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ORAL INTERVIEW  
OF  
CORA WILLIAMS

Edited by

Elizabeth Nelson Patrick

Transcribed for the project  
Black Experience in Southern Nevada  
Donated Tapes Collection, James R. Dickinson Library  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
September, 1978



## ABSTRACT

CORA WILLIAMS, 1930-

Ms. Williams, a Black business woman who owns her own beauty shop, discusses her life and experiences in Las Vegas since her arrival in 1952.

Although she first worked as a maid in the hotel industry, her chief work experience in southern Nevada has been as an operator-owner of a beauty salon. Ms. Williams tells of the job discrimination suffered by Blacks in Strip hotels and the building trades industry. She credits the NAACP with bringing about change and improving job opportunity in the hotel industry.

Ms. Williams has lived in several locations on the Westside. She describes the difficulties Blacks had in obtaining mortgage loans or funds for home improvement. She tells how, thrown upon their own resources, Blacks financed and built their homes through cooperative effort.

Her chief community interest has been her church activity in the Second Baptist Church, but she has worked for some political candidates and mentions: Howard Cannon, Rev. Marion Bennett, Gov. Mike O'Callaghan, and Dr. Charles I. West.

She tells of a visit that Gov. Grant Sawyer made to her shop during his last campaign. She is a member of the Nevada State Board of Cosmetology and describes briefly the activities of that board.

Ms. Williams ascribes improvements in public school education in Las Vegas to federally enforced busing.



Ms. Williams reminisces about early Helldorado Days at Helldorado Village.

She mentions Mother Nettles as an early Black resident of Las Vegas who subsequently became a large land owner on Stewart Street.

Ms. Williams recalls as the most impressive event in Las Vegas (to her) Dr. James A. MacMillan's confrontation with downtown and Strip businessmen and hotels over Black use of their facilities.

Collector: Kathlyn E. Wilson  
March 11, 1975



## INTRODUCTION

Cora Williams, a native of Louisiana, has spent the major part of her life in Las Vegas. Although as a teenager she had spent two years in Detroit, she chose to come to southern Nevada to look for work in 1952.

Ms. Williams' first employment was as a maid in linen supply in the hotel industry, but after six months residence she began to work as a beautician. She now owns the Sparks Studio Beauty Shop on the Westside and serves on the Nevada State Cosmetology Board.

This interview, a class project in Nevada History, was done by Kathlyn E. Wilson in Ms. Williams' shop on March 11, 1975.

Differences in the tape and transcription of the interview occur because the typed version has been edited for easier reading. Repetitions and false starts have been eliminated. In some instances, a word or phrase has been added for clarity or correction and enclosed in brackets. There are omissions in the transcript which occurred when the speaker turned from the microphone, was interrupted, or had a lapse of memory.

Ms. Williams' interview is part of a series of interviews in the Donated Tapes Collection of the James R. Dickinson Library of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The transcription and editing of the interviews have been supported in part by a grant to Dickinson Library administered by the U. S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare through the Nevada State Library; Project Director, Harold H. J. Erickson; Assistant Director, Anna Dean Kepper. The opinions expressed



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A copy of the transcript will be available at the West Las Vegas Branch of the Clark County Library District and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, New York. A bibliography of Black Experience in Southern Nevada will be distributed statewide.

Written permission to photocopy, to cite or quote from Cora Williams' oral interview must be obtained from Special Collections Department, James R. Dickinson Library, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Elizabeth Nelson Patrick  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
1978







Collector: Mrs. Williams, were you born in southern Nevada?

Williams: No.

Collector: Where were you born?

Williams: I was born in Soudheimer, Louisiana.

Collector: Why did you and your family come to Nevada?

Williams: We had relatives in Nevada and I was also looking for work.

Collector: Were you successful in finding work when you first came?

Williams: Yes, but not really the kind of work I would like to do.

Collector: How long did it take you to find the type of work that you wanted?

Williams: I never really found the kind of work I really wanted at the time. I chose to be a maid and, later, I worked in the linen supply. After having spent six months as a resident, I started working in beauty salons.

Collector: Were you educated and trained in Southern Nevada?

Williams: No. In Louisiana and Mississippi.

Collector: And your major occupation has been that of a beautician?

Williams: Yes.

Collector: At what addresses have you lived in Southern Nevada?

Williams: I lived at 450 Monroe, I think. It's been such a long time ago, 1952. I also lived at 513 Freeman.

Collector: And Where do you live now?

Williams: Now I live at 1312 Van, V-A-N, Buren, B-U-R-E-N.



Collector: Why did you move from Monroe and Freeman?

Williams: Well, at the time we were living in shacks on Monroe, (laughter). And the housing [federally subsidized housing], Mable Manor did not come to Las Vegas until about 1953 [1952]. Marble Manor was the only decent housing units. You couldn't get a loan on any house in West Las Vegas. All Black people lived in West Las Vegas.

Collector: Do you mean that Black people were restricted from living in other areas of town?

Williams: That's right. That's exactly what I mean.

Collector: So it was almost impossible to build or do any property improvement at that time?

