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Interview with Freda Halderon

December 3, 2006

Interviewer: UB history student

Transcriber: Nora Feinstein

Interviewer: All right. So tell us your name.

Halderon: Freda Halderon.

Interviewer: And...

Halderon: I'm born in Baltimore, lived in Baltimore all my life. I'm one of eight in a family of middle class America. I'm... I was married at the time of the riots; I was married with five kids.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: My husband worked at Bethlehem Steel. We were...considered middle class, middle class income. And life was...sort of hectic, because of the Civil Rights Act [of 1964] and a lot of other things, you know, with Martin Luther King and Stokely Carmichael and all of them combating with each other.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: Life was sort of confusing, but as a housewife and mother of kids, I mostly concentrated on just raising the children. I would listen to the news and try to stay updated on the different things: the Black Panthers, Southern Leader...Leadership Conference [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]. And it was Martin Luther King that most of my interest was in, Martin Luther King. Because I think what he...what he was practicing and considering was civil rights for all Americans.

Interviewer: Okay. What was your...profession?

Halderon: Housewife.

Interviewer: Yeah, you said that already, didn't you?

Halderon: Yes.

Interviewer: Sorry. And tell me just a little bit, like, how the city of Baltimore was before the riots, like...

Halderon: Well, it was... Sort of, if you were black, you knew that you had to live within a totally black atmosphere. It wasn't... Housing was...

Interviewer: Like, segregated? Or was it...?

Halderon: Desegregated. You sort of knew if it was...in certain areas that you know, you couldn't go there and rent.

Interviewer: Like which...which areas, would you say?

Halderon: The parts of it would've been southern Baltimore.

Interviewer: Like sort of, like, in the Brooklyn area?

Halderon: Yes. Brooklyn, South Baltimore, the lower parts of South Baltimore.

Interviewer: That's where... Hanover Street?

Halderon: There you go. Hanover Street, Pratt [Street], Baltimore [Street]. I can't think of the other streets in that area, but mostly down in that... Pulaski Highway. Pulaski.

Interviewer: Pulaski Highway, yeah.

Halderon: The lower part of Pulaski Highway.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: Patterson Park.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: In that area, you definitely knew that you couldn't move there, you couldn't rent anything there, you couldn't live there. So, even though...if you tried, it was one large real estate company: Goldsecker.

Interviewer: Mmhmm. Yeah.

Halderon: They would not rent to...

Interviewer: ...Blacks at all.

Halderon: ...A black person.

Interviewer: Mmhmm. That's... Tell me now just about, like, the state of Baltimore when MLK was alive, when he was marching, and things like that. Was it... Did you see a difference in, like, the people—especially the black people—or was it sort of just... Was it calmer, I guess I'm asking you for?

Halderon: No, it wasn't calm. It was sort of...people were sort of in between and et cetera. We had a lot of leaders and et cetera, and I can't call their name presently or recall their name right now, but they were trying to...break the barriers. But as things was happening in the south of the United States, it was kind of hard to focus on what was happening in Baltimore as to what was happening all over the country, really.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: Like Alabama, you know, the kids going to school in the Brown v. Board of Education, 1954], George Wallace, the governor of... [Alabama]. You know, and he was highly prejudiced. So, it was hard to really concentrate on just Maryland. You just felt like it was a total spectrum, a total United States and it's prejudiced. And when...even when you went

for jobs and et cetera, you feel their...you felt their prejudice. And certain jobs, you didn't... you knew not to even go to try to...

Interviewer: Try out for...

Halderon: Yeah. To try to, you know, get. Because you knew it was an impossibility for you to get those jobs.

Interviewer: Okay. What were your takes on [Governor] Spiro Agnew, like before the riots?

Halderon: Well, I have to be honest with you. I didn't vote here for him because he had a bad reputation in...in Maryland. He had a bad reputation... So I really never, never cared for him. And at that time, I weren't a voter. I was registered, but I wasn't voting.

Interviewer: Mmhmm. Can I just ask you, like, why? Why you didn't vote?

Halderon: Because it was...so much confusion. And then, really in a whole lot of sense, you were almost frightened...because you were scared to vote and if you were...if it was gonna be counted.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: So you just didn't vote...

Interviewer: Okay.

Halderon: ...Because the majority of the time, who you didn't want...definitely if they were a Republican, would wind up...

Interviewer: Being in office anyway?

Halderon: Being in office anyway. So, your attitude was—I was young; it was very true at that time. But...I didn't care to vote. I said, "Why waste my time?" Because, definitely in the South, they're gonna talk about how votes didn't count. And you'd just feel as though yours didn't count [either].

