

Joyce Williams
Narrator

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Macalester College
Interviewer

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St. Paul, MN

CA: Could you please state your name and when and where you were born?

JW: My name is Joyce Dodson Williams. I was born August 11th, 1946 in St. Paul Minnesota.

CA: Where in Rondo did you live?

JW: I didn't live on Rondo. I lived one block off of [unclear] on Carroll. My grandmother lived one block from me. I lived at 528 Carroll, they tell me that's where they brought me from the hospital. So then my Grandma lived one block east of me at 439 Carroll, so I used to visit her all the time. My mother and father were young when they got married, and so she kinda helped, as grandma's do you know? My dad was really fond of her, and vice versa so this is how they raised me.

CA: How long has your family lived there? Or how long did they live there for?

JW: My Grandma was born in Enterprise Iowa, February 2nd, 1905. She came to Minnesota when she was five which was 1910, so she's been in Minnesota since 1910. And my mother was born June 5, 1926 in Anchor Hospital, she was the first child born in any hospital. The other two were born at home [Laughs]. So I guess we've been here forever.

CA: What was your favorite memory from Rondo?

JW: My favorite memory of Rondo is my Grandma living on the top of the Rondo hill. The Rondo hill went down to Rondo and in the late forties and fifties cars couldn't get up that hill because it was too steep! So kids used to put an ice block at the bottom of the hill, you know snow it, put water on it and then we'd put ice down the hill and we'd slide down there on a little cardboard. Oh that was the best fun!

CA: Was there a strong sense of community in Rondo? What was that like?

JW: Starting back in the beginning, according to what I was told, the black community began where Regions Hospital is now, and that group is called Rec's court. And during that time, when people would come from the south, on the railroad, they'd get off of the train, and they'd ask the trainmaster or the redcap where the colored people lived, and they told them "go straight down Jackson." So they'd come down Jackson, and that's where the village was. That's what they called it. And I have pictures of my aunts and uncles there, in that village when they were kids. But they'd rent them rooms, they'd find them jobs, because this is why they came north to Minnesota, because they had jobs at the packing houses: Armor, Swift or Cudahy. They had jobs on the railroad. They had jobs, you know just throughout the city, that was hiring, so that's why they came here.

So then from that village, they started getting bigger and bigger and moving up like Rondo and St. Anthony and Carroll from down there on Jackson. And then they kept on going, and then they even went across Dale. So when they got across Dale that meant they had a lot of money. So they called below Dale "Oatmeal Hill" and above Dale "Cornmeal Valley" [Laughs]. So those were memories that I remember growing up in Oatmeal Hill, and going to school in Cornmeal Valley. So it was just things that we knew. Our family had talked to us. This is the only kind of history that black people have had, in the whole history of *having* black history, is through word of mouth. So if you look for Rec's Court today, it's not documented anywhere, because I suppose back in the early 1900s, when it began, they weren't keeping records or anything.

CA: Did you attend church or were you part of any other community groups?

JW: Yep. I attended church. I attended Camphor Church, which is on 585 Fuller. That was my Grandma's church. I went to Saint Peter Claver school, that was 1060 Central. And I'd go from my 528 Carroll house down one block to Rondo, catch the bus to St. Peter Claver, which was Oxford and Rondo, and walk one block over to Saint Anthony and go to school. I did that from the first to the eighth grade. And then in summertime, I'd walk home. You know, you'd kick the can and group of you walk home. And I had several friends that lived down on the other side of Dale with me, so we'd all kinda group together. And we had this one place that was on Rondo and Milton and it was called Millie's. It was a grocery store. And Millie's had this big barrell with dill pickles in it, and I just loved dill pickles. I'd go get a dill pickle, wrap it up in a napkin or paper towel, and eat it all the way home. But across from the street there, on Milton and Carroll was Unwed Mothers' Home. So we'd see these unwed mothers coming down, and they were getting dill pickles too [Laughs]. But we didn't understand that because we were just children. But as you got older you knew what that was.

So, I'd walk home and you know, my mother'd hear if I did anything wrong, by the time I got there because somebody down there called her up and told her: "Mary! Joyce was walking on my grass!" [Laughs]. And my mother said "now why were you doing that?" I said "I didn't know!"

[Still laughing]. This is the community we had. Everybody knew everybody. Because they all grew knowing everybody.

CA: Are there any other businesses or restaurants in Rondo that stick out in your memory?

