

Willie Mae Brown

Interviewed Mar. 9, 2008, Pack Memorial Library

Interviewer: Karen L. VanEman

We were using Andrea Clark's pictures of the East End, ca. 1972 as basis.

Karen VanEman: Tell us about this picture again.

Willie Mae Brown: We are here looking at the Eagle St. section, which was a part of the East End, East Side Redevelopment. Area. We see here the backside of the homes that was visible on Velvet St., and we look above them and we see the old Foundry Bldg. and the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church, which is of course a historical church because it has been there since 1918. And I might also add that it was built by the grandfather of Andrea Clark, who had the wisdom to collect these pictures and have them on display. If we look at the Mt. Zion Church, here to the right we see how close it was to downtown Asheville because here is the Jackson Bldg. pictured here. We also look at some of the substandard conditions of some of the houses, and we look at how they were situated. We look at the growth of weeds behind them; we look at white housing two-storied level apt. bldg. that was also occupied by various families. And if we look to the left here of the Church, below the Foundry Bldg., we see what is now South Spruce St., and we see how houses were situated on that street as well.

Sometimes we wonder about why Asheville not having renovated some of these homes and eliminated the crunch they have for low-income housing. Question for me. I tell you, unbelievable.

KV: How about this picture up here?

WMB: In the picture we are looking at here, we are seeing Mrs. Josie McCullough sitting on the front porch of her home, which was located across the street from Feldman's Grocery, and next door Dr. Paul's Bldg., which was destroyed by fire. And it was the first time I had had ever heard anybody screaming for their life, being trapped in a burning building. And . . . It was a tragedy.

KV: You had said he was a migrant worker?

WMB: He was one of the tobacco warehouse workers who came in during tobacco

season to work and he was renting a room there in Dr. Paul's when he got burnt to death.

KV: Was Dr. Paul an medical doctor dr?

WMB: No, he was just called Dr. Paul. He was a Black man who had the wherewithal to develop this bldg. and to use it as a form of income by renting rooms. Mrs. McCullough is sitting on her front porch; it was a green house, located, as I had said, right next to Dr. Paul's building, and it was also integrated housing, believe it or not, because it was two apartments, what we would now call a duplex. She lived in one apartment, and there was a white Jewish woman who lived in the other named Mrs. Fagan, who was also a property owner in the place. After having suffered a stroke, Mrs. Fagan was unable to talk, and she kind of did a howl-like thing, and we always thought that she was a witch--as a child growing up.

KV: Did Feldmans live above their grocery?

WMB: No they did not. It was a separate building. The Feldmans lived in the area where I am now living. I live on White Fawn Dr., and they lived on Buchanan, and I used to babysit with two of their children.

KV: Here's a direct shot.

WMB: Feldman's Grocery--here we're looking at Feldman's Grocery which sat on the corner of Eagle St. and Valley St. We can also notice from this photo that this was a congregating place for young people in the community. But if you will also notice, you will notice that there is litter on the ground that does not seem to bother anybody; and there was a need for such an environmental control and community pride where somebody would have possibly picked that paper and trash up. [Mrs. Brown has been a long-standing active Board member of Quality Forward.] Notice also that it was a protected environment, although Mr. Feldman was very friendly, the father's name was Sam Feldman, and when he passed away, his son Sidney Feldman took over the business. Sidney was very well known, very congenial to everybody in the community, very well liked. Having gone to that store, [I knew that] he had black employees. One was named McCoy, who was a butcher and meat cutter in there, and he also had an elderly white lady who worked there as long as she was able, named Essie Matthews. And that was where people went. And you will also notice something else that has disappeared-- phone booths on the street. Evidently they had their place if you had the ten cents that it

took to make a phone call, because there was not phones in every household, as we now see.

KV: Do you have any recollection of what this building going behind here was?

WMB: Going behind here was the coal yard which would have been situated in here. And there we come again on the building that housed the Southeast Commercial College; it was a broom factory. They made brooms here, and down the street was Southeastern Commercial College.

KV: And this is another shot outside Feldman's.

