Copyright / Usage

Material on this site may be quoted or reproduced for personal and educational purposes without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given. Any commercial use of this material is prohibited without prior permission from The Special Collections Department - Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore. Commercial requests for use of the transcript or related documentation must be submitted in writing to the address below.

When crediting the use of portions from this site or materials within that are copyrighted by us please use: Used with permission of University of Baltimore.

If you have any requests or questions regarding the use of the transcript or supporting documents, please contact us: Langsdale Library
Special Collections Department
1420 Maryland Avenue
Baltimore, MD  21201-5779
http://archives.ubalt.edu
UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY DEED OF GIFT

The University of Baltimore’s Oral History Collection is comprised of taped interviews of people giving first-hand accounts of some aspect of Baltimore history which might otherwise go unrecorded.

You have been asked to give an interview. A tape recording of your interview will be made. The tapes, along with an abstract of their content and, in some cases, a verbatim transcript, will be deposited in the University of Baltimore Archives, 1420 Maryland Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21201. These materials will be made available for research by qualified scholars, for educational use, for scholarly publications, and other related purposes.

I, William Ruff, have read the above and, in view of the historical value of this information, agree to the recording of my voice and my stories. I grant the University of Baltimore the full use of this information in all media known and unknown. I grant and assign all my rights pertaining to this information to the University of Baltimore.

Signed: William Ruff

Name (print) William Ruff

Address 633 A 18th St, 21202 MD

Telephone 410 276 8884

Date 11/28/97 Interviewer: Lucy White
**INFORMATION SHEET**

**INTERVIEWER:**  Lucy White  

**PROJECT:**  East Baltimore Oral History  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW:</th>
<th>PLACE(S) OF INTERVIEW:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997.11.28</td>
<td>Monument East Senior Housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>633 N. Aisquith St.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NUMBER OF TAPE(S):**  1  

**LENGTH OF INTERVIEW:**  1:30  

**NOTE:**  see also Marie West Interview, East Baltimore Oral History Project  

**INFORMANT’S BIOGRAPHICAL DATA**

**NAME:**  William Ruff  

**ADDRESS:**  633 N. Aisquith St. , #213  

**TODAY’S DATE:**  1997.11.28  

**DATE OF BIRTH:**  1930.02.28  

**PHONE NUMBER:**  

**PLACE OF BIRTH:**  99 East Madison St., Baltimore  

**SCHOOLING AND/OR OTHER TRAINING:**

- 129 on Harford Rd.  
- 116 on Orleans St.  
- Dunbar High  

**PARENTS**

**MOTHER’S NAME:**  Leslie Ruff  

**PLACE OF BIRTH:**  Baltimore  

**FATHER’S NAME:**  Cody Ruff  

**PLACE OF BIRTH:**  Virginia  

**SIBLINGS:**

**LIST**

- Oliver Ruff  
- Donald Ruff  
- Jeannie Ruff  
- Shelly Ruff  
- Mary Ruff  

**DATES OF BIRTH:**
Eric: I am here interviewing William Ruff Mr. Ruff, where were you born? Where was your birthplace?

William: My birthplace was Baltimore, Maryland.

Eric: Baltimore, Maryland. Where in Baltimore were you born?

William: 909 East Madison street.

Eric: Where did you attend grade school?

William: 116th grade school.

Eric: OK, how about high school?

William: Dunbar

Eric: Dunbar. So you’re not too far from where you grew up then. Do you have any college background?

William: No.

Eric: Any other kind of technical school or any other kind of training?

William: No

Eric: What is your primary occupation, or what was your primary occupation.

William: Pipelayer.

Eric: Pipelayer. What is your present occupation?

William: Retiree

Eric: Retiree. But for you that is still alot of work.

William: Yeah, I’m doing a lot of work. Well, I’m on the resident advisory board, a delegate of HEBCAC, you know about that though.

