

Interview Log

Interviewee: Zolah Brown **Tape #:** OH146.1 & 2

Interviewer: James S. Lane **# of Tapes:** 2

Date: April 4, 2000 **# of Sides:** 3

Location: Crisfield, Maryland

Topic: My Soul Looks Back in Wonder

Comments: Phonetic Spellings: lolga, Sikertown Road, Kinsey Brown, Marcelene, Burdell's, Briscoe, Mr. Pennet. Mr. Hance Griffin, Eastland Star, Bud Hearn, Abu Benadam.

BEGIN SIDE A

J.L.: Today is April the 4th, the year 2000. My name is James Lane, and I'm interviewing Zolah Iolga Brown who resides on Sikertown Road on the outskirts of Crisfield, Maryland. We will be discussing the African American community under the project name My Soul Looks Back in Wonder. Miss Brown has knowledge of the earlier years of the African American community, also many of the events that occurred when she was a young lady growing up in this community, and an understanding of the dynamics of how the community operated and how the people lived. I'm going to ask Miss Brown if she would first talk about her father, and give us a little bit of background about him.

Who was your father, and where was he from, and what did he do?

Z.B.: My father was Kinsey Brown. He was from Westover, Maryland. And my first recollection of what he did, he was a carpenter, and a waterman, but at the particular time frame, I remember how he -- how I came to be. He was working in Bayside, Virginia, where he was down there building a church. And he was looking for -- he had a car, I guess they call Model-T. And the car ran out of water, and he saw this lady at the well. So he walked up the road and asked her for water to put in his car. And she gave him the water to put in the car, and they spoke, they talked while he was doing the water from the well. And he told her that he was down there building a church. So he took water back to the car, and after he took her bucket back, he decided he'd like to meet her, you know. So he stopped the car down the road, ran the water out, and went back to get some more water the next day.

J.L.: And what was the name of this young lady?

Z.B.: This young lady's name at that time was Blanch Bivens. She was a married lady with three children. And she had a neat little cottage, and he went back the next day. He said that car has let me down again. This was about dinner time, so she asked him to stay for dinner, and he accepted. And at that particular time, it was summer, and blackberries were in season. They had dinner, and she had blackberry cobbler for dessert. And as he tells the story, as he told us the story, she poisoned him with blackberry cobbler. He fell in love with her blackberry cobbler, I think, before he fell in love with her. And during the time, I guess three or four months down there building the church, they became quite fast friends, and he asked her to marry him. Of course, he had been married, he had three sons -- he had two sons, and she had three sons. And he was divorced, and they married. And through his traveling back and forth to Crisfield, which was the place where you would get your lumber and your sand and so many other things, and it was a thriving community.

J.L.: What years are we talking about, roughly?

Z.B.: We are talking about, I would say the early or the late teens. See because I know my first sister was born in 1917. Her name was Agnes. So --

J.L.: Agnes is still living, isn't she?

Z.B.: Agnes is still living. Yes, Agnes at the time is 82 years old. And she was their first child. And I would give it about, seeing as to how things were then, four years before they advanced. He finished building the church, and he had a building, he had a home in Crisfield too. So he built a home for my mother and himself. His home is still standing. As a youngster, I was born the weakling of the bunch. I was born with bronchitis. Of course, then a man and his wife, they were in the business of making families. And my

brothers and sisters number seven or eight of us, and that stretched from '17, 1917 to 1931. Let me see. My sister, Agnes, was born 1917. Blanch was born 1919. Ester was born '20, 1920. I was born 1921. Sarah, my sister, was born 1923. Kinsey, the first boy, was born 1924. My sister, Marcelene, was born 1926. And Roland was born in '31.

J.L.: With such a large family, how did your parents provide, and what was available in the community for families to make a livelihood, and also to provide for their families?

Z.B.: Well I feel we were blessed because daddy had many, shall I say, occupations that he was skilled at and that he could do. My mother --

J.L.: Do you know how he acquired these skills? Did he ever share with you, did you hear him discussing how he came about these skills?

Z.B.: From what I can understand, during his time, children were used in the field very fluently. He had a third-grade education. He went as far as the third grade. And he was a self-taught man. He, from what I could learn and what I saw, he had a very, very good library. And I remember one book in particular that he used to use very fluently was a book called The Steel Scale. And that allowed him to lay out, draw up his blueprints or his buildings. And my mother, she had finished the seventh grade in Baltimore, she was from Baltimore. And the reason she was in Virginia was her parents had died and she had gone there to live with her relatives down in Bayside, Bayside, Virginia. But my father acquired his skills through determination, which was sparked by the times. A man then was not a man unless he owned himself and had property and know-how. He was fluent to the extent that I'm almost sure it was Burdell's, Burdell's Lumber Yard. And he had a berth there at Burdell's where he would keep his lumber. They did not knock down houses then, they took houses down and re-used the timbers from the houses. Lumber, at that particular time, was not dressed, it was cut to scale and not dressed. Any dressing done was done with the plane by the carpenter himself. And that's what they were into. I think he had a mason working with him. He did the chimney work and the plastering work. His name was Mr. Pennet. I remember him saying Mr. Pennet will work some today. And Mr. Briscoe, there was a fellow named Briscoe, Briscoe put up chimneys, actually put up the chimney with chalk and line. I remember them using a plumb line, and Mr. Pennet. Mr. Hance Griffin used to work with my father, even though he was an artist, he was also a painter, and he worked with my father. And daddy would lay out the electrical wiring, he would drill the holes. Then they used glass conduits, the wires run through a glass conduit. And some of them ran from two to six inches long with the hole built in them and the wire was shoved through that glass, and then that glass was shoved through the drilled hole into the different joists. And this is how electric was run. And all of this had to be done before the laths were put on the building.

