Interview with Mary Alexander, graduate history student at the University of Connecticut, on February 24, 1975, at Wood Hall. For the Ethnic Heritage Project by Bruce M. Stave

Stave: Mrs. Alexander, we started on this because the other day we were talking informally about your background and I thought that, 'wow, this is a good story.' Here's someone who's in Connecticut. You're a black woman who came here relatively recently. Your youth was in the south, in Florida. What I'd like to do is start off by talking about your background in Florida. Can you tell me when you were born and what life was like growing up in the South?

Alexander: Well I was born March the 13, 1936, the seventh of nine children. My family is Catholic--my mother and father--and we belonged to the only Catholic church in town, Saint Anastasia. We were the only black family in the church and they had, as I remember, they had a pew reserved for us on the right hand side and it had a sign that said, "reserved for colored members only," which meant our family because we had a family of nine and we took up most of the pew. Now they had no black Catholic school and my mother wanted to send us to a Catholic school, so the priest there built a school for the family and the first year that I went to school, was the first year that the school was open. So my older brothers and sisters did go to public school for several years. But at the time that I was in school they had about a hundred children but we were the only black Catholics then. Anytime any of the black kids would convert to Catholicism my mother
would become their godmother and my father would become their godfather.

BS: These were white kids?

MA: No, black kids. If they converted. There were about five or six conversions during that time. The school remained open about four years after I graduated in 1949. During the time that it was opened after I left, all kinds of things were beginning to happen in the south. They were beginning to build a new black high school, which they hadn't done before so that they were in anticipation of this Supreme Court decision. So, they closed the school because they didn't have many black Catholics there. Later on they admitted whatever black Catholics there were to the local Catholic school. But to get back to how I grew up; well it was a very close family and we didn't realize that we were the only black Catholic family in the town.

BS: This is the town of what...?

MA: Fort Pierce, Florida.

BS: How big was it?

MA: Well, when I was born it was about eight thousand. During the war they had an amphibious base there so that a lot of the navy men after the war came back to Fort Pierce and I believe this was the way it grew. They had a frogman school there. I remember when I was a kid we used to go to the beach, that's South Beach. They had a north beach and then a south beach, and when war came along they closed the south beach and the north beach so that we weren't able to go to the beach at all.
After the war, when the Navy had built up the beach so that it was very nice. But it took a lot of time for them to let us over there because they had mines in the water. They had all kinds of installations over there. During the war also, the church had a special mass for soldiers and sailors and that was one of the masses that I would always like to go to because I liked to see them in their uniforms. But my mother had a habit of going to the eight o'clock mass all our lives and the nine o'clock mass was for the servicemen. But during this time, the strange thing about growing up black Catholic in the south is that all the things that perhaps happened to Irish Catholics in the north, happened there to us. But we didn't know that we were a people apart. We felt funny. I felt funny every once in a while, yes.

BS: As a Catholic?

MA: Yes. Because they would--kids from a public school would want to play our school and they (wouldn't say they would)--they would say they were going to play the Catholics which meant they were going to play the Brown's, essentially (laughs) because my brother--I had two brothers older than I, and I used to follow them around. Play football with them, basketball and baseball. It wasn't until I was about twelve that I knew that I was a girl because they would never refer to me as a girl, 'tha's my sister.' I had fun. I had lots of fun then.

BS: Let me ask this: how come your family was a Catholic family? What's the roots of this?
MA: Oh, well, my grandfather married a much younger woman and he had two children. My mother was the older of the two. After my grandmother left him he had two children to bring up. So there was no school there. He knew that she needed women to guide her so he found out about this boarding school in Virginia. So he sent her there and she became Catholic. It was a Catholic boarding school in Rock Castle, Virginia.

BS: This was about when?

MA: Oh, back in the twenties. Well before that--maybe 1918.

BS: Was this a segregated school?

MA: Yes, yes. It was--there was an order--Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament that was formed for the Indians and colored so that they bought a large plantation in Virginia and set it up as a boarding school for black Catholic girls. They weren't getting educated, what few there were. My mother went there. She wasn't Catholic. She was Baptist at the time but she converted.

BS: I see now. Who were the priests and nuns at the school?

Were they blacks or were they white?

MA: They were white.

BS: They were white.

MA: They were white, yes. The Drexel family in Philadelphia?

BS: Right.

MA: Reverend Mother Katherine was the daughter. He had three daughters; one of whom converted to Catholicism. The other, Mrs. Morrell, founded the boys' school which was St. Emma's Military Academy. The other school, St. Francis de Sales, my
mother attended and my sister and I attended. This is in Virginia.

BS: This is in Virginia?

MA: Yes, in Virginia. And she (Mrs. Morrell) formed the military academy for black boys so that my father graduated from that academy. They met there but they didn't dance together. They used to socialize together but they wouldn't allow the girls and boys to dance together. Boys would dance on one side of the room and girls on the other side. My father saw my mother and he liked her and he never spoke with her during all of that time. They met again in Miami after she graduated from high school, and they got married in Jacksonville, there was a black Catholic church in Jacksonville. They got married. And my grandfather lived in Fort Pierce. He owned a great deal of property.

BS: This is interesting, now. Your grandfather's attitude towards the whole thing; education, religion. You say he was a property owner?

MA: Yes.

BS: What's his background?

MA: As far as my mother was concerned, I heard this, I got the information through her. It seems that during slavery my grandfather's people lived with the Seminoles down near Miami. He was a mixture of Seminole, black and white.

BS: Were they slave or not?

MA: No.

BS: They were free.
MA: They were free. So she said they had come from Georgia. I don't know whether they had run away or not, but he lived in South Florida around Miami and the whole family around Miami. I asked her how come they came to Miami. Grandfather said they could never get anywhere if they stayed on the reservation. So they came to Miami and stayed and he worked as a chef for the railroad, Florida East Coast Railroad. He met a number of white men who gave him tips on how to buy land and where and he took advantage of it. This is how he became a large property owner there in Fort Pierce. He also began to collect coins too. I suppose he talked a great deal or heard a lot of conversations so he picked up a lot and he became a coin collector of sorts.