WMB: This is a shot of young men standing on the corner, and I only recognize one--that's Edward Smith's brother. They grew up on Velvet St., and he is now deceased. But we also see here --this is the backside of George Smith's Grocery. And you see people lived everywhere. There was a stairway; you can see the beginning of the stairway. And there was an apt. upstairs that was rented, where people lived.

KV: So there was competition for Feldman's right across the street?

WMB: Actually there was not, because one always had fresh foods and fresh produces and things, and the other one had somewhat picked over and like.

KV: This looks like housing then beyond.

WMB: This was housing. In-between here we see another coal yard, right here. See this bldg.? This was a coal yard and it was Allan's Coal Yard, and it was owned by a white man named Dewey Allan. He and his wife and son, named Charles, operated from here, and he sold bundles of kindling and bags of coal as well. And this too was part of the substandard housing along Valley St.--all of this is Valley St. [Eagle St. intersects with Valley on this picture.]

This is Eagle St. proper, coming down from Biltmore Ave. We see the men standing outside of the billiard shop, but on the lefthand side of that, it was a funeral home, a mortuary.

KV: Is this in the block immediately off of Biltmore?

WMB: Yes, it is in the immediate block.

KV: So these buildings are now gone.

WMB: These buildings are gone, and we now have small buildings under the parking deck that was erected there.

KV: the massage therapy school, the drum shop now. . .

WMB: . . . book store, barber shop, but it was always part of the main business district of the Block before integration took place. The owners of these building got older and were deceased, and their descendants were not interested in keeping the business going. And as a result of that, the Block fell into blight and despair. Then we had an entity that was interested in keeping the Block alive, so after the parking deck was there, Eagle Market Development Corp. was developed--community development corp. was given the authority to be the ruling factor in restoring Black . . .

KV: and making decisions about how to restore it?

WMB: Yes, yes. I was working with Quality Forward at the time Eagle Market was there, and I decided that we're going to clean up this place. People called--just write it off, because of the illegal activity that was taking place, because of the litter, and things that was there. So we went in and we decided that we were going to clean it up. At that particular time, Janie Wilson was working with Clean Communities with Quality Forward. We organized a cleanup, and we had people from elected officials from City Hall to people from the Police Department coming down, and even the winos and the prostitutes hanging out in the area took bags and helped to clean it up. And as a result we're coming into the renovation of the Block that you'll see even now.

WMB: [picture of "whites only" sign above public bathroom in the area of Vance Monument/Pack Square]: Segregation. In the Square.

Lavatories built underground--why they were built underground I do not know because even white women as you can see should not have felt safe going down there. But integration ended that, and they put "Women" here. But I must say although I was curious as to why they would go underground, I have never ventured down those steps. And this was before they put the pool that is there. And it's now undergoing renovation. I don't think they'll be there at all; I think they've already done away with those with what's taking place now with the Pack Square Conservancy.

WMB: This is one that I've talked about. We talked about the blessing of getting rid of substandard housing. This man lived in a dwelling on what was known as Dirt Eagle St., called Dirt Eagle because it was an unpaved area that went from the bottom of Hazard St. around Pine St. on the corner. This man is cleaning ash from a coal-burning stove, and we

can see what the condition of the house is. Houses did not have electricity; houses did not have any central heating components available; they did not have closets as you can see-- he has put nails in the wall and clothing is hung against the wall and on the back side of the door., We can also see the haphazard chimney going up that went out, and under any code from our Fire Dept., that would have been a safety hazard. But it was his method of keeping warm. No doubt he bought coal by the bag, kindling by the bundle to have heat in the facility where he lived. But you see him taking the ash out, and even the ash was not wasted because the ash went into a container and was poured outside on the street to protect people from sinking or sliding in the mud.

And below we have a self-reliant gentleman tilling the soil to plant a garden. Home gardens were a necessity, and nearly everybody in the neighborhood where I grew up grew their own vegetables. We grew collards, we grew sweet potatoes, okra, cabbages, you name it. The person who had the largest one was Mrs. Mary Forney, and she had a corn field, and she grew corn, and she had corn for the entire community,. She also lived in the area on Davidson St. That's directly behind the City Bldg. and the Jail House. There was a house in the middle of that and a pathway leading across Valley St., and I grew up in the three-tiered layer of Valley St. at 35 Valley, and it was directly across from Ingles Transfer and Moving--the Mayflower company. And Ray Ingle owned that.