Interviewer: Oh, okay. That was good. Now this time in the...during the riots, sort of give me like, a...if you can, like a timeline of...what you observed happening and...stuff like that.

Halderon: It was...it was fear and chaos in the whole community. And at the same time you are seeing things that's happening and saying, "Why would that be?" What is... What is the reason...When you saw your corner store go up in fire, you're saying, "Don't they realize that they're hurting us?" Because this is where we have to go to, you know, to...

Interviewer: To shop.

Halderon: Right. And...and you... During the time you just, you had a whole lot of fear in you and then the...fear of your family, your total family, and the safety of your own family. Because when you hear gunshots, shootings, all you're telling yourself is, "Duck down. Don't go near the window, don't go near the doors." And then you're trying to overprotect your children.

Interviewer: Mmhmm. Where— I'm sorry, now I'm not sure if you've addressed this already, but where were you...which neighborhood were you living in at that time?

Halderon: I was living in the heart of the ghetto... In the ghetto, then, the ghetto areas didn't have 'pecific name for certain areas.

Interviewer: For like, the neighborhoods and stuff?

Halderon: Right... Depending, it was the east part.

Interviewer: East... East Baltimore?

Halderon: East Baltimore.

Interviewer: All right. Do you remember which street it was around?

Halderon: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: Just to kind of get an idea...

Halderon: Yes. That was... between Preston [Street], Biddle [Street]... Harford Road.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So it would be like, like, Mt. Vernon, sort of? What we consider now?

Halderon: Oh no. Oh no.

Interviewer: Not that far down?

Halderon: No, not that far down. Come on up to...

Interviewer: Like, around [Johns] Hopkins, you mean?

Halderon: No... Look, think about... Bel Air Road.

Interviewer: Oh! So right at the top.

Halderon: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Halderon: Mmhmm. Sinclair Lane, the lower part of Sinclair Lane.

Interviewer: Okay.

Halderon: But either way, the...the street was Wilcox Street.

Interviewer: Okay. I'll write that down.

Halderon: But that was definitely the heart of the ghetto for East Baltimore.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, what type of, like, difficulties during the time of the riots did your husband face, if any?

Halderon: He faced a lot, because... He weren't able to move around the...you know, the streets as opposed to coming home and everything 'cause the curfew was that. So he had to stay on the job a lot of times. And then when he was working night shifts it was frightful for me, being home with five children by myself. So the neighbors sort of looked out for each other.

Interviewer: Now tell me about the troops. Did you ever see them, or have any contact with them, or?

Halderon: Oh. Oh, yes. No, I never had any personal encounters with them but they marched up and down the street.

Interviewer: On your street?

Halderon: Yeah. Yeah. All the streets. All the streets they'd march and then...it was certain times that you knew that they were making another round and another troop would come marching through occasionally. Tanks would ride through.

Interviewer: And on your street you would see tanks and stuff?

Halderon: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: What were, like, the ages do you think, like an estimate, of the troops. Were they young, or?

Halderon: They were younger. They were young. Lu said...Luther [a relative of Halderon's] said they were early twenties.

Interviewer: Like early twenties.

Halderon: Uh huh. At the... at the early twenties.

Interviewer: Do you think... Did you ever get a chance to like, look at 'em to see if maybe they were, like, rough-housing people, or were they...? Did you ever observe them doing anything to...?

Halderon: No. No, not in our small street. But you know, from neighbors and et cetera they said, you know, "A trooper's shot somebody coming out the bar, robbing the bar." Or, you know, settin' a fire some place... And then they had, in the neighborhood a Sears [Roebuck] was close to us. And they were talking about how they had rioted Sears and some people were pushing, like, refrigerators down the street, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Halderon: You know, all things like that: racks and racks of clothes. They weren't pushing a handful, they was pushing racks of clothing.

Interviewer: Like a whole thing.

Halderon: Right. And [that's] how some of 'em got arrested—shot.

Interviewer: From stuff like that. How many people do you think, or how many people do you remember hearing of that got shot?

Halderon: Well, in the neighborhood, you wouldn't hear—just one or two or three—you know, something like that. But it was, that was in the neighborhood but listening to the news and et cetera, you found out that it was quite a few. In fact, I think it was at least up to 700.

Interviewer: People that got shot and hurt and stuff?

Halderon: Yeah.

Interviewer: Now what do you think... 'Cause it's funny, we learned in class that there were six people that died and about another seventy to a hundred more injured.

