

Marygrove Oral History Project (MGOHP)
MGOHP Series: The Great Migration of African-Americans in the USA

INSTITUTE FOR DETROIT STUDIES
Detroit Association of Black Storytellers
Storytellers Concert May 7, 2006
Recorded by Dena Scher, Ph.D., Marygrove College

INTERVIEW INDEX—EARNEST STAMPS

Interviewee: EARNEST STAMPS

Interviewer: Dena Scher, Ph.D.
Interview Date: April 28, 2006
Location: Marygrove College
Tape No.: 04.28.06-ES (audio digital file)
(Approximate total length minutes: 22:06)

Topic: **From Foster Care to Pharmacy**

Subject Headings: Migration to Detroit, Foster Care, Marcus Garvey Movement
Comments: Only italicized text in is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions. Counter index corresponds to track times when loaded into iTunes.

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index Topic

[Audio File Track 22:06 minutes -- No. 04.28.06-ES]

Note: Counter index corresponds to track times when loaded into iTunes

0:00 Tell me a little about your present self-- Retired pharmacist living in Detroit. Lived in Detroit all his life, except for ten years and is now 82 years old. Enjoying life, fortunate to lived this long.

0:57 You have prepared something for the Black Storytellers Association. Mentally prepared something, speaking from his memory. Can go back in his memory to a very early age, 6, 5, maybe 4 years old. In Atlanta, Georgia, had an older brother and sister, father and mother, grandparents too. Late 1920's word came through that the north was offering a "great deal". People worked "hard, backbreaking labor" for a dollar a day, men

worked in the field picking cotton, women doing housework, “so five dollars a day sounded pretty good”. Blacks and Whites left because of this. His grandparents left first and sent word back to his father. His father left and took his older brother and sister. Him and his mother was the last to leave, he was about 4 or 5. Can remember riding the train. He was “excited and scared” because the train was “so large and the wheels were so big and the steam shooting up from between the wheels”. Exciting time. They had the “usual shoebox --- with the chicken and the biscuits and sweet potato pie”. In Cincinnati people changed trains, if they were going north they would get out of the Jim Crow coach and got into a regular coach and if they were going south the people would get out of the regular coach and get into the Jim Crow coach in Cincinnati.

3:47 Could you explain the Jim Crow coach? The Jim Crow coach is where all the black people had to sit. They couldn't sit in the regular coach in the south and also couldn't sit in the Pullman coach where they had a bed so they sat in the Jim Crow coach, “designated for the black people only”. Remembers when the porter or whatever he was gave him a candy bar, but his mother didn't tell him she paid for it. He talked about it for a while once he got up north. Can't remember how long it took to get to Detroit. Remembers walking through the Michigan Central Station, it had “high ceilings and the walls and the marble floors and the benches and looked like a grand place to me”. Remembers getting on the streetcar, “with what luggage we had” once they got to downtown area of Detroit. His mother told him years later that once they had got to Detroit after riding on the train for two days that once they got on the street car he said “we're gonna have a good ole ride now”. His mother was very tired but he wasn't. Had to change street cars again downtown to get to the home that his father had rented on “Russell and Mullet”. 1444 Mullet, it was a row of cottages, “very small houses, two rows in fact facing Mullet Street”. Directly behind the first row was a second row of houses. His family stayed in the first house in the first row and his grandparents stayed directly behind them. His father had a job, “not with Mr. Ford”, but with Michigan Copper and Brass.

6:33 They stayed in Black Bottom. Did “pretty good” for about a year. The stock market crashed and the economy “got very bad”. Was the beginning of the Depression, around 1929, 30, 31? His father's “was young, and ah, hormones flowing wildly” and wasn't taking care of home. His father argued with his mother as to what he was doing with his money because “he certainly wasn't bringing it home.” In time his father abandoned them, leaving his mother with “three children to raise, and no skill”. Had to get on welfare and get in the “bread line”. Went to “The Kitchen on Monroe, near Chene, near Duffield School, we'd go there for breakfast in the morning and that's where I learned to hate shredded wheat (chuckles), among other things, shredded wheat, chocolate pudding, ---- the shredded wheat would never get soft in the milk, it was like an awful straw and I would complain about it and my mother would say, ‘shut up and eat it’ so I'd shut up and ate it. I never learned to like it until I got grown.” They had breakfast there before they went to school in the morning. They would see all of their friends and relatives and “Lord knows who else there, cause everybody was in the same boat. Wasn't a disgrace to be poor because everybody we knew was poor so it was just the facts of life. When they were leaving they would get a sandwich and an apple. It was

an apple butter sandwich, but he didn't know what it was at the time. Couldn't do much better but his mother somehow would manage to have them come home for lunch and fix them tomato soup and crackers.

