

**Name of Interviewee: Naomi Booker Brandon**

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**Additional Materials: TV34 interview**

**Interviewer: Debra David**

**Date: 04/21/2018**

**Location: Montclair Fire Department on 1 Pine St, Montclair, NJ.**

**Log:**

Naomi Booker Brandon was born in Mountainside Hospital in Montclair, New Jersey in 1927 and attended Montclair public schools. She recalls what it was like growing up in Montclair South End; she was aware of prejudice, but she did not personally have any problems. Naomi recalls the businesses that the family frequented.

Naomi's mother had moved to Montclair from Virginia in 1925, for more work opportunities than were available in their small farming community; her mother worked as a domestic. Her mother's family was large.

Naomi worked a variety of jobs through the years, including for two catering businesses owned by her extended family, Remco Toy Factory, and MGM record manufacturing plant in Bloomfield.

Along with her work experience, she mentions her participation with the YMCA and the YWCA, and her active and long-time involvement in her church, the Union Baptist Church in Bloomfield. She was also a founding member of Montclair's African American Heritage Foundation and continues to be actively involved in the annual festival and parade.

Naomi also discusses her children and their families, noting their long-time involvement in the Township of Montclair in various capacities.

**Timestamps:**

[0:00] Naomi Booker Brandon currently resides on Bloomfield Avenue in Glen Ridge, NJ. She was born in 1927 at Mountainside Hospital and grew up in Montclair. Her mother's family had moved up from Virginia, relocating to Montclair in 1925.

[1:01]: She attended Montclair Public Schools: Glenfield School, Nishuane School, Hillside School, and Montclair High school.

[1:32]: She describes her experience as a student in the Montclair public school system. She said "I didn't have too much trouble...of course you know there was always something going on. And there was prejudice going on. But I had no personal problems. And I did pretty good."

[2:09]: Discusses the prejudice she alluded to. "I personally didn't but your friends and what not, everyone had some kind of problems. And of course, you heard about them. And you tried to be careful about what you do and say... My mother taught us you mind your business and that's what we did."

[2:37]: Naomi shares some information about her immediate family. She notes, "Well, we were poor. We were poor folks." She had a stepfather who she described as being "all right" and "not

the best” who worked and supported them. Her mother worked as a domestic worker and later worked for many years at Bamberger’s (which would later become Macy’s), when that store started hiring African Americans. She shares that she had two younger brothers, but both had passed away (one died two years prior to this interview and the other approximately 10 years ago).

[3:52]: Naomi is an active member and still attends the Union Baptist Church in Bloomfield (where she is “one of the oldest ones there”). She was baptized in that church at age 12 and is currently 90. She enjoys the respect she receives from the congregation, where she is referred to as either Nana Brandon or Grandma Brandon. She has eight grandchildren.

[5:17]: Describes the jobs she’s worked. Her family had two catering businesses in Montclair (she worked there): Reese Catering and Woods Catering. Later worked in Bloomfield at the Remco Toys factory. She then worked at MGM Records’ manufacturing plant and made and pressed phonograph records; she notes her expansive record library! The MGM plant was in Bloomfield not far from the old Westinghouse factory. The types of music she likes include blues and jazz. She describes her love of dancing, and it is mentioned that she danced quite a bit at her last birthday party.

[8:21] As a young woman, she enjoyed listening to live music at Adams Theatre in Newark. And following the basketball games in Montclair there would be dances where they could enjoy music.

[9:11]: Begins talking about the Montclair YMCA and the YWCA. She wouldn’t go too often but would go to events. Previously, people traveling from out of town or moving up north from the south could rent rooms at the YWCA (which Naomi recalls as the Girls’ Y). The Y on Washington was the men’s Y. This was where the majority of the basketball games would be held; the Washington Street YMCA also had a swimming pool. When asked if they were segregation she replied “I think you could say yes. The one [YMCA] up on Park St. ... was so expensive you couldn’t really ... afford it.” The women’s Y on Glenridge Avenue had a gym in a separate building on the property. Naomi describes the Y as a fun place and notes that her children learned to swim at the Washington Street Y. Naomi learned to swim at the Orange Y (when she was 50!); the facilities in Orange were much more affordable than the Park Street YMCA in Montclair (even though the Montclair Y was within walking distance from her North Fullerton Avenue home).