Halderon: But...nationwide?

Interviewer: Oh, no no no. Yeah nationwide I'm sure it was...

Halderon: Nationwide.

Interviewer: That's what they said the count was in Maryland. Do you think that was accurate or...based on the stuff that you heard about and...?

Halderon: No. I think that's what the count would've been for Maryland.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Halderon: Yeah, probably. See, you have to realize we were going through a lot of things—racial things in Gary, Indiana [where there was a race riot in July 1968]...

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: And so many things that during the riots you...you...you were undecided if it was the right thing to be happening or the wrong thing to be happening. But only thing that mostly all of us older people, family-orientated people was concerned about [was], "Is this gonna be a civil war? Is this gonna be a civil war?"

Interviewer: Why'd you feel like that?

Halderon: We were doing a lot of, like, we're gonna get away from here type of things. 'Cause a lot of us had went to the banks and got money out and went to the market and got canned goods. But we didn't...we weren't prepared like Black Panthers, Stokely Carmichael and them, wanted us to be prepared—gun-wise and...you know, protection-wise. But we were, as far as family-orientated [people]; we wanted to have money, to be able to get away, and food.

Interviewer: What type of stuff were you hearing from...

Halderon: It was...

Interviewer: I'm sorry to interrupt you. What type of stuff were you hearing from Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers?

Halderon: That we'd have to get guns and arms and prepare ourselves. And we would...we weren't... A lot of us, we weren't thinking in that order. We were looking at it from Martin Luther King's...

Interviewer: View point.

Halderon: Right, from his point of view.

Interviewer: Now tell me just a little bit about after the riots—toward the, you know, it went through the week and people were shot and things like that and then the...once they started, like, making the National Guard people leave, what did you notice was happening?

Halderon: What your biggest thing is... You were frightful... You still was frightful. It took a good while before that feeling of, you know, of somebody might all of a sudden, you know, jump up and pull your... Stop you and, you know, take you to jail or whatever. So you still was frightful. And things didn't go on, like, on a regular schedule for, I guess a good while.

Interviewer: How long did the curfew stay on or did it...?

Halderon: Curfew was... that was at least a week. Between a week and two weeks.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: And then it was a resentful curfew, too. Because the county had one curfew time and the city, if you lived in the city, you had a special curfew time.

Interviewer: Really?

Halderon: ...But my husband had to come from the county to the city and he had mentioned that he had been stopped two or three times. Whenever he could come home, he was stopped two or three times.

Interviewer: In the county or in the city?

Halderon: Well, between, getting home—thirteen miles away from home—but between getting from Bethlehem Steel...

Interviewer: Bethlehem Steel.

Halderon: [In] that thirteen miles to home, he said he had been stopped three...three times. But it happened so, you know, he had his...his work and, you know, his curfew paper to clear him so he could. But it was a good while before you really feel confident within your community.

Interviewer: Okay. What kind of stuff did you notice was destroyed, like, around you in your neighborhood and then elsewhere...

Halderon: It was mostly...all business places...two liquor stores, grocery stores, corner grocery store. That was located on Preston Street. Up on Harford Road, the supermarket was burned down. But then after that, after the riots, everywhere you mostly went... If they hadn't already installed steel bars or walls in front of their businesses they were installing them.

Interviewer: What...

Halderon: And most of the places that was burnt down was, you know, they had to clean them out, gut them out. And some businesses was rebuilding in the exact [same spot]. But as far as [racial] prejudice still in the city, it still was there.

Interviewer: Do you think it was better or worse? Or was it just the same?

Halderon: It was the same after the riot but eventually...it got better. And they still could work on getting it better.

Interviewer: Mmhmm. I think you're right on that. Definitely.

Halderon: Right.

Interviewer: My guess is it was a little bit more blatant in that time.

Halderon: Yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah, and there were certain places you went, like if you went downtown... You couldn't go downtown and walk in any one of them stores, Huxler's and Hoschild-Kohn, without a salesperson walking up to you and saying, "Can I help you?" And then you could go right in [if you were] a Caucasian, walk in the store, and they're walking around the store and looking just like you want to look. So personally, to be honest with you, my thing was I didn't care to go downtown. I didn't care to shop downtown.

Interviewer: Just because of that reason, when you'd go to stores and that stuff?

Halderon: Yeah. Yeah. And you couldn't go and sit in even the Five and Ten Restaurant and eat.

Interviewer: Because of the same problem?