J.L.: While your father was working in construction, what were some of the things your mother was doing?

Z.B.: At this particular time, mom taught us, she was a seamstress, and we owned five sewing machines because she had five girls. And when one started to sew, they all wanted to sew. However, dad had to put a small -- he had put a small motor on one sewing machine so my mother could use it because she had problems with what they call rheumatism in one leg particularly. And he said well I'll put a motor on it and a switch so all you have to do is use that. Now we did have one sister at that particular time named Blanch who also had rheumatism, so she used mommy's machine. We would go to the

rummage sale, pick up a man's suit for about 75 cents, and we would rip the suit apart and dad would do the cleaning, because he cleaned with gasoline, and we couldn't use gasoline. He didn't allow us. So he would clean the suit, hang it on the line, let it dry. Mother taught layout and pattern cutting. And we learned how to draft patterns.

J.L.: Was this typical pastimes for most females growing up in the Crisfield area when you were a young lady?

Z.B.: No.

J.L.: Were there other outlets for young ladies?

Z.B.: There were -- well most of them learned how to pick crabs early. And dad was kind of squeamish because five young girls gave him quite a headache because he didn't want anything to happen to `em, like getting pregnant or didn't want them obligated to any of the young men around town, we might offer them favors. He wanted them to have their own. And my sister, Agnes, she was a hairdresser. She helped mother dress our hair after she learned how. And she liked it so much, she later became a beautician in Philadelphia. But getting back to the story.

Men in the wintertime shucked oysters, and that's what my father did in the wintertime. He either shucked oysters or finished off the building of an interior of a building that he was working on. He --

J.L.: Did he help build any packing houses in Crisfield?

Z.B.: Well they were, they were just a pastime. He could do a packing house, he and his men, in about a day and a half. Yes. He built some of the packing houses. I remember once when it was a small job of putting up drywall that he and I did the job. He wouldn't call in anyone. I did not learn how to pick crabs because I helped my father with the carpentry. I learned how to measure and how to cut with the saw. He had a grip saw, a small what they call table saw. And he would take that with him. Of course, by this time -

J.L.: And your father didn't consider that anything out of the ordinary for you to be learning?

Z.B.: No. No. He had a son, two children after me, see. And he had wanted a son. However, I was I guess -- I imagine about 12, 13 years old about now, understanding -- able to understand measurements, probably 15 years old, understand measurements and how to use the tools. And I showed no fear of the tools. That's what he was looking for. The show of fear was dangerous. So I showed no fear. If he told me to cut a piece of wood, say 15 feet long, I knew that I would need a prop. I knew that I'd need -- I'd lay it out with -- we used wooden rulers mostly, didn't have steel scales then. I would lay it out. And I'd cut it and he would probably be working on setting up something else at this particular time. But he wouldn't give me those jobs that were impossible for me to do. He didn't have to test my skill because he didn't want to have to hang around and look and see how well I was doing.

J.L.: What were some of the attitudes that the men exhibited towards women during the time that you were growing up in terms of the occupation and some of their social outlets?

Z.B.: Well the men, which I didn't have too much contact with, but I do believe the men were more honorable toward the women then than they are now because men -- she had more value by that he knew that if she didn't do his shirts, he couldn't take them to the

laundry. He knew if she didn't fix his dinner, it wouldn't be finished because there weren't that many restaurants that blacks could attend. He couldn't take out anything. And labor was too cheap, or labor didn't pay that well. I remember 20 cents an hour is what they paid for labor when I was a girl growing up. This is one reason why I didn't want to learn how to pick crabs. They paid 20 cents a gallon for picking crabs. They paid 20 cent a gallon for shucking oysters. They paid 20 cents an hour for work. But on the other hand, food was quite cheap also. A 12-pound bag of flour cost 25 cents. You could get two loaves of bread for five cents. Sugar was five cents a pound. See, so the men and women got along quite well until Friday night or Saturday night, and then he wanted to go out.

And she, particularly, wasn't --

J.L.: She, being your mother?

Z.B.: No. I'm talking about women of the time. They would frequent a place called Back Street. And Back Street seemed to be a place that was not segregated in any sense of the word. If you could get to Back Street, you could frequent Back Street. Of course, that was a place where sailors came, where the boats came in, and the sailors would come in. And we were, as children, we were never allowed down there. Friday night was choir rehearsal night for my father and my mother. Ever since I've known them, they have sung on the choir, they had sung on the choir. And --

J.L.: And which church did they attend at that time?

Z.B.: St. Paul. They attend St. Paul on the South Port Street. My father built St. Paul Church, however. And but the men's respect toward the women seemed to have been much higher than today.

