ups when you got back to the States from these experiences? Did you have to make a report or how did you use...

NB: I sent my report back.

ALT: To each of these organizations?

NB: I sent my report back to the United Nations while I was on the trip. I had reports sent back for all of the people. When I was in Argentina,

* Pan-American Liaison Committee of Women's Organizations, Inc., a women's auxiliary of the Organization of American States.

NB: (cont.) the American delegate to the Inter-American Commission of Women, Miss Mary Cannon, was there. I had been on her executive board when I was in Washington, D.C. It was she who suggested that I go down there as an observer. So we had those contacts all the time we were there. Mrs. Peron invited us to everything, and she was very gracious. The American embassy officials met us everywhere and gave us the courtesies of the embassy. Sometimes I had to pinch myself to see if I was dreaming. [laughter]

ALT: To see if that was really you? All right. Now I want to ask you about another one of your activities, maybe your favorite, you can tell me. I know that under your leadership, the Women's International Religious Fellowship was founded, and I read that the year was 1959 at All Souls Unitarian Church. That immediately brings to mind two questions. The last time we talked about your church affiliation, you were an Episcopalian. How did you happen to be at the Unitarian church, and do you remember how the germ of the idea for this organization came into being?

NB: Well, you see, I have always been a free thinker. To me, religion always means how you live, it's a way of life. Religion never meant form to me, and so it was easy for me to adjust from one religious concept to the other. Just like I could adjust from Catholic to Protestant, I can adjust to Buddhist, to Hindu, to all of them, because I think it all depends on how you are trained. Early in life my mother taught me that the only people who are superior to you are the people whose conduct is superior to yours. I bring that down to religion. It seems to me religion is a way of life. It doesn't make any difference to me. Sometimes I might be associated with someone for a long time and not have any idea what his concept of religion is. I'm too busy looking at what he does. I don't pay much attention to what he says about his religious life, you know? And too, the Golden Rule of all religions comes down to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" I think religion should be a bridge to understanding, rather than a division.

ALT: What was it that caused you to move then from the Episcopal church to the Unitarian?

NB: Well, when I was working with the Non-Partisan Council, I met some people from the Unitarian church. You see, I had moved from Northeast [Washington] where we attended the Episcopal church because that was near our home and we got involved. Then when I moved to Northwest, I was near the Unitarian church and I was invited. They were integrating that church, and I was invited to some of the meetings there. I became interested because they didn't have any form--they didn't believe in certain rituals. I thought that was a good idea. It seemed to me they were trying to practice their religion.

I think the religion that had the most influence on me for a long time was the Quakers. The Quakers, I believe, have done more for integration and to abolish slavery. Way in the 1800s they were fighting against slavery and were teaching the slaves to read and write.

NB: (cont.) I was prejudiced up until 1937, because I thought that I didn't want to meet any white people from the South; I thought all of them were mean. And it was at a Quaker conference that I found out that the two strongest women in the conference were women who came... one was from Georgia and one was from Texas. Then they were in the same building with me, and I found out those women had to work harder at their home to fight prejudice, these white women, and they were doing a wonderful job. A wonderful job fighting prejudice. And so when the conference was over, I told them that the most important thing that I had learned in the conference was that I had been prejudging too. I've been convinced that all the people have, all of the so-called races...if you notice I say so-called races because I don't believe there's but one race and that's the human race, and this so-called race is just a myth. You know, if we could overcome that, we would be a long ways towards solving our problems.

ALT: How soon after you transferred your membership was the International Fellowship founded? Or was it already established when you went there?

NB: Oh no, no. I established it.

ALT: This is what I thought. So how soon after you went to the Unitarian church?

NB: Oh, let's see. When you go to All Souls Church, you are invited to become acquainted with all of the committees in the church...

ALT: All of the what?

NB: Committees. And you're invited to join the one of your choice. I found the Women's Alliance of the Unitarian Church really the strongest organization I could conceive of. It consisted of a competent set of women who were dedicated to building the church. The church to them means helping others outside and the church outside involves community projects.

After working with the Women's Alliance awhile, I was asked to head up an activity. This would put me on the Alliance Board. I was asked to head the International Committee, but I could not take this position at the time, because I was president of the D.C. Chapter of the International House Association and needed to give all of my attention to that position. The next year, a vacancy occurred in the World Religions Committee. This I accepted. I didn't know a thing about world religions, and told them I didn't, but I told them I would take it if I could do it the way I wanted to. You know, I don't believe in studying; I'm an active person. And whenever anybody tells me they're going to study a situation, it's been my experience that that's just a way of stalling. I study while I act. I launch into a program, and when I get to a place that I see something needs to be done, then I study that particular question [laughter] and I can solve them one at a time.