Halderon: Because of the same problem, but after the riots, you know, they gonna let you come in and sit but if you didn't order something right...right away... You'll... "You'll have to leave here," they would tell you to your face. I forgot the name of that restaurant, but...it was right on the corner and everybody used to love at that...you know, for lunching. But if you were black, before the riots, you didn't sit there. You ordered your food and then you...

Interviewer: Then you took it out?

Halderon: Took it out.

Interviewer: And after the riots you were able to sit in but it was kind of...?

Halderon: Yeah, you were able to sit but you ordered or you'd have to leave.

Interviewer: Okay. What... Did your...did your feelings change about Spiro Agnew after the riots?

Halderon: Oh, no. No, no, no. Because it's...it was like, he was just known within the black community that he was [pro] segregation and we just didn't have, you know, no personal feelings for him.

Interviewer: What do you think were...but... I guess a better way of asking the question is: do you think that the National Guard being in Baltimore had anything positive associated with it, with them, or do you think it was sort of like, they were received...? How were they received? I'm sorry, that was a really long question...

Halderon: They weren't received, they were... it was a negative attitude towards them. It was a very negative attitude towards them because I do remember an incident where more than... like, eighteen, nineteen-year-old teenagers approached one, you know, had threatened to... the National Guard. And once he realized he was going to be locked up, he sort of...he sort of backed off.

Interviewer: Right. And this is what I meant to ask you about when we were talking about during the riots. But did any of your kids have any run-ins with like, rioters or National Guardsmen?

Halderon: My kids?

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Halderon: No, they were too young. They were too young. They were... seven-years-old. The biggest thing you could ever do was stay upstairs, really. For real.

Interviewer: Okay.

Halderon: Come downstairs long enough to eat. Then you would [say], "Let's go back upstairs." 'Cause, you know, the shooting. You were scared for the shooting and everything.

Interviewer: Okay. Anything else you would like to add in terms of the riots or about the state of Baltimore now or...?

Halderon: The state of Baltimore now?

Interviewer: Mmhmm [Laughter].

Halderon: After being here for so many years? All my life? It's gotten better. It's gotten better. But it still could get even better.

Interviewer: Mmhmm. I also do think...

Halderon: I know you know the... The Inner Harbor, that whole entire area, was set up and designed for elite...would that be the right word?

Interviewer: Elite?

Halderon: Elite Baltimore.

Interviewer: And was it that way like, during, or before and after the riots?

Halderon: No... You just didn't go there and then, you know, it wasn't built up. Then, it wasn't built up. You know, it wasn't considered the Inner Harbor. All it was was dirty water.

Interviewer: Just a little place where boats kind of came in, pretty much.

Halderon: Right, right.

Interviewer: It wasn't, like, an attraction sort of thing.

Halderon: No.

Interviewer: So Harborplace and those things weren't there then?

Halderon: No. No.

Interviewer: Okay.

Halderon: Wasn't no entertainment and et cetera.

Interviewer: Okay... Anything else?

Halderon: No, but I love Baltimore, because this is my hometown and it's far better than during 1968. But the rioting and things that happened; I'm glad the way that they happened—that they did happen, and I'm glad it wasn't a civil war. But I think it turned a whole lot of things around for, as they say, African Americans. And it did make a difference, and thanks to Martin Luther King.

Interviewer: I'm sorry, but how so? How did it make a difference?

Halderon: Well, that's what I was telling you. You know, you can feel free to go anywhere you want, feel free to live anywhere you want. And what else? You can feel free to go and apply for any job without the feeling of prejudice, even though it might be there, 'cause it's still there today. But you...you sort of don't feel that feeling nowadays. And the young people nowadays don't realize just how well they do have it as opposed to how it was. But I love Baltimore and I don't think it's no better city in the world than Baltimore. You can visit all the cities in the world but because this is my home, I love it. You know, I love it ever since [then Mayor Martin] O'Malley been in office. I think he... He's been doing a fantastic job. He just really did a fantastic job. When [former Mayor] Kurt Schmoke was in office, he did a fantastic job. So, you know, for the last few years, it's been a good job.

Interviewer: Sounds good.

Halderon: And so I won't sound politician but I wanna sound like a politic...politician. Since [William Donald] Schaeffer's out of office [as comptroller], I think it'll even be better. And I had to say that real nice and loud. 'Cause I think it was time, honestly, for him to retire...For him to retire.

Interviewer: Okay. Well thank you very much.

Halderon: Okay, you're welcome.

Interviewer: It was really good.

Halderon: You're welcome. [Interviewer turns off video camera] Believe! Believe in Baltimore!
You shoulda let me say that!

Interviewer: Well you said it!