

Name of Interviewee: Samuel L. Debnam

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Interviewer: Victoria Lizotte, Donato DiGernomo, Jane Eliasof.

Location: Crane House and Historic YWCA

Introduction:

Born in 1921, Samuel Debnam moved to Montclair from Bloomfield before World War I. His father is from North Carolina and his mother from Virginia. They moved to New Jersey in 1935. Samuel is the middle child, with four sisters. Mr. Debnam graduated high school in 1939 and in 1942 he joined the Army Air Force. During the war, he served stateside at military bases in Utah, Texas and Florida. While there, he saw the effects of segregation, and was even threatened by a group of white Southerners. He met his wife, Maurice Smith Debnam, before the war, but they did not marry until 1945. Their two children, Steven and Ronald, attended Montclair High School. Both boys continued their education at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. After the war, Mr. Debnam worked as a watchmaker at a clock shop owned by Higgamen at a salary of 50 cents a day. In addition to the 27 years working as a watchmaker, he opened a catering business with his wife, Triangle Caterers and later Debnam Caterers. He worked until his retirement at age 90.

In his lifetime, Mr. Debnam witnessed the changes that the Civil Rights Movement had on Montclair, from busing students to magnet schools to the integration of the police and fire departments. He was the first Black member of the Montclair Kiwanis Club and subsequently served as its first Black president. He also helped to integrate the YMCA and served on its Board of Directors. Today, he describes Montclair as a world renowned, very rich town, with low crime rates and a good fire department, and as a very good place to live.

Timestamps:

[0:00]: Samuel L. Debnam was born in 1921 in Bloomfield and lived on 159 Lincoln Street, Orange Road and finally Washington Avenue. He has two brothers, two grandsons and one great-grandson. They all lived in the area in Orange or East Orange. His family moved to Montclair in 1935 after they bought a home here. His father is from North Carolina and his mother is from Virginia. They were active in St. Paul Baptist Church. Samuel graduated high school in 1939 and went into military service in 1941.

[2:30]: He joined the military in the Signal Corps when he read an advertisement on how to become an officer through a course they offered. By 1942 he joined the Army Air Force. He

trained in Fort Dix and Utah. Following a race riot, he moved to Boca Raton, Florida where they were forced to dig up mud piles. He wrote to the school in Newark about the type of work officers were doing. Samuel got called in and was told that they would do something to change this practice. He transferred to a school in Texas to learn about B-17's. They were promoted to the flight line. He was stationed stateside during the war.

[5:50]: Samuel talks about segregation taking place during this time. He mentions how much money they could have saved if the army was integrated. They had to build two mess halls, two theaters - two of everything. If they had just integrated before World War II, this could have been avoided.

[6:42]: He spent one year at Glenfield School; then went to school at Montclair Avenue [?].

[7:30]: Samuel nearly got killed in Palm Beach after a soldier fell onto a few white people. They were going to hurt him and a police officer showed up. The group wanted to hit him and the police stopped them. They managed to get out before they were attacked.

[9:00]: His father worked in domestic service as a chauffeur. His mother also worked as a domestic.

[9:30]: He worked for a surgical supply company in Newark. He would help with the supplies as a teenager.

[9:55]: After the war, he took a watchmaking class. He worked for a clock shop for 50 cents a day. Higgamen was the owner. He went to the New Jersey School for Watchmaking in Jersey City. The government paid employers to hire salesman. He was hired as an apprentice watchmaker. After 27 years, the company went out of business compelling him to move around seeking employment at various stores in the area.

[12:52]: He retired at 90.

[13:20]: He opened a catering business, Triangle Caterers, and later Debnam Caterers. He catered a few weddings. He used to work several jobs at once. He catered events at various places including the Montclair Art Museum.

[14:56]: In 1959, Thomas, Jean Key and a few others started up a band. They called themselves the *Salters and Swing*. They played at a few venues in the area, but broke up when the war started. After the war, they resumed playing, but Key never came back. He had a band during the war back in Florida. He remembers playing once in the Black band and was approached by a white girl who wanted to dance. He got called into the office and reprimanded and told to never

let that happen again. Samuel mentions that it was a bit of culture shock going from north to south, but you eventually learned to recognize the signs and what you are meant to do. He came home for Christmas and later took a Champion Train back south.

[19:50]: In Montclair, he remembers that at Hahne's, if a Colored girl tried on a hat they had to buy it. They could not go into Wedgewood [restaurant] for a while. Another time they went to get a tuxedo and they could not figure out why a Black man would buy a tuxedo.

[21:00]: He met his wife, Maurice Smith Debnam, in church. They met before the war, but did not get married until 1945. They had two children, Steven and Ronald. The children attended Montclair High School, and they both continued their education at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. One change from his childhood to today was that Black people were not allowed on the football team in 1939.

[23:40]: He lived most of his life in the south end [of Montclair]. They had butcher shops, drug stores and more. He remembers that sales people would go house-to-house to sell products, for example the dairyman.

[25:30]: Thomas was the first Black member and president of the Kiwanis Club of Montclair. It is a service club similar to the Rotary Club. The Kiwanis Club membership consisted of business men who met every week. They decided to integrate, and he was chosen as the first Black member. He joined sometime in the 1960s.

[28:57]: His wife did the cooking for the catering company while he did the deliveries and booking.

[31:40]: As domestic workers, he remembers that his parents used to leave for extended periods of time. He also was the middle child, with four sisters.

[32:40]: He was head of the committee of management for the YMCA on Washington Street. Following the war, three people were put on the board to integrate the YMCAs [in town]. First, they integrated the management board and around three years later the YMCAs were merged. He remembers that the colored YMCA used to have banquets and dances.

[36:18]: They were integrated in the 1950s following the war.

[37:10]: He remembers a lot of changes following the Civil Rights Movement, especially in education thanks to busing and the eventual creation of the magnet schools. He remembers being in Montclair when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, as well as when John F. Kennedy was shot.

[39:46]: There were lots of places for kids to play and hang out like the parks or the YMCA.

[40:20]: He used to go to Bambergers in Newark and Hahnes in Montclair. For local stores, there was an Izzy's Candy Store, a drug store, an Acme.

[42:00]: Holidays were another busy work day, but a profitable one. He loved the Montclair Fourth of July Parade.

[43:30]: Big events during the 30s and 40s were the integration of the Police Department and the Fire Department. John Starling was chosen to be the first to integrate [the fire department]. People used to urinate in his boots. They did not want him to be a fireman. Gregory Hayes was the first Black policeman in Montclair. Paige and Gettis also became police officers, and Samuel says that these services integrating were a highlight of those times.

[45:25]: The biggest change in Montclair for him was busing. He remembers seeing 18 busses for one school, and up to 40 SUV's picking up the kids. He used to walk to school back then. He does not believe that the people really changed. He does remember that when Black people were moving in, white people were moving out. Now it is the other way around. He mentions that the neighborhood is no longer Black or white, it's mixed.

[47:50]: Samuel says that Montclair is known worldwide, and it is a nice town despite the taxes. He mentions that it is still known as a very rich town, with low crime rates and a good fire department. Overall, it is a good place to be.

[55:56]: He mentions that Jackie Robinson coming to the Montclair YMCA was a highlight for Montclair. Mayor Dill was the mayor and Samuel was chairman of the YMCA at the time. It was something that everyone remembers. He remembers Jackie Robinson as being very nice and soft spoken. He remembers his father used to take him to see the New York Eagles as a kid.

[59:00]: Hortense Tate was the secretary of the YWCA. Samuel used to have dances there. She used to have a favorite saying "Get off the dime." She would go around saying that to people who weren't dancing fast enough.