Williams: Right, and the loan companies didn't start lending money until 1950. The Federal government was lending money in 1953 to West Las Vegas home builders. Then along came First Western [Now First Western Savings and Loan Association but originally chartered as Silver State Building and Loan Association on August 5, 1952. Ed.] I guess in about that same year. First Western, which is now on Las Vegas Boulevard South, was called Fifth Street Branch [Fifth Street has become Las Vegas Boulevard. Ed.] and they would loan money in the later 50s for people to build houses and home improvements.

Collector: Up to that time, how did people manage to get housing?

Williams: They would just work on construction jobs. Some would save their money and compile it and some would apprend work on the construction jobs and come on Saturdays and help you build your house; they would rotate with each



other. You work on my place this Saturday; I'll work on yours next Saturday. \*

Collector: I noticed that there are Black businesses in Nevada now. Was there difficulty in getting started because of this restricted loans?

Williams: Yes, that's the problem. If you had no money, you couldn't start a business.

Collector: Were you married in Las Vegas or Southern Nevada?

Williams: The second time I was married in Las Vegas.

Collector: When and where?

Williams: At the Court House downtown. I don't know the name of the street it was on at that time. [In 1953. Ed.]

Collector: Is church an important activity in your life?

Williams: Very much.

Collector: Which church do you belong to?

Williams: I attend the Second Baptist Church. I'm also a member, and have been, since 1958. I was a frequent visitor to Second Baptist before I joined.

Collector: Are you actively involved in church activities?

Williams: Very much. I'm an usher at Second Baptist. I work with the kids sometimes, and I'm very much active in Second Baptist.

Collector: Do you feel that church is an important part of the community life in your neighborhood?

Williams: Very much an important part. I wish we had all the churchgoers in the community.

Collector: Do you remember any visits from Presidents to the Las Vegas area?



Williams: President Kennedy came to Las Vegas, I don't recall exactly what year, but the year before he was assassinated. It had to be '62 he was at the Convention Center.

Collector: Did you get to see him?

Williams: No, I didn't. I had to work that Saturday, but I had a very close friend who was working in the next booth took off and she went to the Convention Center.

Collector: Did President Eisenhower come to visit while you were here?

Williams: I don't recall.

Collector: Do you remember any of the important people in the state, the governors or public officials?

Williams: Yes, former Governor Grant Sawyer came to this beauty shop, he and Senator Cannon, in the last campaign which he ran unsuccessful. He visited the beauty shop during the campaign because his campaign headquarters was next door.

Collector: Do you remember anything about his personality?

Williams: He is a very beautiful person. He's so down to earth and he sat and talked with us and explained a lot of political activities that we really didn't know about.

Collector: Do you remember any of the colorful citizens in Las Vegas, maybe Mrs. Ronzone, for instance?

Williams: Yes, I remember Mrs. Ronzone and when she had the store on Fremont which was the only one at the time. And it was a beautiful store and she had quality, quality you just can't find in Las Vegas today.

Collector: Do you remember her as a personality?

Williams: No, I saw her once while I was shopping in the store, but not really. I was never really acquainted with her.



Collector: Do you remember any of the other old families who perhaps have been here a long time?

Williams: Well, Mother Nettles. I had fixed her hair. Mother Nettles came to Las Vegas during the Hoover Dam time. In fact, her husband was in Las Vegas before Hoover Dam was built. She owned where the old police station was on Stewart. She owned all that block and Mother Nettles lived to be about a hundred. In fact, I fixed Mother Nettles' hair at the funeral home. That was her last wish when she passed away; I guess it was 1967. And she was also a member of Second Baptist Church.

Collector: Have you seen or met any of the movie stars that came to town?

Williams: Oh, I've met Frank Sinatra, Tony Curtis, and Sammy Davis, Jr. I just can't name the others because I've seen lots of stars by being here so long.

Collector: Do you remember any particular exciting events that were typical of Las Vegas, any activities, say cowboy, western activities that occurred here?

Williams: During the Helldorado days?

Collector: What was that like?

Williams: Well, everybody would go western about two weeks before Helldorado and we would go down to the Helldorado Village which was located at the end of Washington and Main [the site of present Cashman Field] which they have torn down now. And everybody would go western and they would be square dancing, barbecuing and what have you--I'd say et cetera. And we'd have a real good time that night.



Collector: Why did they stop having those days?

Williams: Well, you can't stop progress. They tore down the Hell-dorado Village and they opened the street where the Hell-dorado Village first set.

Collector: Are you or have you ever been active in politics?

Williams: Occasionally. I helped Doctor Charles I. West campaign. I've helped Senator [Howard] Cannon, Rev. [Marion] Bennett, and Governor [Mike] O'Callaghan.

Collector: Do you remember anyone who was active in jobs or any particularly active person in the community affairs?

Williams: Mr. James Anderson was very much active. In fact, he found my oldest son his first job and he was a beautiful person.

Collector: How's the union situation been in Las Vegas? Black people welcomed into the union or just how has it been? The building trades, for instance, the Strip worker . . .