JW: Yes. That's what we had on Rondo. We had businesses, shops, tailors, dentists, malt shops, liquor stores, cleaners, everything was on Rondo. So when I was going from Saint Peter Claver all the way down Rondo, I was seeing everything. They had Addux Burks [unclear] there on Chatsworth. They had VFW down on Fisk. It was just everything. You had funeral homes, you had as I told you before, cleaners and businesses. You had bars, and all kinds of clubs. That's what Rondo was. So when they came through with the freeway, and they tore all that up, and scattered it... The houses were so beautiful back then. They had all of the whatever they would want now: the hardwood floors, the archways, the built in hutches, the banisters, all that old architecture were in these houses. And then they tore them down! What you would give now, to have those hardwood floors and stuff like that.

I remember my grandmother had a pot belly stove furnace in her dining room and it had a pipe that would go up to the second floor and heat the second floor. She had a coal bin to go get the coal with the bucket, put it in the pot belly stove, and that heated the house in the winter time. As she got more proficient, she had the pot belly stove taken out and had a furnace put in at the basement that heated the whole house. The progress you seen coming up through that time sticks in my mind. Right now I am the family historian telling my children about my memories when I was a child and they listen. My son is a St. Paul policeman and my daughter is a neighborhood activist for Frogtown. They are community oriented too basically because of where they were raised, in the community. We're all raised with respect. I'll tell you what, there was no rolling your eyes or acting like these kids do now. There was such as think as getting your backhand licked to make your grandmama famous and they didn't care but it wasn't abuse. I mean, it was the way to make you respect what they had to say because as dumb as you may be or as smart as you thought you were once you got grown you figured out you weren't smart as you thought you were. My grandma used to always say, "Now child stay a child as long as you can, cuz once you get grown get get grown forever," and she didn't lie.

CA: Who were your friends in the community? What did you do together?

JW: I was a tomboy so all my friends were boys. Jimmy Shelton, Johnny Cenaire, Richard Parker, Richard Parker's sister. She and I were good friends too but she was younger than me and the Ramsons, Terry Dillard, Richard Garcia, and Junior-- uhh I can't think of his last name right now. We were all friends. I played baseball and get down there to play football. By the time I go to be a teenager, my mother taught me you are a girl you can't be playing foot ball. I didn't understand why. But anyway I was a tomboy and my mother was a tomboy. And I loved sports. We used to go to the Halo which was down there in St. Anthony and Kent. We used to skate all

night long almost. And walk in the neighborhood, didn't care if it was night or not cause nobody ever bothered you. They all protected you, That's Mary and Julian's kid, "Oh hi", and that's where you were. They knew who you were. So everybody knew everybody and that's how I know so many people's pitches when I see them. I had a best friend I went to St. Peter's Clayborn with. Her name was Pat Harris. She lived in 666 Iglehart. I walked her home and then I would come down Dale and Carroll to my house. This is how we got to be good friends because we walked together.

CA: What was it like when the highway came through? What emotions come to mind?

JW: Well, when the freeway came through, they tore a part of it in the late fifties. In the early sixties, I had to go through the ditch to get to my high school which was right on the other side of the capitol. If you can think 538 Carol because the shortest distance between two points is the straight line. So, you down through the dirt road and then you get down by the capitol and then there was your high school. That was all downhill then coming back was uphill. Coming back, I probably would take a bus which would be University bus, no, Rondo bus because Rondo bus was at Rice St. I would get cross capital approach, get to Rice, take the Rondo bus up to my house. But, I would walk to school because the busses didn't run when I needed to go to school. It was bad because you saw everybody getting separated. You saw these houses being torn down like I told you. The ones that I had been in that had the hardwood floors, woodwork, hatches, stained glass windows. All of that being torn down. Things that people value so much today we had then. I didn't understand until I got older and went to Northwest Airlines. I realized St. Paul was the only capital in the whole of the United States that didn't have a building from the capitol building to the airport. So they came down Rondo. Well, they couldn't get through Highland so they had to get through another black neighborhood down south Minneapolis which is 35-W and come out beyond the airport. It was just confusing. Who in the heck? What drugs were they on? I don't know, you never know. I have to say this, it had to be a man. Women would have planned it out better. That's just how we do it. We don't make moves unless we know what we are going to do and who it's going to affect. And that's just it. Not to offend any men or nothing... I've been married a couple of time [Laughs].

CA: Have you attended the Rondo Days Festival?

JW: Yes. When I was younger I used to all the time and then I take my children. Now that I have gotten older, I go to the parade. They kinda changed it. When they took it away from this grounds here, where all the shade and the trees were, and they put it out where there's nothing but sunshine... I'm on medication. Some of my medication doesn't let me stay in the sunshine so I didn't go. Age has caused me not to. I will go from Point A to Point B if I know where you are. That will be fine.

CA: Do you have any thoughts about... I know Mayor Coleman made an apology on behalf of the city about the highway. Do you have any thoughts about that?

JW: I'd rather not say.

CA: Well thank you. Do you have any stories you might want to share?

JW: I don't know. How much time...you don't have all day.