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Ethel Mae Hairston interview for a Wright State University History Course

Tasha Hairston

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***Tasha Hairston
Oral History
Dr. Mclellan
Interview Summary/Ethel Hairston
March 1, 2003***

I interviewed Ethel Mae Hairston on February 27, 2003. The interview was conducted in her apartment in west Dayton. Ms. Hairston is a 53 year old black female born in Columbus, Mississippi. She was born on March 9, 1949 in a wooden shack in the woods. Today the city's Holiday Inn is located on this property. Ms. Hairston is bi-racial, her father was white and her mother is black. She identifies herself as black. Her father named her Ethel Mae after one of his favorite blues records. She is the fourth of seven children.

She lived the first seven years of her life on a sharecropping farm owned by her grandfather and managed by her father. She never worked on the farm due to her age and the privileged treatment she received as a relative of the owner. The Hairston's family story is similar to many African Americans in the South. The agrarian lifestyle was becoming obsolete. After generations of farming, the family left and moved within the city limits in search of better opportunities.

Ms. Hairston fondly remembers her childhood in Mississippi. She recollects the happy times she experienced with her family and friends. But her experiences are peppered with the reality of growing up within the Jim Crow system. Her origins and experiences are symbolic of the contradictions of the time. She is a bi-racial person born during when it was illegal for blacks and whites to mix yet her family was accepted in both the black and white communities. Ms. Hairston received some privileges for her Caucasian ancestry while being penalized for her African heritage. During the interview, it was difficult for me keep track of the unsettling social customs of the Jim Crow laws.

We discussed the painful memory of her maternal grandfather's murder by a white mob. "Back then white people did whatever they wanted." He was murdered because he was economically successful and independent. "The whites in the community didn't like it, they wanted him to give them some of what he had,.....when he refused they killed him and threw him in the river." Ms. Hairston's mother often tells the story of how they (mob) came in, took her father from his home in the middle of the night. "The next morning one of her older brother's went out to find his father." He had washed up in the river. The family went to see the body, his head was swollen and bore the evidence of a brutal beating.

In the early 1970's, Ms. Hairston moved to Dayton, Ohio. Opportunities in the south were few and she wanted a better life for her children. We discussed these opportunities and what the "good life" was in Dayton, Ohio. The "good life" was better housing, public transportation, less racism, employment and education. Comparison's

between life in the south and north were constant themes throughout our talk. She would not change her experiences growing up in the south but she feels that she outgrew a region that at times appears to progress slowly. Moving and raising her family in Dayton, Ohio was a good thing. Their lives are better and they are thankful for the opportunities and hopeful for the future. Their story reflects the ideals and values of the "American dream." It's simply what most people want for themselves and their families, the "good life."

Tasha Hairston
Oral History Interview
March 1, 2003
Interview Ethel Mae Hairston

Tasha Hairston: My name is Tasha Hairston, I am doing this oral interview for my oral history class. Today is February the 27, 2003. I am interviewing Ethel Mae Hairston. We are in Dayton, Ohio. We are on Melba Street in west Dayton, Ohio. Would you please state your full name?

Ethel Hairston: My name is Ethel Mae Hairston

TH: Ethel where were you born?

EH: I was born in Columbus, Mississippi.

TH: What year?

EH: March 9, 1949.

TH: That makes you how old?

EH: I am 53 if I live to see March the 9th, I will be 54 years old.

TH: How long did you live in Columbus?

EH: I lived there about 20 plus years.

TH: Can you tell me your mother and father's names?

EH: My mother is Eliza Hairston my father is Richard Hairston.

TH: Are they both living?

EH: My father's deceased and my mother's living.

TH: How old is your mother?

EH: About 85 years old?

TH: What type of background do you come from?

EH: My father was a sharecropper, we grew up in a rural area of the south. It wasn't bad at all considering that time and era and the things that were going on.

TH: Economically, did you grow up middle class, what were your circumstances?

EH: Well, we were not considered in the high class but we were comfortable. I probably would say middle class.

TH: Did you ever work on the sharecropping farm?

