

Name of Interviewee: Lorena E. Tyson

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Interviewer: Jane Eliasof, Justin Millet and Rani Moti

Location: Crane House and Historic YWCA

Introduction:

Lorena Tyson was born in 1933 in her family's home – making an entrance nearly one month earlier than expected. Woven throughout the myriad topics covered in her interview she recounts discrimination and racism that she and/or her family experienced.

Her mother had come up from Mississippi; although she'd been a teacher there, she was not allowed to teach in Montclair and became a nanny; her dad was from Nevis, British West Indies and Bermuda and became a business manager at Rudd's Dairy and other businesses. Lorena provides insight into the origins of several of the Roman Catholic churches in Montclair, including Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church founded by those of Italian descent and St. Peter Claver Church which was founded by the Black community.

Her father bought a home at 15 Montague Place, where Lorena still resides. She attended Immaculate Conception School through high school, one of only two Black students; she continues to feel wronged for not being recognized at her high school graduation as the salutatorian for which her academic achievements made her eligible. She details the stores and other establishments where Blacks were not welcome, as well as the segregation on public transportation. She recalls the Washington Street YMCA and the Glenridge Avenue YWCA, which she frequented as a youngster.

Lorena had a long and accomplished teaching career, which spanned multiple schools and included receiving the Princeton Award for teaching chemistry. She retired from Montclair High School in 1997 after teaching there for 27 years.

Timestamps:

[:00] Mrs. Tyson is 86 years old. She was born in 1933 and has lived in Montclair for all but a few years when she taught in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. She was born in a house at 114 North Fullerton Avenue on December 1st [1933]. She joked that "Every time I'd go by it, I said I should go and put a rock in front of it like some people do. Like they say ... George Washington slept here? I should go and put, I was born here!"

LORENA'S MOM

[1:55] Her mother, born in 1905, had come to Montclair from Mississippi. Although she had taught sixth grade there, her mother could not get a teaching job here, “because she was Colored” but “she looked like she was white,” Lorena added. Instead, her mother worked at Kip’s Castle, where she cared for the family’s children, making their meals, etc. When she first came up from Mississippi and began working at Kip’s Castle, Lorena’s mom lived with a cousin whose house was where St. Mark’s Church is now.

LORENA MAKES AN EARLY APPEARANCE AT HOME

Pregnant with Lorena, her mom returned from work on November 30, 1933 feeling unwell and contacted Dr. Thornhill, who was covering for her regular physician, Dr. Bell. Dr. Thornhill made a house call and insisted the baby wasn’t coming, as it wasn’t due for weeks – not until December 25. But Lorena’s mom knew baby was coming, and indeed Lorena was born just hours later at 3:39 am on December 1st at home, with the help of a midwife who happened to live upstairs from Lorena’s family at 114 North Fullerton Avenue. Her mom had not yet had time to even register for delivery at the hospital; it most likely would have been Community Hospital, as Black doctors were not allowed to practice at Mountainside Hospital at that time.

[3:10] Dr. Bell’s office was on Elm Street and Dr. Thornhill’s was on North Fullerton. Blacks could not get *any* kind of job at Mountainside Hospital at that time.

FAMILY HOME ON MONTAGUE PLACE

[3:45] The family then purchased a two-family home at 15 Montague Place, where Lorena still resides. She notes that the only bank that would do business with the Black community was Montclair Savings Bank, but they refused to give her dad the mortgage. Her father appealed to Mrs. Etherington, a woman he worked for several days a week, who lived on Park Street; she co-signed for his mortgage. [The implication, though not stated explicitly, is that Mrs. Etherington was white.] The payment was \$25 per month, which Lorena indicates should not have required co-signing by her father’s employer.

EARLY FAMILY HISTORY AND RELIGION

[6:00] Lorena’s mother and father were introduced by a cousin, and her father courted her by bringing her chocolates! They were married at the Empire State Building; her father was Episcopalian, and her mom was a Baptist. They moved to Bloomfield.