BS: Was this in the late 19th century?

MA: Yes. Late 19th century and early twentieth century because at the time that my mother got married they had been living in Fort Pierce, maybe about twelve, thirteen years. My grandfather was very progressive. The house that we lived in before I came to New York was kind of unique. Everyone used to come in. We had a ceiling that was made out of driftwood and he had it painted multi-color, and it had holes in it, just like driftwood. The whole living room was like that. We didn't think it was odd. Everybody else did, see, because they'd come in and say, "oh, gee!" They used to call him George A. His name was George Anthony Griffin. He was well known. He was a sage there and he owned property. He owned the houses in back of us--a great deal of property. We lost it.

off. My mother said that he paid a great deal of money to have him not prosecuted for that murder.
BS: In the Klu Klux Klan?

MA: Yes, Ku Klux Klan. He later became Mayor but this is what happened.

BS: Who became mayor?

MA: The guy who fell off the truck. But this is what happened; after the story broke, old man Rubin came to the black community and was apologizing to people. He said he didn't bring up a son to do things like that, because he had come from Germany and his family had been--

BS: What year would this be?

MA: This would be in the thirties. In fact, a guy I grew up with, his father was killed innocently because of that incident. You know, naturally, a white fellow gets killed, they're going to come to the black community and look for the murderer. So this other guy was intervening in an argument with a guy who actually killed the Ku Klux Klansman, and he was shot dead by this white fellow, see. The other guy, they succeeded in getting him out of town, but Pernell's mother was pregnant with him at the time. He is about my brother's age.

BS: What was the reaction in the town to the fact that a Jew was a member of the Klan?

MA: Well, we didn't understand "jewishness" then. He was white to us.

BS: How about the white side of it?

MA: Well I suppose, this is one reason, because as my mother told me, they had a difficult time in the white community. I didn't know this until I asked her in 1955 and she said that when he became mayor, they had some anti-semitism, some talk
about this guy being Jewish. And not only that, the white Protestants brought up the fact that he belonged to the Klan. (Laughs.) The black community when they voted, they voted for him, because the old man was so nice they figured he couldn't have...

BS: What was his occupation?

MA: He owned the only department store in Fort Pierce, a nice one, and he was one of the first ones that would allow blacks to change clothes in his department store—to put on clothes in the department store. He was as fair as he could be within the bounds of the system. We, especially my mother, got along very well with him.

BS: Now, you mentioned to me, the other day when we were talking about your friends, that you had two or three girlfriends you were very close to. Can you tell me something about them? What it was like to be friendly with them? What kinds of things you did, and what's become of them?

MA: Well, we were all born in 1936. Yvonne's father is Dr. Benton. Mary's father was Dr. Rhodes. Mary's father had his shop across the street from the Catholic school. In fact, on the corner of Eighth Street and Avenue C, my father's drug store was there. Farther down Eighth Street was Dr. Benton's office and then Dr. Rhodes and the insurance companies and the Afro-American Insurance Co. office was there. So we all went to the parochial school, they thought that the parochial school afforded their children better schooling but in fact it did not because we had three classrooms together.
BS: Were they Catholic?

MA: No, they weren't. Nor did they convert. They went to the Baptist church right across the street from where I lived and we used to, whenever anyone had a birthday party, we were all invited—a number of us. We mostly associated that time with the kids from the Catholic school. After grade school I went to Saint Francis de Sales, it was a Catholic school. They went to Palmer Memorial Institute—that's a private school in North Carolina. But we would always associate with each other afterwards, this is why I don't know very many people outside of them in Fort Pierce. We had our own little group that we associated with, and we gave parties or went to the beach or just socialized. The Bailey boys were a part of that. Ronald is now at the University of Florida; he taught at Washington University, in Saint Louis, and Harry—after Harry left for college we didn't see him very much, but he's at Temple, he's in the Political Science Dept. His brother Robert—we thought that Robert would be the one who would be the intellectual; now he's a colonel in the Army, but we thought that he would be the one who wouldn't stay in the Army, but he was the one that stayed. He was very nice. His father was from the West Indies, that was another one of the group. He was a property owner, too.

BS: Bailey?

MA: Yes, and that's why Ronnie's at the University of Florida, because none of the other boys wanted to take care of the property. So he's there to take care of the property. Yvonne went to
Bethune Cookman College. Mary went to Howard University, and I went one year at Xavier. I didn't like it there. I wanted to go to the Catholic University. My mother didn't want me in Washington at the same time Mary was there. I don't know why. She said Mary was a bad influence on me, but it wasn't all that. We used to do some things in high school we weren't supposed to. (Laughs.)

BS: Like what?

MA: Well, we didn't have very much in Fort Pierce—recreational-wise, but West Palm Beach did. But you can't have young girls on the highway because we had Route One. We didn't have Sunshine State Parkway at the time. So I remember one summer...

BS: How close is West Palm Beach?

MA: Fifty-six miles—that's a distance. I remember one summer we got bored, and Mary never could have fellows over the way I could because I had brothers, you know. Maybe I wasn't dating, but there were always boys at the house. She liked my brother and she always wanted to come over to the house. My mother never trusted her over at my house unless my parents were there, of course. But one day, we decided—that in my senior year and her first year in college. She was a year ahead of me. Bobby Bailey had lost his license. He was in an automobile accident, but Mary could drive. I could drive. She decided, she said it is so boring here. Let's go to West Palm Beach. I said, "We'll get killed." If anything happens on the highway, and our parents find out that we were in West Palm Beach, we'd get killed, especially Bobby because it seemed that the highway
patrolmen had something out for him. It was small enough for them to know—for the highway patrolmen to know who you are and where you are from, and it seemed that Bobby was so arrogant that they had had it in for him, but we went anyway. There was a joint in West Palm Beach—a barbecue joint—nice. And who should we see when we get to West Palm Beach but Dr. Benton's brother, who knew us. So, my mother heard about that, and she didn't like it very well. And then Mary was thinking in terms of integrating. We had a tennis court down there. We had a black tennis court, but by the time we got in high school it was in severe disrepair, so they had nice tennis courts now in what we called white town. So Mary said, "Let's go over there and integrate it. Let's go there early in the morning."