EH: No, we were too small at that time.

TH: Did your father rent the farm from someone else? If so who?

EH: His father, Doc Hoskin, Hairston I mean.

TH: Under what circumstances did he rent the farm from his father? Can you tell me more about that?

EH: Well, he was born...my father, his father that owned the farm was my father's father. Which was Doc Hoskin at that time, his last name at that time they pronounced as Hoskin. He was a white sharecropper.

TH: I am going to interject, Hoskin is a corruption of the last name Hairston, correct?

EH: Yes, During that time he married my mom. My mother's African American and my father's white. At that particular time that was kind of rare for things like that to happen but by his father ran everything during those days the whites did what they wanted to do and that's how that came about.

TH: Would you call that situation, white men dating black women, what was it, were they using them?

EH: I think basically abusing them, they didn't have any respect for their wives. These black families lived on the plantation farm rather and they used them as much as they want to. Their wives couldn't say a word about it. So that's how my father came about.

TH: Did your family date white women?

EH: Yes he did, he dated white women for years. He said he saw my mother in a junk joint in the country and he told her he wanted her.

TH: Would you say that their relationship was love or did she have a choice in the situation>

EH: She was very young, 16 or 17 years old at that time. Her mother gave him her consent to marry him. When they got married she had to lie about her age so that she could marry him and that's what happened.

TH: So you felt that she loved him.

EH: Yes.

TH: Ethnically what do you consider yourself?

EH: Um, I mean I'm bi-racial but in this day in society it really doesn't matter. I consider myself as black.

TH: How does your community receive you ethnically?

EH: At that particular time I think if you wasn't, even if you were bi-racial part black or part white, you seem to get more because of the color of your skin. If you were a light skinned black person things weren't that hard for you.

TH: So your light complexion worked to your advantage in your life?

EH: Oh yes.

TH: Do you have siblings, how many?

EH: Yes, with me it's seven of us in all. Three girls and four boys. One of my sisters is deceased, she died in the year of 2000. So there are 6 of us left.

TH: Do your siblings work in Columbus, Mississippi or are they dispersed throughout the country?

EH: They are dispersed throughout the country.

TH: Did you ever discuss issues of ethnicity, race and perception with your siblings?

EH: Not when were young we didn't know any difference than you know our father was white> We didn't really understand that, we never discussed it. All we knew is that that was our father and that was our mother. But as we grew up and begin to enter school that's where a few problems came in. It wasn't anything that we couldn't handle we just stated that we are bi-racial.

TH: Your white grandfather was a landowner. Did you have a relationship with him?

EH: We were so small but I can vaguely remember that he had a store and we would go there and he would fit us with our shoes and our clothes, he basically took care of us until he passed away. I have pretty good memories of that.

TH: When he passed away, the wealth that he had where did it go? *my father went onto*

EH: He had willed most of it to my father. But during that time because ~~he married~~ a black woman they didn't feel that he deserved any of it. My father didn't fight about it, he just let them have it.

TH: Did he have siblings?

EH: Yes.

TH: Did you ever know them or their where abouts?

EH: When he passed away he had a sister in Chicago who looked just like him and that was about the only one that I had seen. She looked identical to my father.

TH: You grew up in the south, and I don't think it gets any more southern than Mississippi during the Jim Crow era. What was your life like?

In the stores, they had
 EH: Well it was a pretty happy one. There were certain things that I grew up there where they discriminated against blacks so much. Even downtown when you would go downtown, *As of* two fountains stated colored and whites, colored folks were not to drink out of the white fountains. Certain restaurants blacks could *go* into go through the front door, they would have to go in the back door, which I have experienced, and order your food from the back door. And also I experienced, I had a very good doctor at that time. Whites came in the front door and blacks in the back. I remember that so vividly.

TH: How long did that go on? Didn't that go into the 70's? I remember us going through the back door and I am 32 years old.

EH: Yeah, he delivered you.

TH: I thought so, I remember, I thought I was imaging this.