J.L.: Was this one of the -- one of many social opportunities for men and women to interact together? Were there others?

Z.B.: Yes.

J.L.: Were there fraternal quarters and societies, women groups where men and women came together, or were women themselves conducted --

Z.B.: Well they were generally affiliated with the church -- if you did not go to church, well there was the Elks hall, Elks lodge.

J.L.: Are you saying that there were Elks members that did not frequent the church, or there was interaction between both?

Z.B.: There were -- well there was interaction between both because my father was an Elk. I think -- an Elk or a Mason, one. I saw these badges that he had. But my mother and my father did not frequent because they said there's a handshake in one and a drink in the other. So they were church people, you see. But there were those in town who were affiliated with both.

J.L.: And these social gatherings included men and women, and sometimes --

Z.B.: Men and women, yes. But the women did not have an active part. They might cook for a social or some other like that, but to my knowledge, there was no, we'll say affiliation for women at that particular time, to my knowledge. I understand there is such a thing as Eastland Star, but I don't know as we had it, and if we had it in Crisfield or not. But there was also -- the movie houses were very, very popular at the time. We had two in town. And we did not feel that we were being put upon, but we did go to the movie, and we had to sit in the balcony area. We weren't allowed to sit downstairs. But that was all right. We were still in the movie.

J.L.: Uh-huh (Affirmative). What were race relations like when you were growing up?

Z.B.: Race relations. There was an understanding, and I dare say a closeness between the white race and the black race, particularly in Crisfield. Because the whites had to depend upon Crisfield to unload their boats, shuck their oysters, pick their crabs, work into the line plant and the barrel factory, see. And these jobs were generally filled by blacks. So the women pick crabs in the summertime and shucked oysters in the wintertime.

J.L.: What were the women's opportunities to make decisions regarding their work? Were they only allowed to make those decisions once they returned home in their own social setting, or did they have opportunities even on the job to make decisions about their work? I know that there were labor unions in Crisfield, and some of the important roles were involving women, since they were predominantly the work force --

Z.B.: Well there was no -- there was no labor union in Crisfield. My first recollection was when they tried to get a union here. And the person who came, I guess, they did not know the caliber of place they were coming to. Or maybe they were used to being run out of places. But anyway, I remember they were trying to get this union here, and things were in an uproar in the working part of downtown. I remember one incident --

J.L.: You're talking about what year? Or what years?

Z.B.: I'm talking about, I imagine, about the late 30's. I'd say late 30's. Because I was a girl, I was born in '21. And so I imagine it was the late 30's, because I was a young lady, I'll say. But this incident reminded me of another incident that had happened, however, I will not speak of that. But this incident occurred when torches, flashlights were in, but they weren't as plentiful as they are now. Torches were used to chase somebody up the railroad tracks. The tracks were, we'll say, secondary to the main street. And these people were running up the railroad tracks chasing a white man. And he tried to get away from them, ran around in back of the houses. And that's where the toilets were. And I remember this incident, this woman was -- there was a woman who went out in her back yard, and she grabbed this man and pulled him into the toilet with her. She was a big woman. And she pulled her clothes up and sat in his lap. Set him on the hole first, and sat in his lap, and let her clothes hang down. And when they smashed open the door, she said why, what's wrong? Can't I go to the toilet? And that was the only thing that saved him was her sharp tongue, and she was known to fight. They didn't bother her. Let her -- passed her by. And that's where that man was, she was sitting on him. And she saved his life.

J.L.: And I want to ask, was this individual associated with unionizing in Crisfield?

Z.B.: He was the union leader. He came down here to organize the union in Crisfield.

J.L.: We'll return to this conversation. We're going to begin another tape. So we're going to close out this section of tape one, side one, and continue with a succeeding tape.

(END SIDE A, TAPE 146.1)

(BEING SIDE B, TAPE 146.1)

J.L.: At the time we were discussing the incident with the union organizer and the threats against his life, and him being rescued by one of the residents of Crisfield, were there any other incidents that you heard of regarding union activity in Crisfield afterwards?

Z.B.: Well I know there have been strikes, many, many of them.

J.L.: During your years as a young woman in Crisfield?

Z.B.: Yes. And that's when we were kept off the street. We were kept off the street because we did not know, particularly, when that would happen. I want to bring to focus -- this was in the 30's. Now if we remember, the country had just gone through a shocking time. 1929, the stock market crashed.

J.L.: Yes.

Z.B.: See, so this took the bottom out of everything, everything. And man had to almost start from scratch again getting his life together, his businesses and everything. So there was a constant fight for better living. And living wages, living quarters, people were traveling from the south to the north doing agrarian work, agriculture workers. They would work a season here and move on. So many of these people, finding it better in one place than the other, would stop and stay. This is what Crisfield became made up of, people who had been dissatisfied and find that, they found that Crisfield was almost like community -- good community living, even though the relationship here toward the white people --

J.L.: Family relationships?

Z.B.: Family relationships.

J.L.: And interracial relationships?