ALT: How did you go about organizing the persons who were the first members? Were they members of the church or did you go out? Because I know you had quite a cross section of countries represented.

NB: The nucleus of the group were the women of the church, and we brought in the cultural attachés from the embassies and UNESCO to help us form the organization.

ALT: Now reading the brochure about this organization, I noticed that the activities seemed to be primarily directed at children. I am especially interested in having you describe some of the types of activities you had for children, say right here in America, or in Washington.

NB: Let me see. Always at heart, I've been a teacher, and I have found ways to involve my children in what I was doing. However, it was not until 1966 that I got the idea that we would have the "Our City: A World Community" project. I took this up with the superintendent of schools and with the social studies department.

ALT: Department of where? Howard?

NB: D.C. public schools.

ALT: Oh, I see.

NB: I was able to sell it to the school system, and to let them know that I felt that our city was a world community, and our children should be involved in knowing what an embassy was: what were the duties of an embassy, why they had embassies, what was their function. And I wanted them to consider their school, their embassy. If the main focus of an embassy is to create one world, to understand each other and to work together, a united world, united nation, then they should grow up thinking their school had a part to play in it. Well now, to some people that might have been a far-fetched idea, but I found out that it isn't, because the internationals go into the schools, and they talk about their culture...for instance, Japanese would come in and they would dress a child and tell them about life in Japan and so of course, that's what UNICEF was all about, you see.

Now the children are invited to the embassies sometimes. They have been. And the people from the embassies go into the schools, and they teach the children to sing their songs in their language, and it's a very interesting program and the children like it. Of course, it all depends upon the outlook of the teacher. Some teachers are very progressive; some teachers, I don't know how they got into the public schools.

You will note on the brochure that we have an International Dinner each year with embassies participating. The money raised at this dinner pays for the expenses of the bazaar we hold in the fall. All monies raised at the bazaar go to needy children's projects in the participating countries. All the countries participating in the bazaar gave a free booth. All the money, for instance, raised at our booth, the American booth, goes to Children's Hospital and the children's ward at our University Hospital. The money raised at the Indian booth goes to a children's project in India. At the bazaar, many children are dressed in their native costumes, and two children come in with a

- NB: (cont.) banner saying what their charity is. It's a beautiful affair, and it's really a family affair because you see whole families there.
- ALT: Do you have any activities which are especially designed for age groups other than children, or is that the primary focus?
- NB: Primary focus. Now the older people have the responsibility of planning and developing the dinner, bazaar and other projects. In so doing, they build lasting friendships, you see. We are all working for children.
- ALT: Right. Are you still active with that group?
- NB: Yes. Oh, darling, that's one of the goals of the Women's International Religious Fellowship--to build lasting friendships. When our internationals from the embassies, the World Bank, and the Monetary Fund go abroad, it is one of my duties to keep in touch with them.
- ALT: Are you able to say approximately how many countries are represented?
- NB: Well, as a rule, we vary from seventeen to twenty-five embassies. It all depends upon the interest of the ambassador's wife when she comes to the United States. Some countries have been with us all the time: Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey, India and others. Our most difficult task is to keep an African country. I can understand that, because in the African countries there are not as many women who are used to being in public affairs, although one of them helped us to organize. When they come to the United States, they are so involved with keeping up with other things, they don't have the expertise of having a broad social program.
- ALT: Does the organization have any affiliation at all with the State Department?
- NB: No, in only this way. You see, we don't want to be political. We invite the countries who are in the Blue Book, which is published three times a year. I'll show you one. All the countries with embassies in the United States are listed in the Blue Book. Russia does not cooperate with us in the dinners, but they do cooperate with us on the school programs. They have never participated in the annual dinner nor the bazaar. Each year a different country serves as chairman of the dinner. This year, Mrs. Rattray from Jamaica is serving as chairman. An American woman will always serve as cochairman, because she is here all the time, and the embassies change personnel about every three or four years.
- ALT: Is the organization still sponsored by the church in any way?
- NB: No.
- ALT: It's an independent?
- NB: We are incorporated.

ALT: All right. Now, I want to ask you another question about the sorority. We talked quite a bit about how it was founded and your role. What is your status now in terms of activities related to the sorority?