EH: Yeah, and he was a sweet doctor. But you know he had to go along with what was happening and the white folks in the front they had a big area.

TH: We were stuck back in this room. *I'll never forget it,*

EH: It was like a little closet.

TH: Yes, it was just all black people.

EH: I use to take you back and forth to the doctor.

TH: I have a bad memory, but I thought it was a dream.

(PAUSED FOR A PHONE CALL, lasted for about 2 minutes)

TH: Back to the interview. We were discussing Jim Crow laws and segregations and Ethel Mae Hairston was describing well into the 70's (laughter) How we still went to segregated heath facilities. I remember sitting in this room, this small room and it was all black people. Everybody was sweating, sitting looking at each other ~~looking at each other~~, looking crazy looking at each other. We came through the back.

EH: It was a little small room with a seat welded to the wall where we sat. I will never forget that. Long day as I live and my mother said when I was 7 or 8 years old. We were downtown and I saw the sign that said white and colored. I told my mother I'm not drinking out of the colored I am going to drink out of which ever one I wanted. And I drank out of the white one.. I didn't like it, I didn't fully understand it but I knew it was wrong.

TH: How did your parents explain segregation and separate drinking fountains or did they explain it?

EH: No, they didn't explain that. I guess it was just self explanatory. We didn't question a whole lot about it because my mother would say that's what we have to do.

TH: Did your mother ever seem bothered by those type of conditions?

EH: Yes, when she was growing up they hunted my grandfather down and killed him. Once when visiting downtown she saw a drove of white people beat a man to death. It was called Catfish Alley. My mother has vivid memories of when she grew up about all of the hardships and what she went through as a child growing up. How they killed her father. How they came in the house, ~~ram~~ ~~sh~~acked the house and hunted him down with dogs, my mother said. My mother's oldest brother said that he was going to find his father. So his father's body floated up to a bank and all of them went to go and look at it. She said my daddy's head had swollen up so big where they had beat him to death and threw him in the river. Yes, you should hear my mother talk about it and even at he age now she still has vivid memories of all that happened.

TH: Did she say why they killed him?

EH: Simply because he had his own farm land even though it was on a plantation. He raised everything and he refused to share his money with them. At that time you were not suppose to raise anything and have more than what they gave them. But her father did, so he refused to share with them so they killed him. They killed him.

TH: How old was grandma when that happened?

EH: 9 or 10 years old.

TH: Do you remember his name?

EH: Joe Patmon. To hear my mother talk about it, it seems as if it has just happened. But I guess because it was such a tramatic experience maybe that's why she still remembers it vividly at 85.

TH: Did your father ever discuss issues of race?

EH: Not that I can remember, we didn't question why he was one color and my mother was another color. But I do remember my father couldn't use hair grease like we did. HE would go to the white beauty shop. He could go in the front door. He bought this stuff in a big bottle, it looked like white foam, called Wild Root, that's what we use to scalp out daddy's hair with because his hair was not like black people. He was the sweetest kindest person you could ever meet. He was a kind man.

TH: If you could have chosen anywhere in the country to grow up, would you have chosen somewhere other than Columbus, Mississippi, like up North?

I think I would not. I'm glad that

EH: No, I was raised in that era so I am very knowledgeable about racism. I do believe that if I had left there and come up north, although its prevalent everywhere. The south is well known for racism. So I got in detail what really happened *on those bases*.

TH: When did you leave Mississippi?

EH: The first time was in 1971 and came to Dayton, Ohio. I stayed a few years and then I went back to Mississippi. Then I decided to come back to Dayton in 1975 and I decided to stay because I was going up and down the road and my kids were getting older and I knew I couldn't continue to do that. So I decided to make Dayton, Ohio my home and I have been here ever since. My kids grew up here.

TH: How many kids do you have?

EH: Five, 3 girls and 2 boys.

TH: What attracted to Dayton?

EH: Mainly, I didn't feel like the schools there were sufficient enough for teaching black kids and they were still somewhat segregated. The black schools did not get the materials that the white schools got. I had a brother here at that time. I was carrying my last child, I didn't want my mother to be in such debt with me having another child. So my brother offered to come and get me and the rest of my children. Life here is much better here than it was there at that time. I enjoy day, I really like Dayton, OH.