Eric: Right.
William: I should have brought all that stuff up here. I’ll give you one of my cards in case you need it (he hands me a card), I’m a delegate of HEBCAC, I belong to – where is it at, I just had it – do you remember this from class?

Eric: Yeah. How about um your hobbies, do you have any hobbies or?

William: Yeah I like to listen to music, and I like watching CNN.

Eric: You like watching CNN?

William: Yeah, I like the uh uh politics. That’s my hobby, politics.

Eric: Good, I’ll ask you some questions later about Baltimore politics.

William: Yeah I know about that.

Eric: Yeah. OK, so you’re a member of HEBCAC and are there any other political or professional organizations that you have been a member of?

William: I’m a poll jumper, and also registration, uh, I’m a voter registrar, I register people.

Eric: O.K. Can you speak of any experiences from World War I, World War II, the Depression, the Korean War, Civil Rights, the Vietnam War?

William: What do you want to know about Civil Rights?

Eric: Let’s start with Civil Rights.

William: Yeah, let’s start it from there. What do you want to know about that? Now I can tell you about that real good.

Eric: O.K. tell me about it. Let me hear it.

William: What do you want to know?

Eric: Um, when you were growing up you got to see pretty much everything, from Martin Luther King up until now, what is your view or perspective about where things were when you were younger and where things are now, how they have changed and how much progress has been made.
William: Well, people have changed. People have changed a whole lot because once upon a time the black race couldn’t go anywhere. Right here, this is east Baltimore that I’m speaking of, I grew up here and there was no such thing as a white teacher coming to a black school or there was no such thing as a black teacher going to a white school or vice versa with the children. There was no such thing, that was out, OUT. You understand, you had the stores where you would go and then a lack there of, they didn’t even live in the same neighborhoods. The only way you were living next to someone who was a different race would be – I’m going to cut it to you like it is, uh – only Jewish people were partially segregated because, that’s the only people that you got to live next to, and the only reason you got to live next to them was because they had a store or a second hand store where you bought second hand furniture from. I lived next door to the Lewis’, they were Jewish and we used to play and everything because we were friends. And their store, we bought used furniture from their father and mother. That’s how that came about but otherwise we didn’t mingle. We would fight, you understand right there (pointing out the window towards Aisquith Orleans streets). They tore that down and put projects there. Take a look at it and see for yourself what I’m talking about. Right there was the trow projects, you understand, see? Running right there on Minor street. They tore it down and made new projects from here, from Aisquith street to Biddle street. And it stayed that way until 1948. They started to changing this stuff They went to fightin’ it and stuff You see. And they changed it and made it into all black, It wasn’t integrated then. It really didn’t start integration in Baltimore city until 1969 and it dribbled in, like trickled down, you understand, now that’s the way that was, you understand.
But now people change, some people change for the best, most of them change for the best, but some of them got worser. Some of the younger generation got worser. You understand now, looks like one day they came together and then the younger generation, the more they, like the older they get, I’m serious, the more they, like the older they get. . .we feel, we felt that we didn’t want you to give us anything, I didn’t want you to give me anything, I don’t want you to give me nothing now. Back in my day we didn’t want you to give it to us. “Get out my way and let me have the same opportunity, give me a chance at the same opportunity that everyone else has. Don’t give me any preparations, no preference.” I don’t even understand that word, don’t put it there. “Let me at it (laughing). Let me at it if I’m qualified, if I’m not qualified then I’m not going to try for it, but , but you get the feeling that I’m qualified and I’m ready, don’t hold me back, get out of my way now.”

Eric: Right

William: Because I’m qualified. But these people want you to hand them things on a silver platter, they don’t want to work for it, You can see it for yourself It doesn’t matter if they are Black or White. Asians, they will work for peanuts but they are coming on up, they’re coming on up. You can pay a guy a million dollars and he don’t know nothing.

Eric: What do you think about affirmative action? What do you think about that?