NB: Oh, darling. The sorority now has 525 chapters, more than 75,000 members. The sorority has a budget of \$1,000,000. The sorority gave \$50,000 last year to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It gave a half-million dollars to the National Negro College Fund.

ALT: Are any of the other founders still living?

NB: Two. The other girl is in a personal care nursing home now. I've always been the one who is most active.

ALT: I imagine that many honors have come to you for that role. Would you like to tell us about them?

NB: I think I had the biggest honor last year. I was the sorority's Bicentennial Woman. They had an exhibit of my life in pictures and legend, and that's a big honor.

ALT: Where was this?

NB: At the Waldorf Astoria.

ALT: New York City?

NB: Yes. Three thousand five hundred women were there.

ALT: The exhibit of your life? I see. Was it a surprise or did you know they were...

NB: No. I knew. I hadn't attended a boule for many years. We call it boule. We meet every two years. This was a boule honoring all members who had been in the sorority over fifty years. Since I had been in the longest and had been the most active, I was selected as their Bicentennial Woman. Along with Dr. E. Beulah Winston, a soror, I was given a suite in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. This gave me the opportunity to not only renew old friendships, but to meet all of the young members and to hear all the current reports of the programs and activities. It provided an opportunity to have pictures taken with a host of members who had never met me. You know, darling, I signed more autographs; I had more pictures taken in that week than I could have had all my life! We had a dinner and they presented me with a gold chain. We had meetings...they broke up into different sections because we have all kinds of programs going on all over the United States. It was a wonderful experience and I promised my sorors that I would write my autobiography, stressing my sorority's activities and the influence it had on my life.

ALT: You have been talking about your life, your career, much of which took place when there was no liberation movement.

NB: That's right.

ALT: And I know that being a woman was significant because, say, in your first job, a woman couldn't marry and teach school, so there had to be a choice of marriage or career.

NB: That's right.

ALT: You spoke of working to get more women into the war effort and other activities involving women. So, my question is, if there had been a women's liberation movement, from what could you have been liberated?

NB: [laughter] I don't know what I could have been liberated from because I have done everything I wanted to do.

ALT: This is what it sounds like.

NB: I have done everything...

ALT: That being a woman really was not a barrier, is the way it comes over to me.

NB: Yes.

ALT: What about having made the choice of career over marriage? Do you think about that?

NB: I have never felt, and I may be wrong, that I could do two things well. If I were going to be married, I would expect to be a mother. My focus then would have been on raising my children, just like my mother's focus was on me. Then, I feel, I would not have been able to do the kinds of things I did. I had to think about it because I did have opportunities. However, I realized if I married, I would want a man that I could look across at or up to. I wanted a man that I would have been proud to have as the father of my children. I get out of patience with women who say, "He's just like his father," and his father is a bum or wasn't successful. After all, she selected the father, and that was her job. If she didn't do a good job, that was her fault.

Now, the kind of man that I would have wanted as the father of my children would have been the kind who had the leadership role, and I would have been working to make him a success and to make my children a success. Well, that's a gamble. That's a big gamble. And when you look at how many unhappy marriages there are, how many divorces there are, you are taking a gamble. I just felt that I wouldn't take the gamble.

ALT: What do you think about the women's liberation movement? Do you believe that there is a need for it? Do you have any opinions about it?

NB: Well, to me, I think they have lost a great deal.

ALT: You think they have lost?

NB: To me, I think they have lost more than they have won. Now let me explain that. When I was growing up, if a woman walked in any place, a man got up and gave you his seat. A man never, never sat down while a lady was standing, and they do that in the better groups now. There were courtesies that we had.

It is wrong for a woman not to receive the same amount of money for working as a man. I believe she should. But I think there are certain areas where women are hurting themselves. To me it would seem like this. If I am in the home, then my obligation is to make that a happy home, and I should be respected for making that a happy home. My children and my husband should be thinking of me as a center of love and understanding. I believe that the trouble in the world today is children do not have home life. I think women are running out of the home because they just don't want that responsibility. They feel that the home is too limited--but they limit it. They limit it, because they could be a part of their children's activities. I don't think you can have your cake and eat it too.

ALT: Very difficult. During the same years, there was also the civil rights movement, and yet you were a woman who had to be aware of race and complexion, because you told me your uncle became white because that was economically advisable at that time. So I'm assuming that from a very early age, you were aware of certain advantages that might come because of skin color. Did that have an impact on your life personally, as you think back on it--the complexion or the fact that you were Negro, colored, or black, or however you would prefer to describe yourself?