Z.B.: Yes. Because the white men had to depend on the black men to get his work out. So he couldn't afford, he was losing money every time a strike headed up. So he tried to compromise. The white man had it pretty rough in Crisfield because he was trying to compromise and trying to status quo, remain as he was on top of the heap. He had to give ground. So that is why they fought so hard to stop the unions from coming. And even so in doing, they hit a number of black families, a number of black families is when they had to, shall I say, live in with their cousin or move in with such and so and so.

Because as quiet as it was kept, so many of the whites at this particular time were helping the blacks buy their homes. There was very little renting done in Crisfield at this particular time. The only renting was done was done room-wise by the blacks. If you had a number of rooms that you could rent, I remember my father built a 16-room apartment house at this particular time. And he only charged, I think it was a dollar and a half a week for four rooms. He had four apartments, and each one had four rooms to it. And so many of these people would rent a four-room apartment, and rent out two rooms. See, so living became quite a clutch at this particular time. You moved in, you had to do your part and keep up your side because you could not go to the white man for help.

J.L.: With all these various dynamics occurring in the community with regards to work, living conditions, national calamity, what were the avenues of news information? Was there a grapevine in the community that kept people informed apart from, perhaps, a local newspaper or information that may be distributed through kinship network or fraternal networks? How did the community stay abreast of happenings going on around them, and how were you able, as a young person, to be abreast about what was going on in the community? Did your father reflect or discuss this information in his home around the children and with his wife?

Z.B.: Let's go back. Let's go back just a bit. I remember hearing my father and my mother discuss, she says are you going out again tonight? He says I've got to go. He says if the people in Crisfield draw their money out of the bank, the bank will crash, the

bank will go up. And he would go from meetings to meetings telling the blacks do not take your money out of the bank.

J.L.: Can I comment? Even with the horrendous conditions of depression occurring and affecting people nationally, there was concurrently labor problems that were also being fought out in Somerset County and in Crisfield in the seafood industry at the same time, and your father was a part of both of those things.

Z.B.: Yes, yes, yes. He was a part -- well what made him so interested, he knew the background of any community is its banks. He knew that. He knew just as surely as the banks would go up, the community would go under. Because so many of these people depended upon the banks to borrow the money to buy -- to build their homes. They didn't buy homes, they built the homes because the homes were not here for them to buy, they had to build their own, and they depended on the banks to do this. My father, I can remember him saying I got \$25,000, in the bank and I don't want to lose a dime of it. Well now by him saying that gave them the idea that if Mr. Kinsey Brown says it's good, it's got to be good. See because -- I don't make much money, but I do make enough to save a few dollars every week, and I do have a place to go to borrow money.

J.L.: So the old folk saying the proof is in the pudding, he was more convincing by giving a vivid example --

Z.B.: An example of himself. So --

J.L.: To convince others of the importance of not conducting a run on the bank which would have devastating effects for the entire community.

Z.B.: That's right. So I remember there was a Mr. Ward --

J.L.: Was he a bank manager?

Z.B.: He was -- he had something to do with the bank. Now I don't know what.

J.L.: Did you recall the bank that your father was conducting transactions --

Z.B.: It was called The Marine Bank. It was called -- we had -- at that particular time, let me bring you up to date on something. We had the steamboat wharf. I think the steamboat came in once or twice a week. We had three passenger trains per day, and we had two freight trains per day coming into Crisfield carrying out the crabs and oysters and doing big business here because so many --

J.L.: Were there other cargo, other than oysters and crabs, were there --

Z.B.: Oh, yes. We had a sewing factory. Of course, the blacks weren't allowed to work in the sewing factory.

J.L.: I'm sorry, I may have not stated my question correctly. With the cargo that was being transported out of Crisfield on the trains, for example oysters and crabs, were there any other shellfish along with those two items that went on the freight train?

Z.B.: Oysters, crabs and fish. They did a great business, big business in fish. And at this particular time, that was how the lime plant shipped out crack shells for farming and shipped out the lime. And tomatoes, they skinned tomatoes at this particular time, and they wrapped tomatoes, green tomatoes were brought in. And it was a thriving small town. We had an ice house here, you see. So they didn't have to ship in the ice, the ice was made on the spot. And these fish, crabs, and oysters were shipped out iced. So there were, perhaps, many other businesses that I wasn't even aware of that they shipped out. I do know we had a barrel factory, and the barrels were used in many, many instances.

J.L.: What do you recall were some of the occupations that women were involved in to make it through the depression, other than working in the packing houses? Were there entrepreneurs or other women that were involved in businesses?

Z.B.: I remember this was the beginning of the end of the black, the only restaurant that you could go to to eat. And I remember my mother had a restaurant, and there was, next to her store, Mr. Roger King's fish market. He had the fish market. And Miss Maggie Wick's Variety Store. She had many, you could buy anything in there, I would say, except clothing. Small articles. She even sold gas -- I mean kerosene in there. And molasses was sold by the barrel -- I mean in the barrel. You would take your container and get molasses in it. And she would sell many things, but my mother had a restaurant --

J.L.: Did you, as a young member of your family, help out with the restaurant with your mother? And what role did you play?

Z.B.: No, I did not help out with the restaurant, but I had brothers and sisters to be taking care of. So I took care of the children over at the house. See I was the, shall I say, head honcho --

(Laughter.)