William: Well it all depends on how you look at something. “I’m qualified to do the job, don’t let color hold me back. If you have a white factory and they’re not hiring – I don’t think so.” We are American’s. We need a level field. yup. I am for affirmative action that way. This is my country too! I obey the rules. I obey the rules, I pay taxes. I worked hard, still do, a lot of charity work, so, I mean, why not? You understand? This is my country, you don’t owe me nothing, nobody owes the world anything.
I’m not bitter with the world. I love the world! I love America! This is my country, this is the only place I know. My people have died for this country, not only in slavery but in war. My sons, my daughters, many relatives, all of them. See, you understand see, we gave our share, I gave my share. This is mine, it’s mine, and I’ll fight to keep it mine, in fact I’ll die to keep it mine for my children. This belongs to me, this is mine. This desk here, it’s mine. You know, this is my country. Everyone for equal opportunity and “justice for all” I love that. You understand. If there is something you want me to do then give me the test. That’s what life is all about, that’s what life should be about. I don’t care what you look like, what race you is. We got people in here. We got some white, we got some Hispanics, Barbadians, believe it or not we got a guy here from Africa and he is white.

Eric: South Africa

William: I don’t know from where in Africa he is, but I see that he is treated like everyone else. We got Japanese. Did I say Barbados? We got a couple of Jamaicans, we got a good mix. We got some White. In fact we got more White than we got other, others. We get along, we never hate anyone here. We never hate anyone here.

Eric: Do you feel that as people get older they don’t look at color as much?

William: Correct.

Eric: Do they more look at the person inside?

William: Yeah, well you see, but when a person get’s older he seems to realize that the lies that they were told when they were young were lies. You know, when I was a kid my mother told me and my father told me “don’t mess with them.” Why? “They’re no good. You can’t trust. . .”

Eric: They may be telling you this from their experiences too.

William: Well I know that some of them are lies.
Eric: Right

William: You understand, because his mother taught him the same thing. They mothers taught them the same things and then it passed from generation to generation. That’s not only on blacks or whites, that for everyone. My mother would say “see him, he got lice in his ear” you know like you see dandruff sitting on his shoulder, I’m serious, “you see him.” We would see them out on the street cars ‘cause even they were segregated. Ride anywhere you want, you could go anywhere, but, then she would point to the white kid and say, “see that – that stuff is crawling – he’s got some kind of disease,” it looked like they had some kind of disease. That’s when everyone would say, “you never want to go outside your race” you understand. Then when you on the job people say “nigger this” and “nigger that.” White guys would say “nigger this” and “nigger that” and it would be OK, we were fighting. You would get a fight, especially out of me. There was a time I couldn’t take that word. You couldn’t call a black a “nigger,” or you couldn’t call me “Black,” I was a “Negro.” If he said it to me I would look at him. I’m not going to stoop to your level by getting mad at you or fighting you because you can say anything you want to say that don’t make it true. Look it up what it means in the dictionary, the word nigger, right, look it up. But you don’t owe me nothing and I don’t owe you nothing. I don’t owe them nothing and they don’t owe me nothing.

Eric: You know how you were saying that when you are younger that you hear a lot of words calling you this and that, do you think that now people still think it but they just don’t say it or do you think people don’t uh. .

William: Uh yeah, we used to call each other niggers. Yeah, white guys call white guys nigger. They don’t care, because I used to do it all the time I guess. I used to be the foreman, but then I just got tired of telling people what to do, but I wanted to keep working because of my pension.
See I wanted a union pension, I wanted to sure up my pension because, I’m not talking about social security, I’m talking about my pension from the union for hospitalization and stuff like that, get my teeth for nothing. I don’t have to pay for it so I’m looking out for my future. See, I had a couple of guys fired. Because they were white, a couple of boys from West Virginia, they never heard that before. You know. I said, “look at how you’re acting” I said “I’m not any different.” Imagine that, he was so ignorant, I said “if wanted to, I should call you a nigger.”

Eric: What did he say?