NB: Well, I have always been glad that one drop of colored blood made you colored, and I'll tell you why. If it hadn't been that way, the darker people in our race would have had an awful time. But when they threw all of us in there together, they gave us more people, and they gave us the kind of people who could pass for white and come back and report just how the other half does.

ALT: Do you think your life would have been different had the civil rights movement occurred twenty, forty, fifty years earlier than it did?

NB: I don't know. I'll tell you why I am saying I don't know. Don't we have the same problems today for the masses that we had forty years ago?

ALT: And yet, I'm thinking about the number of doors that you opened by simply walking in.

NB: Oh.

ALT: I think you told me you were the first black woman to go in the Mayflower Hotel, among many of the other things you were the first to do. So the barriers that were there did not stop you. How do you account for that?

NB: Crazy! Well, I didn't ever go anywhere that I didn't pray before taking the step. I asked God to guide me and speak through me.

ALT: Are you saying that any black person could have done the same thing?

NB: Who had the faith and courage. Maybe I should say I never lived in the South. My personal activities were confined to the more enlightened part of the country. However, I do believe any black person with faith, courage and dedication, in my environment, could have opened doors of opportunity for others as I did.

ALT: So then, skin color alone did not stop people from doing things that they wanted to.

NB: Well, they knew I was colored.

ALT: I know, but you went in.

NB: Yes.

ALT: And there were others who were told, no, you can't come in.

NB: Yes, and they listened to that junk.

ALT: And you kept going in?

NB: Yes, I did.

ALT: That's the difference, I see. Were you ever afraid?

NB: No. As I have said previously, I never went in the South. I supported the activities of those working in the South but never visited there.

ALT: How do you account for that?

NB: I never was afraid.

ALT: I would believe that the faith that you are living by now has increased as you have had experiences, and the faith has been tested and renewed. Yet some of these things, you were doing as a very young woman. Was it still faith that carried you in there?

NB: You see, I always felt that if I were led to do a thing, then it could be done.

ALT: So you simply do it?

NB: And I just never took no for an answer. Oh, of course, once we couldn't go in places here, I wasn't so interested in going in some of them. Now, I was disgusted about it. For instance, once my sister, Gen, Helen Osborne and Mary Downing went to a little, old theater. The usher came up and asked if we were colored. Because of my sister's features, she could have been taken as Spanish, but we never tried to pass for anything we weren't. Helen and the others couldn't. So we said yes. He said he was sorry but they didn't allow colored in, and of course, we left. That made me realize that I was going to have to do something about this.

- NB: (cont.) Well, it's better to forgive than to put pressure on my sister. She would let prejudice kill her. She wanted to be free of prejudice. I wanted to fight it and make a contribution in opening up avenues. It gave her hypertension, but it gave me incentive. I just knew that I was going to be accepted.
- ALT: I have one last question. I know you're writing a book about your life. For those who read your book, what would you like for them to know or to remember about Norma Boyd?
- NB: I would like for my life to inspire a child to become a part of the world in which she lives--not just the community, not just the city, but the world community. You see, I will be proving what my mother said: that with integrity and faith in God, all things are possible. I think I have proven that because those were the only two things I started off with. I didn't have money, and I couldn't have made magna cum laude, because I was average. A lot of money isn't important, because if you eat too much, it makes you sick. You can only live in one house at a time, and you can only use one car at a time. What good does it do you to live in luxury when half the world is starving? That wouldn't give me any satisfaction. Satisfaction comes in service--the number of people you have helped. If I had been born in luxury, I would not have been an example to the child who wasn't. I was born where you had ambitions, you saved, you worked, you budgeted; you knew your aims, your goals, and you achieved them with the confidence that God was going to help you, and you felt assured that religion is a way of life. I have found many like-minded people who are willing and who are working to make the world a better place in which to live, so that when your time comes, you can have the satisfaction of knowing you did your best.

To me, the ideal is to inspire the children you teach to be ambitious--not self-ambition. To have unselfish ambition gives you peace of mind. I would not be happy if I felt that I had taken advantage of anyone. I could never do that. However, I am not going to let anyone take advantage of me.

You know, I was never paid. The highest salary I received was \$200 a month. When I started teaching, I received \$80. I never made a speech in my life for which I was paid. To receive money for speaking is not a service. I respected my faith in God and I knew that would get me through.

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