Z.B.: -- of my brothers and sisters. Blanch and Agnes worked in the restaurant.

J.L.: Did the restaurant have opportunities to provide food for the packing house workers?

Z.B.: My mother, at that particular time, it wasn't a problem for them to eat because there were small places down on Back Street and different other places. Crisfield at this time, I dare say, had at least 50 crab houses and oyster houses. Oyster houses they would convert in the wintertime to oyster houses. But we had what is known as Hot Point and Jersey. There used to be a large drawbridge between Crisfield downtown and Jersey.

J.L.: To clarify the word Jersey, not meaning the state of New Jersey --

Z.B.: No.

J.L.: That was actually an adjoining --

Z.B.: An Island. Yes.

J.L.: -- piece of land that was detached from the mainland that had to be crossed by a drawbridge which was called Jersey.

Z.B.: That's right.

J.L.: Is that correct?

Z.B.: That's right. And they would, they would Jersey -- they would buy a sandwich or take their lunches. And in '31, my mother had to close the restaurant because she gave birth to my last brother.

J.L.: In 1931 your mother closed her restaurant?

Z.B.: Closed her restaurant. And then my father had bought a car, automobile in 1930 -- 1929 before the crash, and he paid cash for it. By this time, he could not buy a job. Jobs were nil. No jobs. So we cooked pies and made soup and coffee, and we sold to the crab houses. I remember as a girl going to school so many times we would cook as high as 300 pies overnight. And the next morning when those pies would cool, we had to get up 5:00 in the morning, four or 5:00 to wrap those pies. And they only sold for a nickel a piece. So as you say a family, we were not poor. We were poor people living in poor times, but we made out quite well. If we could clear \$35 a week, that was good. We made out well and were able to buy more commodities, more, you know, that we would need. And she

made sweet potato pies, coconut pies, lemon pies and these were pies that did not need a second crust. If you had a second crust like apple pie, then it would have to be seven or eight cents they sold for.

J.L.: Apart from home-based businesses like your mothers, were there businesses that were in the community that were not so formal, or they were not a part of the mainstream, to give you an example, like numbers, gambling houses?

Z.B.: Well now --

J.L.: Off the beaten path.

Z.B.: I don't think there was an awful lot of lottery. I think it was called lottery. But most of the women, a lot of the women worked in what was known as domestic work. They did domestic work, cleaning. And so many times, they cleaned all day for a dollar, dollar and a half. You see, so if you clean every day for we'll say Miss Susan, every day, if you went to her house every day, you'd probably earn something like three dollars and a half, three dollars, something like that. But there wasn't an awful lot. Women wanted to do other than pick crabs and shuck oysters. They actually shucked oysters in the wintertime.

J.L.: What would have been the quality to define an important woman in your time who had influence in the community? What would she be doing and what would she be involved in? Could you explain if there were women around at that time who had a very important role in the community?

Z.B.: Yes. These women were our school teachers. These women were our school teachers or the wives of the pastors in our churches. They were very, very high on the social scale, and respected as such. And they would have different clubs in the church. These women belonged to the men so many times who shucked these oysters. And they would have quilting groups, sewing groups, and they would put on different rallies for the church. And they also collected clothes for the poor. The poor people in our community.

J.L.: Describe for me what a typical rally may be like.

Z.B.: All right. A rally, they had a rally that was called the apron rally. Now they would make these small four by -- four by four little aprons sewn on a sewing machine and put a little pocket in them. And they would make 200, 250 of these and pass them out in the neighborhood, and tell them the apron rally will be such and such a day, and we will be collecting our aprons to see how much you have in the pocket of the apron. It was also known as peanut crabs. And this was like, on this particular night, you might pay 10 cent to get in, and you would have two or three baskets of peanuts. And with one hand, you can draw as many peanuts as you could out of there, and they would sell for two for a penny. If you picked up 12 peanuts, it cost you six cents. They also had what you call a lemon squeeze. Now that was mostly for the young people, kissing age. You would buy a lemon for a dime, and if you wanted to, you could cut that lemon in half and sell the other half to a friend, or you'd keep both halves. And for every seed that was in there, it would take five seeds, five seeds to get a kiss from the girl. So you didn't want anybody kissing that girl, so you want to keep all the seeds.

(Laughter.)

Z.B.: And then we had box lunches where they would sell, they would sell box lunches at the church. And for every box lunch, when it was auctioned off, the young lady would make up the box with the necessary chicken, bread, napkins and stuff like that in it, and

pie, cake or whatever, and the young man who bought that box in the auction was able to have lunch, sit down and have lunch with that young lady.

J.L.: Were these fundraising *efforts* used to undergird the organizations in the community, and also to help out any needy families in the community?

Z.B.: These that were sponsored particularly in this manner were to help the church meet its different organizational, we'll say, deficits that they had to meet.

J.L.: Okay.

Z.B.: But they would have clothes gathering. You gather clothes from Mrs. so-and-so, and everybody went there to see what they could use.

J.L.: Since we're discussing the church, was the church also a place where one could come in contact with politics of the community and also information regarding what was happening in the community or happening in the country?

