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Interview

of: Ralph Parham, Sr.

by:

date:

Q How long did you live or work in the Penn/North community?

A How long have I been working in Penn/North?

Q Yes.

A I've been in that now for four years.

Q You mean been in the organization of Penn/North?

A Yes, been in the Penn/North organization.

Q Well, how long have you lived in the area?

A Oh, I lived in the area since 1947. I moved here in 1947, 39 years.

Q Did you live in the same place.

A The same house.

Q Oh, where was it?

A 1710 West North Avenue.

Q Is that right?

A Yes.

Q What are some of your earliest memories of Penn/North? About the area where you live. What are some of your earliest memories?

A Oh, the earliest memories. When I first moved there it was the 1700 block. Only one black family. As time passed, they moved out. The whites moved out. For instance, when I first moved in there, I bought the house. Was a gentile & Jewish family. It was two complete apartments. You had to give people 90 days for them to find another place to move. So this gentile, he lived on the first floor and it had three rooms and a bath on the first floor and four rooms and a bath on the second floor. The Jew lived on the second floor. And this gentile lived on the first floor. So the gentile, the Jew asked me, he said could he stay until he found a place to move. The gentile, he didn't want to stay. In fact, I wanted the place anyway, because I only had one child at that time. And I wanted him to move as bad as he wanted to move. So he moved out, and the Jewish family lived there with us for more than two months.

Q Well, as far as your earliest memories are concerned, what did it look like?

A Oh, you mean, how it looked to the eye. North Avenue had all trees, beautiful trees. Fulton Avenue was the same. Fulton Avenue was much wider than North Avenue. North Avenue was beautiful because it had all great big large trees and all the limbs protruded almost to the middle of the street on each side of the street. And just like today like we have had a you would say, 90, 95 or maybe 100 or so degrees, you would hardly feel that because of all the shade. All shade, from the middle of the street you couldn't, you know it seemed like you were, for instance that corner up there,

you would think that you, well, the limbs would meet from each side of the street.

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| | <p>And then it was quiet. You only had the 19 car. It was a new car at that time, real quiet. Ai: that time it wasn't a number one highway which it is today. Number one went out to Franklin Street and out to Mulberry Street. That was, later on, after, then they changed it. But it was very, very quiet, very nice here and pretty. During that period of time we had (can't decipher).</p> <p>On the north side, where I live, we put all our trash out front. But during this time, they had motorcycles, a street car motorcycle and they used to come to the back door and pull the trash out in the back. Because the alley in the back, down to Bruce Street is real narrow, but it's not wide enough for any cars to pass through. But that is why they used the motorcycles that used to come through to pick up the trash. Now, we put the trash out front.</p> |
| Q | What changes have you seen on North Avenue that are positive or negative? |
| A | Positive. In fact when I moved, like I'm telling you, it was all home owners. Later on, after the whites moved out, then the blacks came. During this period of time, you could rent some of the houses were for rent, some were to be sold. And during this period of time, a lot of people came in and rented, and after that they started to buying again. Now, it's almost rental again. |
| Q | So what positives can you say about rental versus ownership? Does it mean that. . . |
| A | Rentals versus ownership is that people usually rent don't take care of the property. It's not like you own. Now, right now we got many owners again, starting again, but we do have right many peoples who are still renting which is below me, towards Fulton Avenue. They are still renting. And it just makes it very difficult when somebody is renting and they won't take care of the property. |
| Q | What businesses have you seen come and go? Which ones have stayed? |
| A | Businesses, now, right on the corner when I moved there, right on the corner of Fulton Avenue and Mount Street, they had an antique, it was owned by whites at the time, this antique place. It was beautiful, very expensive prices where there. Right on the corner of Fulton Avenue, Pennsylvania Avenue and Mount Street. Mount Street runs right out to, I can't think of the name now, but after that a black man bought it. In fact, he bought the building. He ran it for years because he had studied it. |
| Q | What are antiques? |
| A | Like furniture, antiques. Furniture and whatever. |
| Q | What other businesses did you see here you wish had stayed in the community that had to leave? |
| A | Well, right now in that block, I really don't know of any businesses, oh, there was one. Right on the corner of Fulton Avenue and North Avenue on the west corner, the south corner, they had a drugstore there. Which is no drug store now. And after it burned – some years ago in the 60's, during the time when somebody got angry about Martin Luther King you know, they burned it all. They set fire to it. They should never have did it. But that drugstore was real goad for us then. That drugstore right on the corner. |