BS: This was when, the forties or fifties?

MA: The fifties, by this time, it was the fifties. "Let's go over there early in the morning and just occupy them. Come on." I said "No." My mother at the time was in Boston, and I didn't want to get in any trouble while she was away, but one idea that she had which we all implemented was going to the drive-in theatre. They wouldn't let black people in the drive-in theatre. She's light skinned. She said, "I'll tell you what we're going to do." She said, "I'll buy some flesh colored make-up, and you put that on and I'll drive and put some on and make myself look even whiter. We tried it but the man at the theatre knew us and told us to go home. So she was kind of, what shall I say—daring. And I used to go along sometimes just to keep her out of severe trouble.
BS: Now, what's become of her?

MA: She's getting her doctorate at Stanford University in linguistics. Yvonne went into the public school system and after they integrated the public school system she became a reading teacher. She's the head of the reading program for Saint Lucy County for the elementary schools.

BS: Which county is that?

MA: Saint Lucy.

BS: Saint Lucy.

MA: Yes, and her husband is the principal at the middle school in Saint Lucy County.

BS: Did you have interaction at all, in talking about segregation here, you're trying to talk about integrated, with whites on the social level?

MA: Well, I remember the men in the parish used to come to my father's house every Christmas, or he would come to their house and they would drink and they would take him back with them wherever they were going. I remember that, but as for the women and children, no. Except the kids there at the Catholic school, they were not adverse to talking with us. We would talk but there was no social interaction. That was the only thing that I could see. They liked my father. My brothers used to kid that they only call my father down to serve on the jury to get him to agree with them. They were a bit cynical about it--and they would tease about him. But he was well respected and when he died in 1948, it was a great shock...
BS: His first name was?

MA: Frank. To give you an idea of how well he was thought of, they had a black part of the paper in Fort Pierce. They had a special page for black people.

BS: Is that so?

MA: Yes. The announcement of his death appeared on the front page. So that it gave an indication of how well they thought of him. And when he was buried they had three of the men who were white that asked to serve as his pallbearers. Salesmen who had come to sell him merchandise and men in the church. A lot of the blacks felt that they would make special accommodations in the black church, but Father Beerhalter said, "No." He was a member of the parish, and he would be buried from the church. So that made news throughout the nation, you know?

BS: This is '48, you say?

MA: 1948, yes. I remember there were photographers, and it was very unorthodox, but he was very well thought of. My mother wasn't as well thought of.

BS: Why was that?

MA: My mother was brusque. She was to the point. She spoke her mind, and she was very Catholic.

BS: What do you mean by that?

MA: She was resented by the people in the community because she felt that her religion was the best. It was the only religion, and she was kind of snobbish in her own way. That was one of the reasons she wasn't successful after my father died in keeping the business going, plus she was a contradiction. Before my
father died, she seemed like she was the strongest person in
the world, and when my father died she fell apart. In the
end, we found out that he was the one that was stronger, even
though he was still very quiet. I loved my father very much.
He was very quiet, very calm. My mother was very excitable.
We get our high-strungness from her. He was very calm.

BS: So you're talking about a very tight family structure here, it
seems.

MA: Yes.

BS: You mentioned your brothers earlier, your relationships as a
young child. You had nine children in the family?

MA: Yes.

BS: Did this raise any difficulty for you?

MA: Oh, yes. Have you ever...? I was the seventh child in a
family of nine. Of course, I eventually became the youngest
because my sister beneath me died a few days after birth. The
brother beneath me died at the age of ten, so I was the youngest.
It has its advantages and disadvantages.

BS: Did they die of natural causes?

MA: No. My brother Martin had heart trouble. My mother kept him
in Johns Hopkins for a year, and that was before my father died.
My father died in 1948, my brother died in 1949. I had
problems inasmuch as I was being told to shut up and always
being told to do one thing or another. I spent half of my
childhood trying to hide from my brothers and sisters, because
it was always--my mother would get on them--they'd get on me.
But it taught me a great deal. I learned a great deal from
watching what was happening in the family. The family was falling down around my ears and nobody could understand each other—they were so busy shouting and blaming and everything. I would sit back very quietly and observe. I get my love of books from that. We couldn't go to the library, so my mother brought the library to us. We had a whole room of books: Book of Knowledge, encyclopedias, and any other book you could want.

BS: The library was segregated?

MA: Yes. So she brought the library to us. But I would sit back and listen and see what was going on so from that I've learned how to deal with a great number of people, and I learned then that my mother wasn't the strong person that these other people in the family were taking her for. Of course she really needed a great deal of love and understanding. And I made up my mind in high school that I would give her that as far as I could and we established a very good relationship. I found out a great deal about what was going on in her married life and in the life of the town and her background because she had not had a mother, she was determined to be the best possible mother, so it made her over possessive.

BS: She was from Fort Pierce?

MA: She was from Miami.

BS: Originally?

MA: Originally she was born in Miami and my grandfather moved to Fort Pierce.

BS: Did she come from a free family or a slave family?

MA: Free.
BS: Free. So both sides of the family...?

MA: No, no my father's side is free, but they were an old Maryland Catholic family. From what my great aunt tells me, my father's side of the family bought their freedom.

BS: I see. That's interesting in light of the --

MA: My grandfather went to school with a guy who later became Bishop of a diocese in Maryland. They went to grade school together, but they had no high school at that time, so he wasn't able to go to high school. He died as a result of working on shrimp boats out of the Chesapeake Bay, you know. The air, he had to sleep there in the damp and he died. My father raised his other brother and sisters. James is the only one who's living now. He sent Uncle James to Saint Emma's, and one day (he sent his other sisters to school also), but one day she walked away and they've never seen her again. My father spent one year looking for her and never was able to find her. My aunt Mary, my father brought home and she went to school there in Fort Pierce and she was the one really to raise us, and she and my mother had an argument and Aunt Mary left. She was like a servant in the house. My mother used to kid her so bad.