Z.B.: Now let's say that the church did its part not as a pulpit thing, but as a special night set aside. The men particularly would go to these meetings. It was trustee-affiliated. If you were a trustee and you want George to sit in tonight, you asked George to come tonight, or you would ask John. John, I want to see you at church tonight, we're going to discuss something important.

J.L.: Were these men also the men that would shuck in the packing houses, work at the docks, loading and cooking, preparing the seafood? Were these men affiliated with Masonic lodges and Elk lodges also who came into these meetings that were arranged by the church for special nights to discuss topics and issues?

Z.B.: Yes, yes. See the Masons, the Elks --

J.L.: Were the odd fellows in the organization at that time?

Z.B.: Yes, yes. They were also there, but as a young lady not being able to be present at that meeting or interested, see, in these particular meetings, I can't say as to when or where or how many. But I do know that we had in our neighborhood, in our community at that particular time, a Mr. Palmer who was an electric, I mean an insurance collector, an insurance man. He sold insurance. And a Mr. Bud Hearn who had a store of odds and ends, you know, and Mr. Wittington who had the barbershop. And these were on South Port Street. Now on North Port Street there was Mr. Cotman. I think his name was Emanuel Cotman. I'm not sure, but I think -- I know his last name was Cotman. And these were, we'll say, the pillars of our neighborhood, Cotman, and the Wicks, Miss Maggie Wicks' store. She also had a shoe shine parlor and a restaurant on the side, on another street. But I remember Mr. Cotman taught his son, Harlan Cotman, how to cut hair. And he has taught his son how to cut hair. Now what I understand, the son hasn't had a son, so I don't know. And I think the son is about 60 or 65 years old, something like that.

J.L.: So these were the important people in the community at the time.

Z.B.: At that time.

J.L.: And they were involved in various --

Z.B.: In political --

J.L.: -- occupations as well as the political climate at the time.

Z.B.: Yeah. Now --

J.L.: Along with that, were they also involved with any national events or national affiliated events outside of Crisfield?

Z.B.: Now there was a Mr. Howard Miles.

(OFF RECORD - TELEPHONE.)

J.L.: We were discussing Mr. Howard Miles. Did you say that Mr. Howard Miles was a distributor of The Afro American, which was a source of information for the community at that time?

Z.B.: That's right. We would get our paper from Mr. Howard Miles. I remember Mr. Howard Miles also sold insurance. An outstanding figure in the community. Mr. Howard Miles rode a bicycle because there was no road up where he lived, so he came down by the tracks on his bicycle, and he was definitely an influence. He had an influence. He was quite a talker.

J.L.: Have you heard whether Mr. Miles was involved with the labor movement in Crisfield?

Z.B.: No, I don't know that. I don't know whether he was affiliated or even involved in that.

J.L.: Were there any other individuals in the community who might have been involved with the labor movement that you knew about as a young woman that your father may have known or your mother may have known, or you have heard discussed?

Z.B.: I'm trying to think. I can't, I can't think of any at this particular time.

J.L.: Were you aware of Mr. Albert Bell during those years?

Z.B.: No, I was not. No, I was not.

J.L.: Well we'll end the interview on that note, and we'll continue with a succeeding tape about the African American community and its history and the things that were occurring during those times.

(END TAPE 146.1)

(BEGIN TAPE 146.2 - SIDE A)

J.L.: You have commented that in the area where Mr. Bell lived, Mr. Albert Bell who was a well-known labor leader, he was struggling to improve the conditions of men and women working in the seafood industry, but there has been a remarkable change in our contemporary setting where conditions have not improved, but if not retrogressed. Do you care to comment on that?

Z.B.: Well I have been away from Crisfield for some 45 years. But in that time, Albert Bell did not drag his feet when he saw his people still struggling to bring changes in today's lives into their living. I find that such that he was fighting for has changed. He was fighting for changes so people then, his people then could buy their homes and pay for them, could send their children to colleges. But I find just the reverse of that now. Then people owned their homes. There were very few rental spots in Crisfield. But today, I find that most of the living community now live in rented quarters. Almost nobody owns their home. And not only that, they don't even dream of buying a home.

And even though times have changed, salaries and wages have increased threefold, the time of the grocer has kept up with the change of money times. A home now, a decent home will cost you anywhere from 45 to \$95,000. And that is just the reverse. This is why a man living now will say about three or four generations later has no -- he has no conception whatsoever of ever owning his own home or how to even get it. So, therefore, I would say this is really a terrible outlook for today's young man. It takes all of the life of

ever owning anything out of the young man. And I find that this is in itself a detriment to the black community because the only other step is drugs. And we find them very flourishing in the black community. And it hurts. It really hurts.

J.L.: Would you agree or disagree that many women during your youth and the time of your parents' life were more capable of achieving noticeable results in their material life in having evidence to show for it was more of a promise then than now? It's even more improbable that generations in this time are not capable of making material achievements even with the huge amount of capital and better education than the times that your father and other men and women were struggling just to survive off the minimal wages?