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| Q | Describe what living on North Avenue and Pennsylvania was like and what year or years are you describing? |
| A | Living on North Avenue?. |
| Q | Like if you could choose any year or anything, if you could just give us a description of what your life was like, like maybe going to school back, just how it was. |
| A | Oh, well, during that time, you take 1949 and 1950, that was just about my rough years. During this period of time I had six children. You see, and, I was working at Sparrows Point and I wasn't able to buy a car. Riding the street car, riding number one down to Pearl Street I think it was and then we would get the twenty—six all the way down to Sparrows Point. It was rough due to the fact I was working around the clock. Working from 7:00 to 3:00, 3:00 to 11:00 and 11:00 to 7:00. Now, riding the street car, during that period of time in order to relieve the fellow that is working your job, I had to leave home around 3:00 o'clock in the morning. You stand on the corner 3:00 in the winter time it is some kind of cold when you stand there waiting for the street car. For instance, standing on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue, North Avenue and Fulton Avenue, at 300 o'clock in the morning and then go down and wait for another street car to take you all the way down to the Point, it was right cold, those cold mornings. Usually we don't have cold winters like we had back then in that period. We have good weather now, I'm telling you. |
| Q | Well, do you think the summers are hotter now? |
| A | Yes. Summers are hotter now. We didn't have this kind of weather back then. Like we have now. During this period of time, 1950, I went to automobile mechanic school. |
| Q | This was a high school you went to? |
| A | No, I went to high school in Virginia. |
| Q | Here is what I am trying to say. I was going to school you know. I was working this shift like I just stated. I start days at 7:00 to 3:00. Now, we would work until 3:00 o'clock. Now, in order for us to go to school, we had to put in five hours a day in school, in the classes. And when I came from work, you see I left home around about 3:00 o'clock and I came back to the school around 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon. Now, I go to school for them five hours a night. Right? Now, that was when I was working days. When I was working 3:00 to 11:00 I would leave home around 8:00 o'clock in the morning, five hours in school. Leave school and then go to work. Then from work back home. And usually get back home around one o'clock. Go there from the school when I was working 11:00 to 7:00. We would leave work and go to school. Couldn't go home. Five hours in school, then come home and go to sleep. And then you got to leave around 7:00 o'clock to go back to work. I did that for two years. |
| Q | How did your wife and family make it? They hardly got to see you? |
| A | They certainly didn't. They hardly saw me, but that was something I wanted and you had to work hard to get it. That's the only way you could get it. I couldn't quit the ob because I had six children. So if you wanted something, you had to work for it. Just like you youngsters. If you want anything, you got to work for it. Nobody is going to |