BS: Let me ask you this: you're probably very familiar with E.

Franklin Frazier's book, The Black Bourgeoisie?

MA: Yes, I've read that.

BS: How do you see, you know he's very critical in that book--do you see your family fitting this pattern, or do you think not?

MA: In some ways, and in some ways not because as I look back it was kind of a unique community, inasmuch as they gave the kids
a sense of worth that you find missing in a lot of communities in the north. Now we have cousins in Washington, and I noticed that in Washington they had a strong color line. In Florida they did not.

BS: Color line within the black groups?

MA: Yes. In Florida they did not. I didn't come across that until I left Florida. Even in boarding school, when the girls from Louisiana you would hear these things, you know, but we thought they were strange. But when I went to Xavier in New Orleans I found that there was a color line there also, and then I began to reflect back on the community in Fort Pierce, and it didn't go according to color, it went according to economics. So that even the poorest kid who attained an education could associate or come up in the social structure. Your name was more important than anything else in Florida, and I'm grateful for that, because my brothers had such a bad reputation that when I went there in 1970, the last time I was there, I told Dr. Benton, "I'm almost ashamed to come into your home," and he told me, no matter what my brothers had done, they knew where I had come from. They knew who my mother and father was. And I thanked him for that. For heaven's sake because Julius almost went to jail because of my brother David. David had him sign something, telling them lies, and come to find out four years later that he had signed a death certificate of a woman who was not dead. My brothers were crooks.

BS: How about the social aspect of Frazier, in terms of the tense social life, the high society kind of thing as a reaction to
white society and almost a parody of debutante balls, cotilions, this kind of thing. Did you have any of that?

MA: No, not in Fort Pierce. My parents gave parties, but they weren't those debutante things. It was just a matter of who you invited where. You just didn't invite anyone to your party. I remember I played with the people in the neighborhood but I was never allowed to bring them into the home. Mary could come in. Yvonne could come in, and some of my brothers' friends, but the other people we could play with them outside. Now my mother didn't make a big deal of it, it was just the thing that we knew to do. I don't know, she would say, don't bring--she wouldn't say don't bring them in because they're not your equal or anything. It was funny. By the time I was in high school in other words I knew who to invite to the house and who not to.

BS: Now, were there many poor blacks in Fort Pierce?

MA: Oh, yes. And they were all mixed up together with all the middle income blacks which was nice.

BS: Mixed in what, in residential centers?

MA: Yes, right. In the back my mother had the homes that she rented, the houses that she rented. Most of the people back there would wash clothes for white people. Every Monday morning they would get up and put on the fire outside. Now I hated that because they were so poor, and I liked them too because they were so nice. But the thing I didn't realize was, that that's folklore. They would get up in the morning and they would be out there working like dogs and singing.
BS: This is absolutely so?

MA: Yes, right, and singing. I used to hate blues because it was so sad. Now that I look back on it, that was coming from those women's guts really. My mother owned the apartment building right next door to us, too. We used to call it the big house. I got in more trouble saying that in New York than anything else in the world.

BS: The big house?

MA: When I tell them about the big house, what on earth is that? It was just a large apartment building that she owned and collected rent off of.

BS: What I'd like to ask you about now is when and why you left Fort Pierce?

MA: Well, when I finished high school, I wanted to be a writer. In my senior year in high school our choir went to the Catholic University to sing and while we were there I saw a production, a little theater production of Julius Caesar, there at Catholic University.

BS: In Washington?

MA: In Washington. When I wanted to go to Catholic University, the book that we read in literature class was written by De Ferrari, and he was there at the university. I wanted to get into the English Department or theatre department, I wanted to be a playwright. My mother insisted I go to Xavier University which was in New Orleans because she didn't want me in Washington with Mary, and she thought perhaps we'd get into all kinds of trouble. I had cousins there in Washington, I
wanted to go there. I went to Xavier. I didn't like Xavier, and I did very poorly there, because most of the time I spent in the fifteen cent movies on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. I hated New Orleans.

BS: Why so?
MA: It was one of the most segregated cities without any sense. A lot of the black people look more white than the white people and here they were--they had a sign on the bus saying, "for colored patrons only." And you would have to move the sign back on the bus. I had never seen anything like that. One of the things that we wanted to do as students there was take one of those things home as a souvenir. Kids used to have it on their dormitories there at Xavier. "For Colored Patrons Only" on the door.

BS: Was Xavier a segregated school?
MA: Yes.

BS: It was all black?
MA: Yes, it was all black, and it had mostly white teachers. But if you stole that sign it was a $200 fine or five years in prison or some such nonsense. But everyone would have their boyfriends steal one of those signs. I had a boyfriend of mine steal a sign, but we went out to dinner, and we left it on the chair and we forgot about it. I would love to have one of those signs now. They don't have it there now. But "For Colored Patrons Only," and you'd have to move that sign back. Whenever we played Dillard, and we had to go across what they called the Industrial Canal, Huey Long's monument,
one of his constructions, building up New Orleans. It's a nice highway over the industrial canal, connecting New Orleans with Gentilly, that area. And Dillard is in that area—that's another black school so that we had a thing going between, a rivalry. We would go there to play basketball, so whenever we got on the bus we'd sit anywhere we wanted because ordinarily you couldn't move that sign any further forward than the first seat, but we were crowded on the bus, and one white fellow got on the bus, and he said, "You're letting these niggers sit up here." He said, "What do you want me to do? Here's a bus full of black people. What do you want me to do?" And they're all college students. And the guy turned around and looked, and everybody on the bus was black, so he got off. (Laughing.) It was funny. I hated that city. One thing that I liked about it was that you could ride around New Orleans for seven cents. All over New Orleans for seven cents at that time.

BS: Seven cents. They still have trolley cars, don't they?

MA: Yes, the Saint Charles Avenue Trolley Car. And the Mardi Gras was the most horridos thing in the world; they had the Zulu parade there, and the African students protested because they said, "We wouldn't act like that." (Laughs.) I don't blame them for saying that. Well, after that I came home—that summer I was eighteen then.