William: I said “nothing can stop it.” After that he went to night school. He come to be an operator. That’s no joke. I know where he is right now, I know him real good. He calls me up every once in a while, he’s been to my house and ate dinner, and he was white.

Eric: Have there been a lot of people in your lifetime where they had words with you but after they got to know you as a person you changed their whole view on how, you know, Black or Hispanic whatever because of you?

William: A lot of guys.

Eric: Because they see that, you know, this guy is a good person, and. . .

William: Look, if you was told like I was told, “you stay away from those people”. . .See, the more people you know the better you understand them. You understand, your eyes open up. If I can eat a can of chicken noodle soup, and open the can, you can eat the same can of chicken noodle soup. I need the same things that make me survive. What makes me different? You got a brain, I got a brain. We all speak the same. We go to the bathroom just like you. I make babies just like you. I break my leg, you break your leg, it’s all the same. You understand, it’s hocus pocus.
If you keep on building it and keep on building it you will have that superiority complex or otherwise an inferiority complex. The one that has it is the one that stirs up the trouble. You understand, I don’t agree with anyone having a superiority complex or feeling superior to anybody. You understand. You can do something stupid and get yourself in jail. So you feel superior in there. People will act like they superior and then still feel inferior. A man needs to reevaluate himself and get an education then come up so he doesn’t have to feel inferior. And I can hold a conversation with anybody, on any kind of topic, political, constructive, I’ll be anything that I want to be right now, and I’m an old man. I’ll be anyone that I wanna be.

A hoodlum and people will say “why does he want to do it, what will he accomplish?”

Because I used to do it – right down here on Aisquith Street here. I used to get out there and shine shoes, sell shopping bags, you understand. I would be out there, street fights, alley fights, what have I accomplished? Patterson Park, right up there, we used to call it “Sheep Hill.” They didn’t allow blacks in Patterson Park. We didn’t have no cars in those days. We had a horse and wagons. Guys would have trucks. We would all get in them and go up there storming mad. We broke down that, we broke through that.

This building you in, I’m gonna give you this building, I’m gonna give you this place history This building right here was Arundel’s Ice Cream Store.

Eric: This whole building?

William: All this wasn’t this high. This is where Arundel’s ice cream parlor used to be at. Next to it was they used to sell dried fruit.

Eric: yeah, you talked about it when you came to our class.

William: Apricots, cod fish, stuff like that, shoe shop, deli, and a clothing shop. You couldn’t come in here and eat or sit down and eat your ice cream. you had to take your ice cream and go, or your sandwich and go. Everything you ordered you had to take to go.
Eric: Would you still come here though?

William: uh, huh. We didn’t have no other choice. Where else were we going to go? We didn’t have our ice cream parlor. Right there, little junk stores like my grandfather’s was right across the street. See that little street right there? That’s Monument Street, yeah that’s Monument Street. My grandfather owned a store there. Seafood, I don’t know shrimp. Crabs, crabs once in a while, but I don’t know, no shrimp. Trout, flounder, steakfish and stuff like that. And you didn’t sell them, fish wasn’t sold by the pound you see, it was sold by the bunch. You would get a bunch of fish. they would take a string and tie it on the bottom. You don’t know nothing about that though do you?

Eric: uh, uh. Ever since I have been growing up it’s been by the pound

William: And it was 10 cents a bunch.

Eric: Good price!

William: Ten cents. And those were the kind of stores that a black man, the only store that blacks could have. On Central Avenue, three blocks from here up, you understand, grapes and all were sold by the bunch. A clip. There was nothing sold by the pound. White potatoes, onions, stuff like that it was by the peck, half peck, and uh, half a bushel you understand, just like that, a little round thing. A peck and half peck, that’s the way that was. That the way it was back in those days. fish was by the bunch, crabs and stuff like that was always by the dozen. So those were the kind of stores we had, we may have had a couple of restaurants, you know called “home cooked” restaurants. That’s what we used to call them. Otherwise than that we were pretty much segregated.