TH: Where did you live, at first.

When I first came here I had got a place in

EH: DeSoto Bast public housing, I stayed a few months until my last child was born. When I came back in 75 I decided to stay.

Then I decided to go back to Mississippi

TH: Did you move here in search of the good life?

EH: There were so many more opportunities here. The south has advanced but not as much as the northern states.

TH: Something that's important to remember is that Mississippi is a world all to itself. Even though different areas of the south has progressed....allegedly by the 1970's there was no more segregation and Jim Crow but as we stated previously, even in my lifetime, I was born in 1971, I was taken to a doctor in segregated facilities.

EH: Mississippi is back in times, the things they still do are primitive. I outgrew the state so I had to come back to Dayton where I love it, there is more freedom of everything.

TH: Give me your definition of the good life in Dayton?

EH: Number 1, a lot more jobs and advantages of going to school. The whole ordeal is just better here.

TH: Economically it's better, education, opportunities, jobs....what about your living conditions as far as housing....would you say that that fit within your definition of the good life?

EH: Yes

TH: What about transportation, what forms of transportation did you use?

EH: Initially my brother helped me until I learned how to use to the bus and it took me where I needed to go.

TH: Repeat the answer you gave me about the places you lived when you first moved here.

EH: First, Lexington, they condemned that house then a friend got me into the Desoto Bass. I went back south and came back and lived out in Sunshine Court with a friend. I put in for an apartment and stayed there on the East end of the town.

TH: What was it like living on the east end in the 70's, 80's, 90's?

EH: Well racism reared it's ugly head again. I still continued to live out there. I felt like you have a freedom of speech and everything else so why can't I live where I want to live. After a few years they started accepting more blacks, it got better.

TH: Did your children have conflicts with race?

EH: Yes, my son Raymond. I made a list and sent him to Kroger's about 5 or 6 blocks away. As he was returning on his bike a car full of young white boys drove up and took all of his stuff, put it in their car and speed off. When he came home he told me what happened. We looked out and saw the same guys driving around drinking the pops and grinning. I use to walk to Eastown and I would get racist remarks, I had to deal with all of that. But I still wouldn't take nothing from Dayton, I'm happy to be here?

TH: Do you think there was any psychological effects of racism on yourself?

EH: No, not on me or my children. I think they have accepted that. I educated them on it when they were growing up.

TH: Can you give me a specific example of a better opportunity that was successfully pursued by your children that they probably wouldn't have been able to have in the south.

EH: Yeah, education. We have showed progress. I got the ball rolling by getting my associates degree from Sinclair. My three daughters have obtained bachelor degrees. My one who is interviewing me is working on her masters.

TH: Amen!

EH: I hope she pulls through.

TH: Me too .

TH: What did you do for recreation when your kids were growing up?

EH: Taking care of five kids is a job within itself. We use to ride bikes together, play tennis, we had a lot of fun.

TH: How many years have you lived in Dayton, all together?

EH: Twenty plus years, almost 30 years. So I basically grew up with my children here because I was in my early 20's when I came to Dayton.

TH: If you could have one wish or hope for the future of Dayton and yourself and what you considered the good life to be, what would that hope be?

EH: I would like to continue my educating, I stopped because of illness, I'm feeling better. I hope in the future with God's grace and mercy that I achieve the degree that I want to. I am keeping the faith because I know that with God at your side you can do anything. You never give up, give out but don't give up.

TH: What would your hopes be for your children?

EH: I am particularly proud of my three daughters and their achievements. I just hope that they continue their education, that means that they will get better jobs so that they will not have to depend on anyone. I wish them all the luck.

TH: Is there anything that you'd like to say in closing?

EH: I think I touched base on everything. I must say that I enjoyed this interview.

TH: Same here.

EH: If there is anything else you would like to know, please contact me.

TH: Thank you so much, Ethel Mae Hairston.