BS: What year was that?

MA: That was 1954.

BS: '54.
MA: Yes, I was eighteen then. I was sort of biding my time because I figured that my mother couldn't stop me from going to New York after I was eighteen, or anywhere else that I wanted to go, and her health was failing, so I didn't want to put her through that strain of having to support me anymore. I was the youngest. My sister had already been to New York, so we decided we'd go back. She didn't like Xavier either. She was there that year and she didn't like Xavier either. So we decided that we would go to New York and my mother would help us until I got a job, and I wanted to write. She didn't want me to write because she said there was no money in it for black people. But I was determined I was going to write. So I came to New York and I got a job right away but it was in a factory. I hated that.

BS: What kind of factory?

MA: Jewelry factory.

BS: This is in New York City?

MA: Right.

BS: Whereabouts? In Manhattan?

MA: Yes, in Midtown Manhattan. I quit because he wanted us to work on Saturday. Well, I had worked like one week and I hated the job and I said, now this is not for me. The next week he told people to—I didn't like the way he talked to people. Nobody ever talked to me that way before. We've got to come in—so I quit.

BS: Well, a question now. At first, how did you--literally, how did you get up there? What means of transportation?
MA: Oh, a train. Saddest train ride I ever took. I saw my mother looking at us through the window, and I wanted to cry. She didn't want us to go.

BS: Did she foot the bill for the fare?

MA: Yes. And she supported us until we were able to--we came to the "Y." She supported us until we were able to support ourselves.

BS: The "Y" where?

MA: In Harlem, 137th Street--Emma G. Ransom House.

BS: The Emma G. Ransom House on 137th Street in Harlem.

MA: Yes, right. One of the agreements was, my sister had already--she was always one step ahead of everybody. Just like everyone else in the family. She had already applied to the New York Institute of Dietetics, and the agreement was that I would help her through the New York School of Dietetics, and she would help me through maybe the Medical Technology school so that at least I'd have a job better than the one that I had. Well, I helped her and she forgot about me. I learned a valuable lesson.

BS: Did you have any family at all up in New York City?

MA: No, my mother had friends, and I had friends. I had girls that had gone to school with me, who were in New York. My mother had friends--women that she had gone to school with at Rock Castle also. One was a nurse. That was the one we stayed with. She was a public health nurse. By the time she retired a couple of years ago, she was head of Public Health nurses there in New York City.
BS: Why did New York seem to be such an opportunity for you? Why not Chicago or Atlanta or New Orleans which you don't like?

MA: When I was in New Orleans I heard about Chicago. I met some girls from Chicago. I just didn't like Chicago. New York, well, the stories from people--there was a straight line from Florida to New York, and most of the migrant people who had come out of the South went to New York. And one of the reasons why they do go to New York I would suppose is because they've heard that Harlem had much better housing and blacks had a little more freedom within Harlem than they would have elsewhere. The atmosphere was better, and I found that I liked the atmosphere of New York, although I didn't confine myself to Harlem. By the time I stayed within the area, I was living on 143rd Street and Convent Avenue which was really not Harlem, it was just that I had become a recluse. It was my own choosing. I have my moments to be social. Very often I'm very introspective so I stay quite to myself.

BS: You mention you went to work in the factory to start with. How did you get that job?

MA: I can't remember, but I think I must have gotten it through the New York State employment. They send you out to several places and you just go and if they want you they hire you. I found out it wasn't a matter of whether you were qualified or not. For years, if I would write to a job, I would have the job until they saw my face. So it wasn't a matter of whether I was qualified or not. It was a matter of whether you were black or white, whether they would want you or not. It took me the
longest time to find out that was what was occurring, because if you just look at my resume you would think I was a white Catholic because of the private schools I attended. They were very anxious to have me, because I got the job, and they'd look at me, you know, and I never got the job.

BS: You mentioned the other day to me that going to New York you really felt what it meant to be black. More than in the South.

MA: Yes, that's right. I didn't feel it right away. I got to New York when I was eighteen, and I just thought, well, I suppose it was a culture shock. But by the time I was 22, after I had become rejected from so many jobs, I began to think about it. I had a long period of unemployment in which I had a long time to mull over certain things. I had the opportunity to go back home in 1959 and then I married, I got married in late 1959. In 1960, when my daughter was born I said to myself, it suddenly dawned on me, What would I tell her? I didn't know very much myself about black people, because even though they had black history week in school, the nuns never really told us what it was to be black. Of course, they wouldn't know. Most of them were from Ireland. They were some of the best white people I had ever known; the most unprejudiced I had ever known. But then you began to talk with the other girls who were going to school with you, and they just had no idea what we were going to come up against out here. I began to mull over things and began to read the history of black people, and that's when I began to understand what was really happening in Harlem and elsewhere. And about that time, of course, Malcolm X was beginning
to hold forth...

BS: This was in the fifties?

MA: No, sixties.

BS: Sixties, okay.

MA: ...on the street corners of Harlem. And of course I met my husband who was raised a black Protestant, and of course he knew a great deal more about things than I did.

BS: Where was he raised?

MA: In South Carolina. And I suppose I must have presented a horrendous picture to him. Here I was a black woman with these ideas that I had about the world. He definitely taught me what was going on. (Laughs.)

BS: Do you attribute this to Catholicism?

MA: Yes, I attribute it to both the middle-classness and Carholicism because it imbued me with some kind of idealism that's kind of unrealistic.

BS: Do you think it would have been different had you grown up black Protestant middle class?

MA: Yes.

BS: Even though you still would have been of the same economic class?

MA: Yes. I think it would have been,...no, no. You know why I said that? Because I look at Mary and I look at Yvonne. The same thing that happened to me happened to Mary, and she became radicalized. She's more radical than I am. Yvonne stayed within the confines of this middle class community in the South, very conservative. Very conservative, so it might be more to
my middle class lifestyle. Because Yvonne is very conserva-
tive. In fact, Mary insulted some guests in her home there,
and she was in a huff. Mary had become so radicalized.