And we did have this man's name ; I had written it down. That's Big Barber in his barber shop right next door to Feldman's Grocery. But he was the barber on the corner there, and he had a booming business, because when the men got paid on Sat's, they always went to get haircuts and some even got shaves there. A very prominent member of the community.

KV: He's well dressed: shirt, tie, suspenders, good trousers.

WMB: We always called him Big Barber because he was the person who gave haircuts and shaves in the community at the bottom of the street. We had others that were located up in the Block, in the area known as the Block. And we still have people there making their livelihood braiding hair and beauticians and things of that nature. So you see, it says life goes in a circle--the more things change, the more they seem the same.

Here we have the 'Valley St. Coal Co., which was behind Feldman's Grocery. Could not identify two of the men, but the one with the walking cane was commonly known

as Pipe Daddy because he always smoked a pipe.

KV: Oh yeah, he's got one in his mouth here in the picture.

WMB: He came to Asheville from Mc Cormick or Abbeville, SC, because he had relatives living in Asheville. When he came, as I said at the Front Porch conversations, because he was a little bit strange, and different--I prefer to say "different"-- his family were ashamed of him, and they wanted him to go back to SC. They put him on a bus from Asheville on the way back. But he got off in Hendersonville, and he came back to Asheville. So he wasn't really as strange and difficult as they made him out to be. And he lived his entire life in Asheville's East End area. I cannot say what his address was or even if he had one or if he stayed in this facility [in the picture]. But he knew my husband because my husband lived for a while in Abbeville, and he knew him. And when I was carrying my daughter, he would always ask questions that I thought was a little bit too personal, about when she was going to come. And I [would] think, 'you don't need to know it,' and I would keep going. But never ostracized him because he was a little unkempt and talked foolishness because he was God's creation, and he was a person with as much value as I have. When my daughter was starting to walk, he would always tell her that she was going to be a "typewriter." He was very intuitive because my daughter is not a typewriter, but she is in Human Resources at Ingles Administration, and she does typing and answering complaints for a living. But there we are.

[next picture] Means of making a living: some selling coal, bundles of kindling, some of the women being prostitutes, many of the houses selling liquor by the drink; many of them indulging in what was then known as "butter and eggs" which was a lottery, playing the numbers, and people were hooked on their and dependent on luck to better their quality of life.

KV: Now we're in Lord Auditorium looking at the pictures on the wall, starting with the pictures nearest the door. Before you get started, you were saying your mother got quite ill, so you had to take a whole semester off of high school.

WMB: Yes, enough time out of a semester where I was not able to pass.

KV: So your mother was the main income.

WMB: My mother--I was born in a single parent home.

KV: And how did she make a living?

WMB: She worked. She worked. She did cooking at the county courthouse cafe which was across there. And she did odd jobs, and she was a domestic working in homes, and she worked for a living. And I must say that although we were poor--I prefer to say "po' '-- p - o - apostrophe--we had never seen a hungry day. And I did not appreciate the hardships that my mother had in raising three children more-or-less by herself. But we never had a hungry day; we always had a roof over our head. And when I said that we had gotten put out of the substandard basement apartment at Valley St., we moved, and we moved back to Clemmons St., which was primarily the area where I had been born and where I had gone to elementary school, because I had gone to Mountain St. Elementary School. And it was a wonderful move, because we moved to a house that had indoor water, and it had electricity.

KV: So how old were you when that move occurred?

WMB: When we moved back, I was getting close to being the age to go to Jr. high school. Yes.

WMB: So we're at the beginning of the exhibit downstairs. And here it shows the bottom of Eagle St. And we see George Smith's Grocery; we see the phone booth in front of the Barber Shop. And in this little area here, where we see "much milder," where they were still advertising cigarettes and cigars, we see Albert's Cafe. Mr. Albert ran a cafe here, and he sold quick foods, hamburgers, soups, beans, and things of that nature. Businesses operating, and people making a living from them.