Williams: I once belonged to the Culinary Union as a maid at the Flamingo Hotel in the 50's. At that particular time Black people couldn't find a job other than maiding or laundry work. But in the later years they improved because the NAACP had forced them to hire the Blacks because there were no Black parking lot attendants. You could drive a car to the hotel but you couldn't get a job parking that car.

Collector: What about the casino worker?

Williams: There were no Black dealers except in West Las Vegas when I first came here. I notice they have opened dealing schools and there are Blacks dealing all over the city now.

Collector: In the building trades, do you know whether they were open



To Black people?

Williams: Are you speaking of construction?

Collector: Right.

Williams: In the early 50s that's all you saw on construction jobs, but as the unions started paying more money for construction work, for some reason, the Blacks have seemed to vanish. You pass a construction site now, you see nothing but Caucasians.

Collector: Are you a member of any social club or special interest group?

Williams: Well, not any more. I have been, but by me working two jobs, I was pretty well stacked up. I have cut out a lot of social activities but I'm still active in the church, very active in the church.

Collector: Well, what are your two jobs that you're working?

Williams: Well, I'm a operator at Sparks Beauty Salon, also a member of Nevada State Board of Cosmetology, and I have a family.

Collector: Would you like to tell us a little about your work with the State Board of Cosmetology. What does the board do?

Williams: The board polices the schools, gives examinations, sees that every operator has a license, sends the bills to the legislature, gives the different operators, and those who'd like to be operators, instructions about certain things in the cosmetology field.

Collector: Is gambling an important recreational activity for you or your family?

Williams: No, not for me because I'm a church woman--I'll put it that way. I'd like to be known as a church woman, but I



have nothing against gambling. Those that like it, that's their prerogative, but I like church.

Collector: What other kind of recreation do you seek alone or with your family, like games or radio or television listening or fishing or sightseeing or anything like that?

Williams: I like all that: sightseeing, games, television, fishing, baseball games, going to the park with the children on Sunday afternoon. I enjoy all this.

Collector: Do you ever go to any older sights like the Mormon Fort that was around. Have you ever seen the Mormon Fort or any old museums?

Williams: No, I haven't seen the Mormon Fort but I've just visited three sights in the outskirts of Las Vegas. I've been to Temple Bar with the kids and I've visited the Valley of Fire and Mount Charleston.

Collector: Do you remember anything about the early above ground atomic tests?

Williams: Yes, very much so. In the early 50s we would arise, I guess, about 4 a.m. and maybe this blast would go off, I guess, approximately 5 o'clock. We would always stand out and see the big mushroom come up after the blast and you could actually see the blast. Then they would bring all the mannequins back from the blast and they would have them on display in the windows saying she or he was in the atomic blast on whatever particular date. The hotels would be filled because so many people would come from the various states just to see the atomic blast in the morning. You couldn't go to Mercury, but you could stay in the city



and watch the blast. And mostly after the blast it was always come a dust storm because we had no paved streets, street lights, nothing modern like that.

Collector: Have there been a lot of improvements since then?

Williams: Very much. Now we have paved streets, a few lights on different corners, but it was completely dark in the early 50s.

Collector: How has the economy changed? Are jobs better than they used to be?

Williams: Yes, for Black people. Jobs are very much. When I came here in the early 50s, it didn't matter how well qualified you were, you never got a job in the downtown district. The only jobs that were open to Black people were laundry, domestics, a maid on the Strip.

Collector: How has the environment changed? Has Las Vegas grown a lot and do you feel that it's built up here a great deal?

Williams: Very much so. In the early 50s, the population, I would say, have tripled. Because the early 50s, maybe I've said this once before, but West Las Vegas was from Bonanza to Harrison, from A to H Streets, and then there was desert area. [A 1954 map, City of Las Vegas 1954 Map published by Redwood Publishing Company, shows considerable development North of H. Street. Ed.]

Collector: Well, the social changes? How is the relationship between the people in West Las Vegas, and North Las Vegas, and Henderson, and all around? Have the people learned to treat each other more with respect?

Williams: I would think so. There are a lot of Caucasians across



in north, the east, and south maybe hadn't seen the Black people and they hadn't been associated with them, so they really didn't know them. Maybe some would just see you, and they'd look at your skin color, and that was that.

Collector: How about the school?

Williams: The schools have improved tremendously because some of the delapidated schools had, well, I wouldn't say just poor teachers, but poor facilities. And since the busing came to Las Vegas, for example, schools like Madison has been improved tremendously.

Collector: If you would recall any incident, in the time that you've live in Las Vegas, what impressed you most or what was the most important, what would you say?

Williams: I would say the most impressive (garbled) event happened when Dr. James A. MacMillan had asked the business men downtown and on the Strip to open their doors to Black people. There was some controversy, so Governor Grant Sawyer flew in from Reno or Carson City and they had a meeting. They negotiated the civil rights movement at the Moulin Rouge, and this problem was solved within a matter of minutes.

Collector: Just a simple thing.

Williams: Just as simple as that.

Collector: Thank you very much for your time and your patience and would you be willing to have a longer interview at some other time?

Williams: Probably in the near future. (Laughter)

Collector: All right, thank you very much.



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