Eric: During this time when you couldn’t eat inside the ice cream parlor, or you would have to get you ice cream or sandwich and take it out. When you and your family would get together was there ever any resentment there towards this?

William: No, we didn’t think about it.

Eric: Or did you just think that this was the way things were?
William: As a matter of fact we would get angry. But we weren’t all hooting and hollering. Understand now. As far as our bands we had our own. We had our own places. The Hippodrome, we couldn’t go in there. You want to know the truth, they always say that Elvis was the “king of rock and roll,” not in my book. I never listened to an Elvis record. Never, never bought one.

Eric: How about the Jazz places, um uh, on Charles Street, did you ever go to the Mt. Royal theatre or anything like that?

William: We got our own. We used to use Pennsylvania Avenue. It was the black spot. We had twelve theatres, the Lincoln, the Harlem... and uh, and Park Theatre. That was white once then they changed it into black. And that was that one. We had plenty of them. And see we had all the big top entertainers. Mahalia Jackson.

Eric: Sometimes you’ll be watching TV and still see commercials for Mahalia Jackson.

William: Mahalia Jackson, Lewis George, Lester Young, all them come from Harlem. Leena Home, Ella Fitzgerald, we had time for them. The only people there that I met listened to alot of music like Charlie Barnhardt, he was white, I listened to him; I listened to Charlie Walker, he was white. That was when they had Swing. Then they changed it from Swing to Jazz. That’s when I really got into it. I like Jazz: Dizzy Gillespie Lester Young, Duke Ellington, Slim Stewart. You never heard of Slim Stewart huh? That’s all the stuff I know about. I like the oldies but goodies. But seriously I never bought a Beatle record, I never bought an Elvis Presley record, Because during that time I was prejudice, I really was, yup.
People used to watch the Jelly Bean show, I never watched the Jelly Bean show, unless they had black folks. One week they would have black songs then every other week they would have white songs. One day of the week they would have black songs. Well just like commercials, let’s look at commercials, face it, look at it from your perspective, how long did it took for black folks to drink Coca Cola? Well we would drink it, but how long was it before you saw a sign that was advertising Coca Cola by a colored person? When did you see it?

Eric: Ever since I started noticing that kind of stuff I have seen it, usually. Maybe in the last ten years it was a lot more.

William: I’ll tell you when it started, the advertisement for Coca Cola had Nat King Cole on the shelf, Coca Cola hired King Cole. You ever heard of Nat King Cole? That’s when they first started advertising . . hold still.

Eric: When do you think that the most change happened, between what ten year period let’s say ‘50-‘60, ‘60-‘70, ‘70-‘80, ‘80-‘90?

William; Sixties, 60’s and 70’s. People got to start making a decent living. Wages went up, good jobs, people started booming. The last of the ‘80’s and the ‘90’s, look like it’s trying to fall apart. You know, like, you got, drugs I guess is doing something to them. Well I mean you got more people in jail, it’s overcrowded. Every time you turn around they’re going and nobody wants to be responsible for nothing. Nobody wants to take the responsibility. Like, I’m responsible for everything going on in here. I’m responsible. The buck stop’s here, I tell them that, the buck stop’s here. But be responsible on your own and we can do something, you understand? If you just see a trash on the floor, and you walk over it and drop something down yourself, it’s accumulating, and sooner or later what do you got?
Eric: Too much trash.

William: You got a building that is gonna fall apart. and I understand some of the rugs and stuff being worn out but I can get the order in here to replace the rugs in the hallway and stuff and we gonna put tile all over and that should last a while where the rugs lasted 5 or 7 years, it’s time for new. So it will last unless somebody scars it up or cut’s it up. But I’ll go down there and say we’ll get out cheaper that way. But it’s just like you got to be responsible for it, somebody’s got to be responsible because nobody wants to be responsible. I take responsible for everything in here. Just like your responsible for this time we’re talking right now, and you’re held accountable for what you come out here with. They sent you, and you’re accountable. And he is accountable for you. He is accountable for keeping you out here, you’re accountable for coming out here. But you’re taking on the responsibility, and that’s a big one because everybody doesn’t want to talk to you about the stuff that we’re talking about. When we were all together, we were giving it to you right.