Z.B.: Well I think -- I think I understand what you're asking. But let's look at this. Men and women then were men and women. And men wore short pants until 17 or 18 years old. He was not considered a man, full grown man able to take care of himself until he was 21. Now there is a great difference in that already. Then responsibility was taught along with supper. If you sat down to my table, my father would say you learn responsibility because it was a part of your meal, it was a part of your school and a part of your learning. When you go out on your own, you take care of yourself. Even as a girl going to Philadelphia, for the first time being out on my own, I had to have car fare. I remember standing on the corner crying because I did not have 15 cents to pay my car fare with to get uptown to my brother's house with a check in my pocketbook. I knew the responsibility of asking a stranger to help me. I said so, therefore, responsibility is not being taught today. The only fearsome thing out there is having to go to the police station to pick up your son or your daughter. And there is quite a change, quite a change in what they're able to get with the money they make. There is quite a change.

J.L.: What was your first work experience as an adult?

Z.B.: My first work experience as an adult. I remember having told my father that I had not intended to live in Crisfield because it was nothing here to do. I did not intend to learn how to pick crabs.

J.L.: And what year are we talking about when you had this discussion?

Z.B.: 1940. I graduated from high school in '40. I went to Hampton Institute in '41. Now that is another story I'll touch on. Hampton Institute was charging \$29 a month for boarding and lodging.

J.L.: And this was in 1941?

Z.B.: 1941. And they would give you a scholarship of \$150 per year. And that was to help you buy your books. I had been promised a work year. A work year, you work a year, do your time off from your school, and you work at odd jobs, and that would allow you to pay your boarding, lodging and your books. But me wanting to get ahead, at 20 cents an hour, I would have to work the rest of my life, I said, to get my education. And that's all they were paying, 20 cents an hour.

J.L.: In the year of 1941.

Z.B.: 1941.

J.L.: They were paying 20 cents per hour?

Z.B.: Twenty cents an hour. And that's when I went to college. And since I did not get the work year, I remember my mother sending me a letter. In the letter was \$10. She said Zola, if you do not get the work year, if they do not give you the work year as they said, we cannot send you -- you cannot go to college. Use the money to come home.

Now at that particular time, I was desperate and I went to talk to the dean of women. And she said well you sure you're not pregnant, that's the reason you're going? I said no, I'm not pregnant. I said I want to -- I wanted to work for my education. She said well your father can afford to send you. He has property. I said many people are property rich but dollar poor. I said when I get my education, I want it to belong to me and not to my father. So I left. But they gave me recommendation for two jobs. A job in New York, Long Island, New York, and a job in Norbeth, P. A. Well having had a brother living in Philadelphia, and Norbeth wasn't that far from Philadelphia, I took a job in Norbeth as an upstairs maid.

J.L.: How would you spell Norbeth?

Z.B.: I think it's N-O-R-B-E-T-H. Norbeth.

J.L.: Oh, Norbeth.

Z.B.: Yeah.

J.L.: Pennsylvania.

Z.B.: Pennsylvania. And I think that was the first time away from home and the incident of a 15-cent token teaching me be responsible. So I had a brother living there in Philadelphia, Garnet Brown, at that time. And that's where I would take my Thursdays off. And later on, I was let go because I was hired because the nursemaid, upstairs nursemaid, her mother had died and she had to go home to take care of two younger sisters. But as soon as she found someone to take care of her sisters, she went back and got her job back. So I went to Philadelphia and became a sewing machine operator. This is at the time of Pearl Harbor.

J.L.: Did the World Wars have an impact on you and your family?

Z.B.: My family, no, because my father was a carpenter and very aged at this time. I was in Philadelphia by myself, other than my brother and my sister. And I did go to school for the Navy Yard to take electrical wiring. And I went to work for a while at the Navy Yard. The reason I say for a while, I worked in the sewing factory, and they were picking up as many sewing factory workers as they could to work in the Navy Yard. They would send them to school a few weeks to learn whatever occupation they wanted them to work in. And I was tossed a lot of electrical wiring. So I worked in the Navy Yard for a while, and I didn't like it, I didn't like it. So I went back to work as a sewing machine operator.

J.L.: What were some of the experiences you had with employers, some good, some bad, if you can recall?

Z.B.: Well I remember at the Navy Yard, the reason I said I didn't like it, there were about five of us on the same job. We were putting together, they called linking together electrical boxes to be put on ships. And the job that I had been trained for as electrical wirer, I didn't want that. They switched all around completely. And we would drill the holes in the boxes, get a piece of pipe, thread it on one end, put it on both ends and cut it and screw it in these boxes, and nipple three or four boxes together. But at the same time, I think of a group of about five of us, there was one white girl. I remember her particularly. And on pay day, everybody was discussing their check, and showing their check how much they got. And she showed hers, and hers was almost twice ours.

Well you're doing the same kind of work we're doing, how come you get more money than we are? And it turned out that she was the shop stooge. She was seeing who was stealing, or who was cutting time. And I remember one time in the -- we call `em change houses, it's a toilet, you would go there for your break. And we had a black change house girl who would clean up. She was -- had just finished scrubbing the floor, and it was nice and clean and smelled good. And this white girl took an orange and sat there and ripped it apart and juice dripped on the floor. And I told her you're a pig. You're not -- you're not capable of being in a clean place. And she said what the hell do you know, nigger? I said -- I threatened to knock her down. I said and after that, I was let -- I was called to the office and told them that they weren't going to fire me, they would let me sign a slip saying I resigned.