KV: And I'm sure Albert's has not gone back into business since urban renewal.

WMB: No, no, there is no more of that area of Eagle St., because we now have the City's Public Works Bldg. and parking lot is located on that area. Houses have been gone, groceries stores, small businesses, and everything has been restructured.

KV: And all the owners of the small businesses were never able to get back into business after the area got bulldozed?

WMB: The majority of owners were middle-aged and elderly at that time, and the majority of them are dead already.

Now we look at the vine-covered bldg. here looking from Velvet St. across to City-County Plaza. And we see the Jackson Bldg., we see the BBT Bldg., we see the City Bldg., we see what was then the Jail House--Buncombe County Bldg. But it was the Jail

House, and inmates were housed in the top part of this facility.

KV: And that's now the Court House.

WMB: That's the Court House, just the Court House. Don't see much else there to identify.

[another picture] And we see here what they spoke about as being the Nasty Branch, and where the stagnant water was. Are you going to have Trevor or any of the others to come to talk?

KV: Yes--oh, leave that for Trevor?

WMB: That was part of their presentation so we'll leave that.

And here we have a gentleman here tending his garden. And I believe his name was Felix; we called him--not Mr. Felix--but we called him Big Felix. And he was tending a garden on the back side of his home. And here we see where they also had livestock, because we see the chicken standing there. And people did raise chickens, some of them, for their livelihood.

KV: And this looks like, not brick . .

WMB: Cinder block; looks more or less like cinder block. And that must have been on down Valley St., because there was a little cinder block house and a lady who lived there known as Miss Pansy, who died here not too many years ago, who lived in that little house.

WMB: This facility I do not know, which must have been more recent, because look at the parking meters. And we know that's one of the old type parking meters that was installed along the street. I'm thinking more or less it must have been on the upper side of Eagle St., and these doors must have led upstairs to apartments where people lived above them.

[next picture] This was a house that was at the corner of Velvet St. and Eagle St., and people did live there, and we can see somebody relaxing in their bed.

KV: This wasn't originally a shop by any chance?

WMB: No, it was a residential place for someone.

[another picture] And here we see a man sitting on a corner. No doubt he's sitting in front of George Smith's Grocery there at the bottom of Eagle and Valley St., in the fork. And we see where they have meats and fruits and vegetables

KV: and money orders and groceries.

WMB: Fulfilling all needs, but we see that cigarettes was a big thing, and they still are a big thing in Black communities.

KV: Were cigarettes sold individually?

WMB: Yes, they sold them by/as singles, one cigarette at a time, depending on how much money you had.

Two women sitting in front of substandard housing. You can see the cracked pavement and everything else along here. So that was one of the curses that was removed when integration took place and people were settled in other areas of the city.

Here we have a full view of Velvet St. And we notice that some of the houses don't look too bad along here. We had several residences along here, because Velvet St. ran from Eagle St. down to Sycamore St. All of these houses have been removed, and there is no longer any housing along there, but it houses Public Works, and part of the property above that belongs to Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church.

KV: And these people were well enough off to have cars.

WMB: Yeah, these people were what is referred to as bootleggers. They sold whiskey from their homes. They had money. . . .

And this one I cannot identify.

KV: This is the woman with the [nylon] stocking cap on at her door looking out.

WMB: Here we have a winter scene looking down Velvet St. going up towards Hazard St. and Dirt Eagle. And we can see the various businesses here: the one we identified as Mr. Albert's, Big Barber's Barber shop, Feldman's Grocery on the corner, and we see here--and this was a really rough place owned by the Woods Brothers. One of them was crippled and the other one was not, and they ran a business out of there. And it was kind of risqué because as children we were not allowed to even look in that direction when we came up Eagle St. on our way to church.

KV: And this is the building [referred to as owned by the Woods Brothers] that has a 7-UP sign on it.

WMB: And here we had Ms. Minnie Grant and her husband who ran a cafeteria right here in this building here. It's no longer there, of course.

KV: So you had that and you had Albert's Cafe

WMB: All of it was black businesses because we could not eat in the facilities downtown

unless we went to back doors or stood outside.

KV: And is this the Petty Bldg?