Eric: It was an interesting group

William: huh

Eric: Your group was an interesting group.

William: We all lived in Black neighborhoods. The only people who were White were the store owners. Serious, the place across the street was a pawn shop, and the place across the street from it, I mean right down from it. . . and he sold fresh fruit and vegetables like that. Down the street was the church, down the street further was the bath houses.

Eric: Could you talk about drugs, and how drugs has affected the community around you and when it started getting bad, and what it’s done. What do you think about the future about what can happen with drug issues in this area, and all over the country?
William: I can’t speak for all over the country but I can speak for this area. Drugs is bad for not only the black population but for the whole population of Baltimore city. It’s in the black race as much as it is in the white race, I don’t know who’s it is. I don’t know which is worse than the crack. Because even the kids are getting something. The drug addicts are going out there, you can see it every day over here, in the projects, this is the Black projects, you got a few whites living in there but you see it every day. For what reason, there is no reason to be shot at. Family support, and the check is to pay the rent, and to feed the children, Not to supply no drugs to no one. You understand, the children are being neglected, or some of them are being malnutrition- what do you call it, malnutritioned, you understand, and the children don’t know no better. They see their mother and father fighting, they see their mother and father cussing, they see their mother and father snorting it or shooting it. Heck I don’t know what they doing, snorting it or shooting it.

Eric: When did you first start seeing drugs becoming noticeable, like this “this is gonna be a problem.” Like what kind of problem it is now.

William: I seen it years ago. I seen the girls, what made me notice it he most was because I seen the girls, start to use it. When you see children being neglected, that’s when you know that you have a big problem on your hands, but nobody pay that no mind though. When you see the young starving because of drugs, that’s the biggest problem we ever had. And then when women start, not that they aren’t human beings, but when they start neglecting, because a mother back in my days, mothers were mothers, you understand. “Hey, come on here boy, don’t do that you listen” because you didn’t see people do these kind of things, you understand. Because you didn’t see people calling each other a bunch of names or children calling each other a bunch of names. “Come here motherfucker.” Excuse my language. “You little so and so, come here!” You didn’t see
that. You got a whippin’. You saw some leather come up there you understand, they
got you, but, children were fed, it may not have been steak and caviar, hey, you
understand, it was no more than some bread and soup, we was fed, everybody would
get around the stove and get warm, o.k., right? But that was family, you understand. It
just wasn’t, you gotta share with them, there wasn’t no drugs, you understand. You
might see, as a matter of fact they couldn’t afford whiskey, they used to drink that what
do you call it, uh uh?

Eric: Moonshine?

William: Yeah, they couldn’t afford that stuff No.

Eric: What do you think about, do you think there are not as many family values that has alot
to do with it?

William: Yeah, Yeah, family values. You understand like you got a family, you need a certain,,
right? You come home and you got certain things that you responsible for, fixing
things. Like I used to come home and chop wood. On Fridays I would go get coal, run
earrands for people, that was my job, I would get all scratched up because I would move
sofa’s and stuff like that. And I did that. And then when it came a certain time at night,
you were in. Not in bed, but you were in. As long as we didn’t have any gas heating,
we didn’t have any gas and electric, at all. We had to build coal and wood fires. You
understand. We were in at nine o’ clock and we were hitting the bed. because we were
cold in the winter time. In the summer time, we didn’t know nothing about no air
condition, man you had a fan all right, a piece of newspaper or a piece of cardboard,
you had a fan, yeah it was your fan. There was no refrigeration, we had an ice man, you
understand. On the weekend, my uncle bought a 50 cent piece of ice. During the week
we had to settle for a nickel piece or no piece, to put in the ice box. That’s the way that
was.