J.L.: So --

Z.B.: So she was a stooge, even though we worked there, we were kept under monitor to an extent.

J.L.: Were there any attempts within those war time industries to unionize you women as workers to prevent those type of incidents from occurring?

Z.B.: No. I can't remember having belonged at this particular time to a union. But I'm thinking perhaps I didn't work there long enough. But I remember my father having said that the war he had been in years ago, Wilson's time, that he went to Chester, he and his small family. And during that time, they forced you to join the union.

J.L.: Your father went to Chester to do what type of work?

Z.B.: Working on boats, carpenter on a boat in the boatyard. You were forced to join the union. And there were so many men, you know, that they wanted to use all the women and spread them around or they saw a commodity that they could capitalize on. No sooner, and it took anywhere from three weeks to a month or six weeks for you to pay for your union dues, pay your union dues all up, pay that fee for joining and for we'll say one month dues, and you were let go. And many men, many men, Chester was flooded with men who had been done this way, if they didn't hold you on one boat, they would take you on another. And it was just a merry go round for them where they were cheated out of jobs because of the great burst of men that were coming up from the south.

J.L.: If I could comment, your father's experience was indicative of similar occurrences in Maryland and in Somerset County regarding union organizing because during the 1940's is when the Local Union 453 of the Seafood Laborers was organized.

Z.B.: All right.

J.L.: And they were able to offset those type of experiences rather than have them to undergo that type of duress and racial prejudice.

Z.B.: But may I state my mind here?

J.L.: Yes.

Z.B.: The union has been on low key because of so many unions all over the country that the people in Crisfield are being robbed yearly, and they have been robbed of pension rights. How? Each person in Crisfield should have had a work number, regardless as to who they worked for or how long they worked for them, should have been kept intact. And a certain amount of their salary, plus a certain amount of the employer's take should have been put to their number so they would have a decent pension now. And it -- they

have been robbed right straight down the board. The seafood industry has robbed them of a decent twilight life.

J.L.: Would you care to comment while we're discussing pension funds in the union, you think that ever occurred as a possible area of redress with the Local 453 in Crisfield regarding the seafood laborers? Or you think the priorities were more with raising the salary for production and better working conditions, physical working conditions?

Z.B.: I think -- actually I think it never occurred to them to think about tomorrow. They were hoping for big things as far as getting it addressed to labor raises, raises in labor. And even though social security had come and it was in its heyday, they had no idea as having never having been 55 and 65 before how they would live. They did not even dream of it. So they tried to strike one blow for labor by getting a decent wage for their work.

J.L.: What do you remember about the people that left an impression upon your life?

Z.B.: I think were it not for some of these people, my life would not have been as smooth, gone as smoothly as it has. I have yet to say good morning, Judge, for having gotten into trouble that required me going to court. But one person in particular, she came here as Miss Cheryl. But she married one of the local men in Somerset County, Mr. Williams. She became Mrs. Williams. Miss Cheryl was my seventh grade teacher. And she was a very dynamic person. I remember her teaching, you don't even hear the word used now, declamation, a declamation contest where you learned a long recitation, you were able to stand and speak that recitation with gesture and with meaning and knew what you were talking about. I remember a 25-verse poem, The Skeleton in Armor by Wadsworth Longfellow. And even when I speak the first lines now, people stand and listen. If I may.

Speak, speak, thou fearful guest who with thy hollow breast still in rude armor drest, why dost thou haunt me? Wrapt not in Eastern balms, but with thy fleshless palms stretched as if asking alms. Why dost thou haunt me?

That was just the beginning. But these few lines, and then she taught us one called Ode to Ethiopia. And that was by Dunbar.

J.L.: Yes.

Z.B.: Paul Laurence Dunbar.

O Mother Race to thee I bring this pledge of faith unwavering, this tribute to thy glory. I know the pangs which thou didst feel when slavery crushed thee with its heel with thy dear blood all gory.

And the last lines are *Go on and up our souls and eyes shall follow thy continuous rise. Our ears shall list thy story from bards who from thy root shall spring and proudly tune their lyres to sing of Ethiopia's Glory.*

She was an impression. She was truly an impression.

J.L.: How would you like to be remembered?

Z.B.: You know, I remember this poem about Abu Benadam.

May his tribe increase. He woke one night from a deep dream of peace and saw within the moonlight in his room making it rich like a Lilly in bloom, an angel writing into a book of gold. Exceeding peace made Benadam bolt into the stillness of the room he spoke, what right has thou. The vision raised his head. And with a look made of all sweet accord answered the names of those who loved the Lord And is mine one said Abu? May not so, replied the angel. He said well write me as one who loves his fellow man. The angel wrote and vanished. The next night appeared with a great waking light, and these are the words that Abu heard. He said And is mine one? He said yes. A one above all the rest. Yours is the one that the love of God has blessed

J.L.: Thank you so much for such a wonderful interview. And I really appreciate the time that you gave me, and certainly hope that we have occasions where we can talk again. We're closing out the interview this evening with Miss Zola Brown at her home, and we certainly hope that what she has shared with us will be an asset to those who will discover the richness of this interview and the information that she has given.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)