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| | <p>give you anything. And don't hold your hand out and think somebody is going to put something in it. Because they are not. You are going to have to work hard and get whatever it is you want. Now, I've got mine, and I trained my children. I trained my children to do more than one thing, to learn more than one thing— cause you don't know when things are going to change. Like go to school again, you jus: get sornethin else. That's what you have to do.</p> |
| Q | <p>How has transportation changed over the years and how does it affect the community?</p> |
| A | <p>Now? Transportation is great, man. Right now if I wanted to, I could go up and catch the subway and be downtown in about six minutes. I used to have to catch the 13, the 19 or the 7 and stand on the street waiting for each one of those buses, twenty—five or thirty minutes. But now I can catch the subway and be downtown in six minutes.</p> |
| Q | <p>What has the political climate been in the Penn/North community present and past? Like, when you first came here, how did the political powers affect this community?</p> |
| A | <p>Well, I'll tell you. When I came here, when I lived on North Avenue it was only trash collected. You didn't have water, too much water. There wasn't too much hot water. You heat more by coal. And we didn't have a black. We didn't have one black person that worked on the Trash. The majority of those was Hungarians. And it was a dirty job. You could stand on a truck, like a dump truck and somebody would throw ashes up to you to catch them and dump them inside the truck. Well, you could see what you would look like at that time. If they didn't have a black, and that was a job.</p> <p>What I'm trying to show you is that that was a job. Even a black couldn't get that job in 1939. And we can see what we have today. We have truck garbage. We have men on the job. It wasn't a black policeman on the police force. And the first black policeman that was put on the force, they were put in plain clothes because they didn't want to let the public know that they was policemen. In a blue suit. There were no blacks in 1938. So the political changed. And right now you can see our Commissioner is black. Commissioner Robinson. And you didn't have a one. At that time we didn't have anyone to represent us. We didn't have no senators, no politicians, nobody. Whatever rules and regulations that was made you didn't know a thing about. You didn't know what was going on until it happened. At that time none of the laws was made for us.</p> |
| Q | <p>What are your memories for entertainment in the community such as the Met, Wilson's, Chauncey's, Nate's and Leon's?</p> |
| A | <p>Where were they?</p> |
| Q | <p>Do you remember those as far as being entertainment?</p> |
| A | <p>Oh, Wilson's, when I moved here we couldn't go to Wilson's.</p> |
| Q | <p>Why?</p> |
| A | <p>Because we was black. You couldn't. Read's had a drugstore on the opposite corner there. And they had a fountain there and you couldn't sit in there and get anything. On the opposite side of the street, I forget that other place,</p> |

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| A | Of that school at that time? At that time the school was not on the qualified list. In other words, if you graduated you took another course to come up to get into college. Due to the fact that the one simple reason was that the library was not too strong. And the school belonged to a church. |
| Q | Do you attend church in this area? |
| A | Yes, I am chairman of the trustee board at Memorial Baptist Church. |
| Q | What impact do the churches have or did have on the community? |
| A | Well, our church does do a whole lot, not as much as they could do, but they are doing a lot for the needy. We have got a helping hand club that on every third Thursday we give out clothing, and food. And we help out during the week whenever somebody can prove that they need something before the next Thursday. |
| Q | What was the ratio of blacks and whites when you first moved here. |
| A | I answered that a while ago. When I first moved here, and you are talking about my block, you are talking about North Avenue, they were mostly all white. Two black families. But now it is all black. |
| Q | Do you prefer the Penn/North area of yesteryear or now? |
| A | Well, some I don't and some I do. The beauty of it I prefer back then. Not only do we get a lot of traffic, because North Avenue is a number one highway now. But it wasn't then. It wasn't a thoroughfare like it is now. You didn't have this. Right now, it can take five minutes to cross North Avenue. Or more. Then you could walk across any time you liked. We didn't have all that heavy trucks and all the dirt like you got now. We didn't have that. That I would rather have. |
| Q | Was there as much crime and violence? |
| A | No, at that period of time you could leave your doors open. We slept in the park. We could go up to Druid Hill Park and stay all night. Down by the lake, the reservoir. You could go down there and stay all night. Nobody would bother you then. Never in my day did I thought it would be like this. It's changed. |
| Q | How did segregation affect the community? |
| A | Well, I mentioned that to you. Wilson's. Wilson's was a first class seafood place, right? And I would like seafood just like anybody else would like seafood. I mean we didn't have, I mean black people didn't have it and they would like to have gone in there, too. And I would like to have gone to Read's at that time. And sit at the soda fountain, but I couldn't. So I didn't like that. |
| Q | And living in the neighborhood, too? |
| A | Tickner's, I forgot to tell you about that. Tickner was a southerner. Blacks started moving into North Avenue, on North Avenue. Tickner had a petition for people to sign that no blacks would live on North Avenue. He tried to keep blacks off. Chinese people had a laundry next door and they told us that Tickner had told them to sign |

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| | <p>this about blacks on North Avenue. And she told him this about blacks on North Avenue. And she told him that she wasn't going to do that. Because blacks hadn't done anything to them. Why should she do something like that?</p> <p>So he told <small>(can't decipher)</small>.</p> |
| Q | <p>What changes would you like to see occur?</p> |
| A | <p>I would like to see drugs go on back. And building a high rise on Pennsylvania and North. That's what I would like to see. A senior citizen home.</p> |