BS: Well, let's see, let's go back to Harlem when you first came
up; you mentioned that the thought was that housing was better
in Harlem than in a lot of other places.

MA: Right.

BS: Was this the fact?

MA: In certain parts, yes. In certain parts of Harlem. Harlem was
a diverse community. They have areas there that you wouldn't
believe. Like on 138th Street, 139th Street, what they call
Striver's Row, they're historical landmarks now.

BS: ______ Avenue?

MA: No, between 7th and 8th Avenue.

BS: 7th and 8th.

MA: Right off the corner of all these tenements you have these nice
townhouses that you can't buy, and they're very nice on 137th
Street also. I used to pass this area, and it was very nice
right off 7th Avenue, but you go to Lenox Avenue and everything's
all broken down. In going into the homes, the different homes
in Harlem, they were nice. The apartments were situated nicely,
but that was because in Harlem the realtors had overspeculated
in planning and they had to rent to blacks. So blacks were
some of the first ones to get into some of these houses.

Homes down on 120th Street, 125th and Lenox Avenue where _____
used to prowl?

BS: Right.
someone. But anyway he took me to the Harlem Writers' Guild. This is how I got into the guild. I found that at eighteen I thought I knew everything. By that time I found out I knew absolutely very little even about writing.

BS: How old were you then?

MA: About 21, 22. And then a year later I met Wilfred through him, through the Harlem Writers' Guild.

BS: What kind of plays, what kind of people were at the Harlem Writers' Guild? What was it physically like?

MA: Well, they had people like Maya Angelou and Walter Christmas. Walter was in the advertising industry, but he liked to write. My husband at the time was--had just gotten out of the army. He had belonged to the guild before he went into the army. We had Sarah Wright. The problem with the guild was that the people had to work. John Killens did not work but he had _______ and he was lecturing. Grace, his wife, had been working for a while. So there was John Clark, who seemed never to have a job.

BS: John Henry Clark?

MA: Yes, he seemed never to have a job, but John did all right.

He used to write and he lived in one room, too. It was fun. He was so much fun. John could always get to the crux of things. It was Louis Burham. He's since died. He used to work for the Guardian. Sarah Wright, she got published. I had a number of them in my mind this morning. There were a number of them. Most of them got published by 1970. Except that after Wilfred and I got married and the children came we
didn't have much time. He sent a couple of his books to the publisher and they rejected them. One was rejected because they were saying the theme had been overworked. It was about integration of the armed forces overseas. I think they rejected it because it gave a very accurate picture of what was really going on over there. He started a story, "A Flat in Harlem Heights," but he was going to school at the time, he was going to school, NYU School of Commerce, so he couldn't very well write and do that also. He hasn't thought about writing in recent years.

BS: Now he was from South Carolina. When did he come to New York?

MA: Well, he came to New York--His family moved to Philadelphia and he came to New York in about 1952, after he was at Temple a year and a half and he bummed around the village. He came here to write, too. He belonged to another writing group down in the village. He went into the army. They called him to the army. He stayed there for five years. He enlisted for three more years and then he got out of the army and came back to New York. I met him there in 1959.

BS: Physically, where did the Harlem Writers' Guild meet?

MA: At different people's homes. Sometimes we would rent the marketplace gallery, but that was later. There was an artists' gallery there in Harlem and we would rent the gallery. We would do things like, when the Ballets Africaines from Senegal got there, when Senegal got their independence. There were a number of people. See, through the guild a lot of people knew a lot of other people, and these Africans were in town, and we
invited them to the guild meeting. One of the things we found out was that there were a lot of Africans who never met a lot of blacks except in a menial capacity in the United States, so we made it a point always to have some kind of contact with them, so we entertained them. Irving Burgess was in the group too, he wrote eight of the songs of Harry Bellafonte's first album. So he was one of the members of the guild too. He wrote for the Kingston Trio also. So that he had a lot of contacts with people in the U.N., and when the Ballets Africaines came to the United States we gave a reception for them. It was very nice, and they thanked us. They said that they don't meet very many black people in the United States. My husband had someone on his job from Kenya and we invited him, too... We always participated in what was going on. They would have sponsored things for ______, and book parties down at Carnegie Endowment Center for a writer. So we took the guy from Kenya there once and he told us that a white family that he had lived with in New Jersey said that he wouldn't like black Americans. We found out that that's what white people in the white community would tell an African. That's why Africans would think we're just stupid. Like we had nothing in common with them. But it was a nice, New York was a nice experience for us because we kept what we liked culturally. He liked the theatre. I liked the theatre, and we'd take our children. Even now we take our children to the theatre.

BS: Okay, now your husband's occupation was what?

MA: He is a finance executive.
BS: And when did he get started in that kind of business?

MA: About twenty years ago. What happened, this was a finance company that was started by the Dutch, people from the Netherlands, and it was connected with the House of Rothschild. After Rothschild sold it, they decided to sell it, in turn, to Aetna Holding Company. Aetna's getting into the finance business now, like Ford, Ford Motor Company?

BS: Right.

MA: So that they formed a holding company to buy all of these finance companies, and so they bought the one where my husband was, and they asked him to come to Connecticut. He asked me, did I want to go. I told him, "I'm not adverse to newness."

BS: When did you come to Connecticut?


BS: August '73, so you've been here about a year and a half.

MA: Right. About a year and a half.

BS: In Connecticut where do you live?

MA: Windsor, North Windsor, in the Poquonock section of Windsor.

BS: Going back to your husband, for a minute, you say he went to NYU School of Commerce?

MA: Yes.

BS: So he was training in a sense to go into business while he was also interested in writing?

MA: Right.

BS: And this was something that he planned to do, actually, the kind of job that he ended up with?
MA: No.

BS: No?

MA: No, he had planned to write really. He had gotten into this job and he got a job to support himself, and he got interested in the finance part of it. They only had two blacks in the whole company, and one of the guys sort of sponsored him.

BS: Who, a white?