WMB: That is the Petty Bldg. And the McMillans even ran a business there; she had a small dining area inside and it was enlightening to me at the presentation when Mr. Johnson said, "And they say that she wasn't very kind." [laughter]

And here's a young man here in a dirt-strong alley somewhere near the coal yard, no doubt, on the back side of the street. And the litter just makes me sick because I've been a member of Quality Forward for a number of years.

KV: Were you one of the founding members then?

WMB: No, I've been with them as a volunteer since 1988, and I have served two terms as Chairman of their Board of Directors, and I'm still there as an Emeritus Member.

The same litter-strewn area.

KV: It does look like the previous shot.

WMB: Now this street we all [participants in "The Twilight of a Neighborhood" program] thought was something different. We thought it was coming down from Pine St. And whether it's a part of Tuskegee or what I do not know. Somebody else will have to identify this. [This is a picture with three kids on the street.]

And here we have a full picture of Mr. James Walker, better known as Pipe Daddy.

And here we have Big Barber sitting outside, lounging in a chair outside his barber shop, but we see that he also was conscious of keeping the air clean because we see the plants in his window.

Here we have a service station that operated directly in the fork of Eagle and Market St., and this is the corner of the building where the two ladies previously seen were sitting in front of their apartment. And we can see that nobody bothered very much about sidewalks; nobody bothered about paving of streets or anything.

KV: So you had said the fork of Market and Eagle?

WMB: No, Valley St. and Eagle.

And here we have men sitting on the side of a building--no doubt that's at the top of Eagle on the side of the Savoy Hotel waiting for work to come to them--people seeking somebody to work by the day, or for whatever jobs there may be.

And this is on the bottom at James Smith's grocery where they're all sitting, and we

can see how they congregated on the corners and waited. And we can see the young girls here in conversation, but the old men paid no attention to children because they were so protective of children in the area.

And here we have Mrs. Josie, and who this is in the hat, I don't know if that's Mrs. Fagan or not. But as I said, you can see how the house was divided: doorway here for Mrs. Fagan, one over here for Mrs. McCullough.

KV: And Mrs. Fagan was a white woman.

WMB: Yes. And here we are at the top of Eagle St. We had cab stands, we had Breland's Fish House, we had barber shops, we had everything. And we can see what it looked like even back then. Now this was shot on the other side of the street--all of this was not taken away. We have a building there that houses a beauty shop; we have a jewelry store in this building on that side going up on the side of the building; and this is more near the end of Biltmore Ave. , going up.

KV: and Biltmore Ave. is up here, to the right side of the picture.

WMB: And here we have Mr. Holmes. Mr. Holmes had a horse and wagon, and he lived in the Chunn's Cove area. I have heard previously that before he moved to Chunn's Cove he lived in the Montford area. And he would make a living by going around plowing gardens for people to sow. And we can see his horse. Somebody said the horse was blind, but I was afraid of horses and never got close enough to tell whether he was blind or not.

And here we have other substandard living quarters which you will notice the stove; you will notice the shovel for taking out the ash; you will notice also the religious pictures mounted above the mantel, and I guess that was beautification efforts--some sort of way. And we can see the old-fashioned chair, which would be worth a fortune now, if somebody had it to refurbish it.

KV: And this is a warm morning heater?

WMB: Yes, a warm morning heater. You could bank the fire at night so that it did not have to be started all over with paper and kindling to get your coal ignited or what else. And then you would stir the ash and start your fire up, build your fire up from there. Little foot stool

KV: Down there at the base of the heater.

WMB: People craved comfort even then. No doubt this was the coal bucket sitting on this side.

KV: And calendar over here on the far right.)

WMB: I can't make out what this is [date]. Interesting. But one thing we know: that the people who lived in East End were all survivors. They were survivors because they developed skills that would keep them growing. They grew their vegetable gardens to have food on their tables. They worked when and if they could, and everybody came out ahead.

KV: And now that things have been dispersed, we've got young people who are growing up who've developed different kind of survivor skills.

WMB: Different kind. We' have young people growing up without values and without morals as well. And I wonder if sometimes the older generation have not made the younger generation weaker because we wanted life to be better and easier for them. And it's like a two-edged sword: you made it better, but in another sense you made it worse.