[13:35]: Naomi has been part of the Montclair African American Heritage Foundation since its founding. She notes the annual parade and festival, and notes that the organization also granted scholarships. The parade used to get up to 10,000 people.

[14:30]: Naomi discusses her four children, their families and professions. Lonnie Brandon, former Director of the Montclair Townships Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs; her daughter is married to Roger Terry, former Montclair Township Police Chief; another son, Barry, lives in Bloomfield; her youngest son, Craig, resides in Verona, works for Montclair Township as Superintendent of Solid Waste/Recycling.

[17:16]: Discusses her grandchildren and great grandchildren, most of whom live in or very near Montclair – attending some of the same schools she did and even being born in the same hospital (Mountainside) as she was.

[18:46]: Recalls that it was a bit strange to go in recent years to Nishuane, “Everything had changed of course but it was nice to go in.” She is more frequently at Montclair High School for various events and feels that it has not changed too much over the years.

[19:25]: Recalls where she shopped when she was growing up in Montclair’s South End, around Orange Road. Her family purchased food at Acme supermarket (which she described as a large store). Living near Bloomfield Avenue, they had access to many shopping resources and shopping options. For clothing, it was more difficult as there were not as many clothing stores in the Bloomfield Avenue area; she mentions Lewinsky [sp?] but cannot recall the name of the other clothing store. There were not too many options, but you could get skirts, blouses, winter coats here in town. Also describes having sewing lessons at Hillside School. Her family did not have a car, but all of her mother’s brothers did, and they were always willing to take her mother shopping.

[22:14]: Goes into more detail about the two catering businesses her family ran. Reese’s was on Madison Ave. and Woods had a store, located in the South End. A fire destroyed the catering business and they never opened up again. They catered jobs in a variety of areas such as Short Hills. Her aunt did all the cooking.

[24:38]: Naomi talks about organizations in which she was involved at the Union Baptist Church in Bloomfield: she was President of the Pastors Aid group, Senior Choir (for about 30 years), and the Busy Bees (where she served as treasurer). She also notes her involvement in Montclair’s African American Heritage Foundation and its annual parade, which was very well attended, although she is disappointed that the attendance is lower in recent years. There are many vendors, food options, and Naomi helps sell t-shirts for the foundation. She also notes the widespread attendance at Montclair’s July 4<sup>th</sup> parade. Mentions the antique cars that her husband enjoyed in the parades.

[29:15]: Begins to describe the book she brought, which was assembled as part of a history of Mountainside Hospital capturing stories of the Glen Ridge and Montclair families whose members were born there. The book had belonged to Naomi’s mother. In it were photographs of her family (her parents, siblings, children, grandchildren).

[31:37]: Tells the story of why her mother, born in 1908, moved from Virginia to Montclair. Her mother lived in Kenbridge, [Lunenburg County,] Virginia – a very small town 86 miles south of Richmond, Virginia. Naomi’s mother’s family was large. Her relatives who lived in South Jersey – Pitman, New Jersey -- would send their children to Virginia for the summer. Naomi and her twin sister noticed that their cousins from South Jersey were “dressed so nice.” And her mother and her twin were a bit jealous and wanted those types of clothes. So, in 1925, at approximately 17 or 18, they moved north, first staying with the relatives in Pitman, New Jersey and ultimately coming to Montclair (likely because there were more opportunities for them to get domestic work in Montclair rather than the farming work that was available to them in Virginia). She then

describes the relationship between her mother and aunt: “they always got along beautifully.” The two families even lived in separate units in the same house. They had three children each. In total, Naomi’s mom’s family comprised 13 siblings, two of whom were born in Montclair and the others in Virginia. Naomi’s mother’s family moved to Montclair about three years after Naomi’s mother and sister did and later moved to Bloomfield. She recalls how her mother and sister were driven to come up north for better opportunities, beyond the farm of their birthplace. As young women, Naomi’s mom and aunt, were drawn north by the desire to have the nice clothing that their New Jersey cousins had, and Naomi recalls that they always dressed nicely.