MA: Yes, right. And he also told him, why don't you settle down and come into business with us. Because one of the guys knew a guy who wrote, this is how they all met. So he did finally decide that this is what he liked best to do, and he went on to NYU while we had the babies. That was a hard time, but it was nice. And I got to know black people in New York. See, I didn't get to know very many black people, and black people not as friends, you know not as particularly selected friends until I got into the project thing. At first I got into the project thinking I wouldn't be bothered with any of them. You know, this middle class bit that I'm disgusted with.

BS: Which projects were these?

MA: Manhattenville. They were 133rd Street and Amsterdam, and they were new. They were built in 1959, and we were the first tenants in our building. I met some nice people, and I found out the way black people socialize. How they kept their minds together.

BS: Is that any place near ________?

MA: No, that's out in Long Island. That's where we were planning to go. Rochdale.
BS: Rochedale, right.

MA: We were planning to go there until I found out I was pregnant again, so we had to find cheaper housing so we got them. I'm glad we did, you know, for the experience of knowing black people; what they go through and where other people come from. Some of the things I heard about what happens in the South I never heard before. See, it's a difference. So I was there, and I participated in the life of the community, and I got to know a great deal about black people, about myself. So it was very educational.

BS: Okay, now, did you work at all during this period?

MA: While I was married?

BS: Yes.

MA: Yes. I worked for Chase Manhattan Bank.

BS: What kinds of things did you do?

MA: I was a teller, and then I became head of their special checking and savings department.

BS: How long did you do that for?

MA: Not long. My husband wanted me to stay home with the kids. We had this idea that, you know, once the kids become three, they need to be turned toward the world instead of towards the family. So we wanted them to get the socialization process, so we put them in the nursery and then I still worked for—let's see, Catherine was four, and William was three—so I worked for two years. In the meantime they would benefit by being in the school. This little nursery was a nice little nursery school. I put them there, and then the lady warned
me that if I made too much money the kids will be put out, but I just couldn't believe a thing like that. My husband wasn't making that kind of money, and neither was I at the bank. Sure enough, after I got the job at Chase, I was making 98 dollars. That wasn't anything. $98 a week and added to my husband's salary I guess at the time he must have been making about $150. Added to my husband's salary, they told me that I would have to pay $56 a week for my children to stay there. So I would be working for them. So I took them out. It saddened me. But I could see how other people would go there and lie, tell lies and get their children in, and the kids had the benefit. I asked my husband, how come we don't lie, and he said it wasn't honest. I admire that, but sometimes it just gets in the way of some of the crookedness that I like to put over on people. (Laughs.)

BS: (Laughing.) Your family background?

MA: (Laughing.) My family background, yes. But it was kind of disappointing, because the children, they were learning very well there at the school.

BS: Who ran the school?

MA: The city.

BS: The city ran the school.

MA: Right, and in order to get the money from the city they would take welfare people before they would take somebody who could afford it.

BS: I see. Now, what kind of activities did you engage in while living in the project? You lived in Manhattanville Project---
go across the street and see a friend. They liked to go out in the street and I never liked that. They had a park down the street. They wouldn't go to the park---in the street, you know? We tried our darndest to keep them out of the street and have them go to the park, but they would go to the park sometimes. Most of the time they would play in the street. But the lifestyle didn't change that very much, inasmuch as the people I associated with.

BS: Was there more integration now? Were the kids playing with white kids?

MA: Oh, yes. But because the area was filling up with a lot of people from Harlem because they followed each other over there....

BS: Was there migration pattern?

MA: Oh, there was a migration pattern. Some of the kids in school tried to prevent my children from being friendly with white people. That was kind of a problem that I thought my children could work out for themselves with just guidance from me.

BS: Can I ask, how has it worked out?

MA: Oh, very well.

BS: In terms of black identity as opposed to...?

MA: Very well. I feel that what I've done which my mother did not do--I told my children since the time that they were born that they were black. And tried to tell them in terms that they can understand, what that means. My son is light and my daughter's very dark, and he wants to know how come
he's considered black. I told him blackness has a great deal
to do with your ancestry rather than the color of your skin.
You're white and your sister's black and you know how come.
The greatest pleasure I had was taking them home in 1970.
The people in Florida don't ask things like that. My daughter
got a good feeling of self worth, when she went to Florida
everybody made over her because she looks like my father. My
father was very dark like she. My son's very light like my
mother, and they made over both of them. They told me, they
said, "I'd know who you were before you could tell me. I could
see that's Frank and Abby right there." She liked that, but
she asked me, she said, "Mama, how come in the north they do
that and in the south they don't?" It's a difference. In the
south white people don't look at her strange but in the north
they do because white people in the south see black people.
They know that they're all different shades but in the north
they look. Also in the south they won't think that a smart
black person is a phenomenon. In the north they do. My
daughter has an average intelligence, they think she has
superior intelligence.

BS: In the north?

MA: In the north. She notices all these things, and she's been
able to handle it because I talk. I talk to them about it.
This is what you have to do. Otherwise they're lost. I
remember if my mother had talked to me as I am talking to my
children I wouldn't have gone through that terribly traumatic
experience when I was twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five.
BS: Where do your kids go to school now?
MA: In Windsor.
BS: High schools?
MA: Junior High School.
BS: Both of them?
MA: Yes.
BS: You moved to Connecticut. Why?
MA: Because of...
BS: Your husband's change?
MA: Job change. Right.
BS: What kind of area do you live in in Windsor? Why did you move there? How do you find Connecticut compared to the other two places or the other three places that you lived?
MA: Well, you know, I didn't know very much about Connecticut. Hartford we knew even less about. When we came to look for a house here, we asked about, --where did the blacks live. All right? Someone in New York, who was going to the University of Connecticut's School of Social Work said, "The North End, but you wouldn't want to live there." So we came. We came to the Sonesta and we brought the kids overnight and we rode through Hartford and we had a very depressed feeling. You know? You don't quite get that depressed feeling in New York City riding through Harlem if you're black because you know that there are other places that are nice. It looked awful. We said, "We're not going to live here." Then someone told us in New Jersey there was an area in Bloomfield, the very next week, I talked with our neighbors across the way,
and luckily we found that someone lived in Bloomfield. So the next week when we came up here we looked in Bloomfield, and we said, "No, we don't want to live there either." So the week that we really got in touch with the real estate dealer--the real estate dealer took us to Simsbury and Avon and Canton and all those other...