KV: Took away the ability to build strength.

WMB: Absolutely.

Questions about her biography

KV: Birth date?

WMB: 12/26/35. (

KV: Birthplace

WMB: Asheville.

KV: At home? Or in a hospital?

WMB: no, I was born at home, at 47 Mountain St. Was supposed to have been attended by a doctor named Dr. Thompson, but the weather was inclement, and he was unable to get there. And they sent and got the midwife named Mrs. Shaw, who helped my mother in the delivery.

KV: And were you the oldest child? youngest?

WMB: I was the youngest child, the youngest child in a family of four.

KV: And the other children?

WMB: They were all delivered by midwives. At home.

KV: Spouse's name

WMB: Bobby Brown. No middle name.

KV: Children?

WMB: Married names?

KV: O.K.

WMB: Linda B. Glaze and Robert E. Brown.

KV: Are they both here in Asheville?

WMB: No. My daughter is here in Asheville, and my son lives in Charlotte. He's with the police force in Charlotte.

KV: And your daughter works for . . .

WMB: She works at Ingles, Human Resources.

KV: Your education?

WMB: 12th grade at Stephens-Lee H.S. and I continue to learn through reading and workshops and so forth and so on.

KV: I can certainly believe that. And you graduate in '37?

WMB: '54. (

KV: don't know why I was thinking '37. I'm so sorry.

Occupational history? You've always struck me as a person who would have been a teacher.

WMB: I started out doing a bit of practical nursing. I married at 18 yrs. of age. And I did a bit of practical nursing for a few years. I had no particular training for it, but I had skills that I had learned in caring for my mother, and then I worked in a maid service at one of the hotels. Then I went into the business segment--the manufacturing segment. I went to work for Ball Man. Ball-Incon Glass Manufacturers. (

KV: And you did that for?

WMB: I did that for 28+ years, and I retired from there.

KV: So you did that while you were raising kids.

WMB: Yes.

KV: Your children: did your son who's in the Police Force, did he graduate from Asheville High?

WMB: Yes, he graduated from Asheville High; so did my daughter. Don't ask me the

years, because I'm terrible with dates. But at any rate, my daughter is a graduate of Shaw Univ. and my son received certification in law enforcement because he had been an embassy security guard in the U.S. Marines. And he came out and he got security certification from A-B Tech, and he was hired in Charlotte as a policeman, and he has been there ever since. He has been there 16 years.

KV: You had said you went to, as far as elementary. school?

WMB: I went to Mountain St. Elementary. School. It was not the facility that's there [now]. I went there from 1st through 6th grade, and I went to Asheland Ave. Jr. High School which is located across town. And I went there seventh and eighth grade. And we did not have buses picking us up at the doors and in the neighborhoods. We did not have snow days. We walked and played in the snow. And regardless of the conditions of the school or whatever else, we had qualified teachers, we had qualified teachers and we received an education. I went from Asheland Ave. Jr. High to Stephens Lee in the 9th grade, and I graduated from 12th grade in 1954.

KV: And some of your extracurricular activities when you were in H.S.--did you have time for some?

WMB: Yes, I had time for a lot of them. I worked--I had a job working after school, but I also had permission from my employers to have time off. And I was in the cheering squad; I was in the Drama Dept. I was president of the Crown and Scepter Club, which was our honor society.

Baptist Training Union . . . I have been a member of Mt. Zion Baptist Missionary Church since I was about three or four yrs. old, and I'm still a member there. Never thought I'd live to be one of the senior members, but here I am. But at any rate, the Recreation Center was operating there about the time we were 12 or 13 yrs. old, and we were so curious about everything that was going on on the block, until we decided that we were going to go and peek in the door. And we got ran away. "You have no business here. Go back." And that's the way people were then; that's why I said, when people say "It took a village to raise a child," if didn't take a village. It took a community; it took caring neighbors and friends because children and women who were affiliated with the Church or with some of the businesses there as workers, they were respected by everybody. The drunkards, the prostitutes, the bootleggers, everybody respected the women and they