9:06 Activities of the area. The activities were centered around the UNI (United Negro's Improvement Association) hall. The Marcus Garvey movement was very dominant. They would go every Sunday; he thought it was church. The Marcus Garvey movement was focused on going back to Africa. He didn't know why, but at the time some people thought that it was a good idea that the blacks go back to Africa. That didn't happen. They had many things there for the kids as well to "keep the kids busy". Down the street there was the Christian Center, "there we really had fun" which had a big gymnasium where the children could play basketball. They also had seasonal programs there for Easter and Thanksgiving.

10:22 He and his brother and sister went to Capper School on Maple, from Kindergarden until the second grade, and then went to Duffield and he was double promoted from the second grade to the third grade and then went to Barscoe School. His mother had even more financial trouble, which caused them to go into foster care. They were placed in foster care because his mother had no skill and couldn't afford to take care of all three of them. His sister was almost 12 or 13, and his mother felt that she could take care of her so she went and got her out of foster care. He and his brother remained in foster care for 3 years, until 1937 and it was around 1934 when they went in. Looking back, he found that it was a good thing for him and his brother because they had structured care. They had a set time to go to bed and a time to get up, had to show that they did their homework, and their grades were "looked after" and they were in church all Sunday. Was in church "before Sunday school and after evening church." "Had a free hand" before they went into foster care.

12:28 Father was "nowhere to be seen, when he abandoned the family, he abandoned the family. Found out later that he was in Detroit the whole time but they never saw him and he doesn't believe that his mother saw him either. His mother "didn't have a happy married life with him". It had a strong effect on him, "traumatic". He wet the bed, stammered, and had no idea that their relationship was causing it. He felt insecure. He also had a crossed eye was poorly dressed. His mother couldn't provide. The first thing they did when they went into the foster home was get them glasses which corrected his crossed eye and he got new clothes. "I had never been so dressed up in all my life; I didn't know what a suit was." They treated them like they were their own children. It was a good thing for them although he didn't know it at the time.

14:03 Roosevelt was president. The NRA came along and caused raises among the working class. His mother worked in Kerns as a maid. Kerns is a department store. She got a raise from 8 dollars a week to 14 dollars a week. They came home from school one day and his foster mother told him that the worker would be there the next day to take them back home to their mother. The next day they went to their mother's house, she stayed at a boarding house. She wasn't home yet but the worker left them there. His mother had no idea that her sons were coming home. Since she was making more money

the government felt that her children were now her responsibility. They were happy but he guessed that she was “overwhelmed”. She was living on Palmer near Balch School and he was starting seventh grade and Balch only went to the sixth. They went to Garfield and they had a “very hard time”. He was eleven at the time his sister was then sixteen or fifteen and his brother was around fourteen or fifteen. They eventually dropped out; neither of them finished high school. His brother dropped out in the 10th grade and his sister dropped out in the 11th, so they could help out at home because his mother wasn’t making enough money. He stayed in school because he was the baby. He didn’t want to drop out nor was he encouraged to drop out. He learned to read at a young age. Whatever his sister learned at school she would teach him, they would play school. Was learning and didn’t realize he was learning; he was having fun. Remembers when he “discovered the main library on Woodward there, I thought that was the grandest building.” Large supply of books there and when the other kids were outside playing he would be reading a book. He found that there were “other worlds beside the one I was growing up in”. He didn’t get into trouble; he figured he wasn’t smart enough to get out of trouble if he got into it. His brother on the other hand figured “he could talk his way out of anything”. He never skipped school because he never had any money and everyone he knew was in school. What would he do but walk the streets; some of the other kids would walk around downtown and that never made sense to him. He never felt like he could talk his way out of anything so if anyone were to get caught skipping school it would be him. So he stayed in school.

18:49 Went to Cass after Garfield. He used to write poems: thought that he wanted to be a poet, thought he wanted to be a writer, and thought he wanted to be a scientist. One Christmas, his mother got a Christmas bonus from Kerns, so she gave her children money. He got a “dollar and a half, a whole dollar and a half, I never had that much money in my life.” He went through all the toy lands looking at all the toys. He stopped at Kerns and looked at the microscopes and telescopes and he would look at the scales of the butterfly’s wings. He asked how much the microscope; they were sold as a sets and the boy said ten dollars. It was around ten dollars and that had might as well been a thousand to him so he said never mind. The boy said well “don’t you have any money” he said yeah but only a dollar and a half. The boy told him to wait a minute and gave him a microscope from the back that was already broken but it was still usable. He gave him some slides, some were already prepared, and a book and showed him how to use it. All the neighborhood kids came in their house to see things through his microscope. All he could collect was the bugs in the neighborhood, roaches, butterflies and flies. This is what started his desire to be a scientist. When he went to Cass he went into the science program, which later helped him become a pharmacist. He realized after he got out of service that it would take him too long to write “the great American novel and make a million dollars” so he decided to go from a scientist to chemist to pharmacist, which he is today.

22:06 (end of interview)