BS: Was this a white real estate person?

MA: Yes. All over there in Avon and everything. We liked one house in Avon, but it was too much money. We weren't going to pay so much money for a house. My husband's very stingy, not stingy but you know, very frugal. We don't expect to live grander than we can afford. Avon was nice, and Simsbury was nice, but they had septic tanks. Can you imagine all the executives out there with septic tanks? They talk about it too, you know? I said, "No." We wanted a city sewer.

BS: Why the difference as one who has a septic system and had trouble with it?

MA: Right. They back up and...we're city people. We don't want to be bothered with all that nonsense. When we flush the toilet we want it to go. (Laughs.) There were some nice homes out there, but they were too high. The next week we came and there was another real estate agency in Wethersfield told us, "Forget about Simsbury and Avon. They're too high priced. There's some nice homes on the other side." She took us to Ellington. There were nice homes out there. She took us all over. She didn't take us to Bloomfield. We didn't bother to ask her why--13% black, you know. She
home" or something like that—we found out after a year and a half that they were pretty nice.

BS: Now was there any economic difference in view of your family? Your husband being an executive? Yourself in terms of acceptance and non-acceptance? Or was it simply a matter of black and white?

MA: I don't quite understand that.

BS: Well, did people say, "Look, they're good middle class people coming out here"?

MA: I think they said that. Yes, I think they said that.

BS: In other words as opposed to saying, "They're coming from Harlem. From the slums of Harlem."

MA: Yes, right. At first, yes. That was probably their first reaction, and then I think McCall told someone in the neighborhood Wilfred was an executive at Aetna. I think that's when it subsided. I think they thought we were also out of North Hartford.

BS: This would have made a difference?

MA: Yes, I think it would have made a difference. I don't see why. Had we moved right out of New York we would have been from what they called Harlem.

BS: Have any other blacks moved into the area since you did?

MA: No, there was one black on Poquonock Avenue, but that was outside of the development, and they gave that black a hard time. So I understand this is what Mr. McCall said. They gave that black a hard time. But he is isolated. He will, not—I'm determined to go see that woman. But I haven't been able to because my
children and her children just do not come in contact.

BS: Now, most of your children's friends obviously are white. There probably aren't any blacks.

MA: Yes. Most are white.

BS: How about yourself now? You are a graduate history student. How did you get into this? This is not the usual kind of pattern for several reasons. One of which--your age, family growing up, this kind of thing.

MA: How I got in this far?

BS: Yes, and why.

MA: After I graduated from City College and found out that I was not going to be there at City College any longer I decided I would try to teach in Connecticut or go to grad school. I wanted to teach on the college level, and had I stayed there at City I probably would have continued with my Master's Program. So what I did when I was taking the GRE, I filled out the slip saying if you are a minority student and interested in colleges in the different areas, check off one area, the New England area, and the colleges will get in touch with you. So I did that. Yale, Harvard, the University of New Hampshire, the University of Rhode Island, and Connecticut wrote to me. So I decided while I was trying to get my teaching certificate I would apply and see if I could continue.

BS: Did you start teaching at all, or have you gotten your certificate?

MA: I have got my certificate but I haven't gotten a job yet, and the teachers in Windsor are trying to help me get a job. They
They want me in the school system. I practice taught there once, and about three or four teachers live right near me. The guidance counselor's next to me. The reading teacher lives next to her. The woman in Special Ed. lives there, and two houses down there's another teacher who teaches in the sixth grade in the public school. So we have become good friends. I was over their house Friday night and Saturday night. Saturday night there was a game and a party. So, they've become friends and they're very nice. Last year they tried to get me into the public school, and I said if I didn't get to school I'd accept the scholarship. Once accepting the scholarship I would finish. But the other night they were saying that they had an opening. But I think Windsor being basically conservative does not want a black teacher yet.

BS: They don't have any black teachers?

MA: They have a typing teacher. They don't have any on the academic level. I was in their high school substituting, in junior high, and I handled the kids very well, and they liked me, but I don't know. The lady next to me said that Windsor's stupid. They're going to wait until the NAACP comes in, because Windsor had a high percentage of blacks. But that's not the reason why I want to go teach. I want to teach because I think I can help them. But I said, once I got into the graduate program I would want to pursue what I wanted to pursue in the beginning anyway.

BS: Why graduate history? Is it simply to aid you in teaching? Is there another interest involved?
MA: Well, there's the basic thing of formalizing whatever knowledge you want to get. Like the Urban History course? I hadn't thought of it in terms of that, but look at all the specialized knowledge you get about history. When you're teaching on any level I think it's important to know the antecedents and what makes this city the way it is. Now that I've been in this course, I've been thinking a great deal about what I used to think about just on an informal level there in New York. So it's a way of putting things together. The same way with immigrantism--the way of putting things together. I found that when I got to know the Spanish people better, I could never say from that time on that I hated one group or another without getting to know something about them.

BS: Do you see your study sort of going on in graduate work, MA, perhaps doctoral program as a logical culmination of your life so far?

MA: Yes.

BS: Or fifteen years ago, twenty years ago, did you think that you'd never be doing this?

MA: Well, I've always had that goal--goal oriented toward that education in the south--but I said that I would die sitting in the chair at school. But it's a logical culmination. Because I told my friends I had graduated from college, they said, "Don't stop until you get your Ph.D."

BS: These are friends of yours?

MA: Right. My girlfriend in California; the one who's getting her Ph.D. But the thing is, I guess it took me so long, there's
called racial names than to be called names that they especially attribute to a woman. I used to hate it when my brothers used to say, "woman." We used to have fights. They used to do it just because we didn't like it. They used to say it as if they'd do it just to make us angry. Just because they could. So I think she's right. She's right in that sense.

BS: Okay, we're going to stop here because I have to be non-chauvinist and pick my son up.

MA: (laughing). Okay.

End of Interview