Originally her dad belonged to Trinity Episcopalian Church, but he considered the Roman Catholic Church to be very similar so he went to the only Catholic Church in town that would accept Black parishioners in 1930, Immaculate Conception Church. She notes, “The poor Irish,

all the Italians, and the Colored had to sit in the basement in what they call Madonna Hall... that's where they had mass. They didn't see the priest... They saw the priests for communion only. And then they had to leave the church because they had to be gone away from the church [before] the rich white folks [who] were upstairs could go home...they don't want to come out the church and be seen on the street with the same people.”

Lorena relays that those worshipping in the basement felt it wasn't right. Members of the Italian community, who were known to be builders, acquired land and built their own church, a convent, rectory, parking, a school, and they had Filippini order nuns there. [Lorena is referring to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church that was constructed on Pine Street in 1937.]

[8:35] They worshipped there until about 1970. Lorena then comments on the current changes at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church: the Diocese recently merged it with Immaculate Conception Church and removed some of the parish's operational and financial autonomy.

LORENA'S FATHER'S HISTORY

[9:51] Lorena recounts her father's lineage. Alfred Emmanuel Tyson was born in 1897 in Nevis, British West Indies. Her father was orphaned at age 5 after his father was killed with a machete during a robbery; his mother died from illness, unable to get the medicine she needed. Lorena's father and his two-year-old sister were sent to an aunt in Bermuda, where they grew up. At age 15, in 1912, he came to Montclair to live with his mother's sister. He had a short-lived record store and worked in other stores in the Fourth Ward.

Lorena's mom's name was Clarie (sp?) Flora Love Tyson.

MORE ABOUT RELIGION

[11:30] Returning to the church topic: The “poor Irish” – those that work for wealthy Montclair residents, then decided that they were fed up with attending church in the basement of Immaculate Conception Church as well, so the Irish built St. Cassian's Church [founded 1897, Upper Montclair]. Then the Black parishioners also left Immaculate Conception Church; they bought the house that Lorena's mother's family had been renting and held mass there; Father Ahearn (sp?) was sent to the parish. The parish held many fundraisers of different kinds, raising enough money to purchase the [56] Elmwood Avenue property, circa 1936, for St. Peter Claver Church. The cornerstone was laid 1939. She remembers the ceremony well and proudly recalls seeing her father and 5-6 other men who, like her father, had been instrumental in getting the church built.

LORENA'S SOUTHERN RELATIVES and HER EXPERIENCE TRAVELING SOUTH

[14:00] Lorena recalls when her great-grandmother, Jane Wilson, her mother's grandmother, came to visit from Mississippi. She was a Cherokee Indian. She had been enslaved and had several children with her master. When visitors to the master's home confused Lorena's great-grandmother's children as the master's wife's children, the woman yelled to Lorena's great-grandmother, "Put something around their heads so they know they are slave kids."

When her maternal great-grandmother Jane Wilson died in 1939, at age 95, Lorena recalls traveling to the South for the funeral. As a very young child in kindergarten, Lorena was confused and shocked when she was prohibited from using "white only" restrooms or sitting in "white only" areas of public places in the South and instead had to use an outhouse. She was confused because at her home in Montclair, she had indoor plumbing, yet not all of the homes in Montclair did.

RECOLLECTIONS OF MONTAGUE PLACE

[00:16:30] Lorena recalls a house that had been across from hers on Montague Place in Montclair, now a parking lot. The Floods lived on the first floor; the Jacksons lived on the second floor. She was there playing with friends when she asked to use the bathroom and was surprised that it was outside on the back porch, with the hole in the floor.

[17:19] When asked about the diversity of her block on Montague Place, Lorena noted that while the family across the street was Black, two branches of an Italian family (Gardusi ?) had a duplex next door; the O'Leary rented their home; there was a Jewish family; many white families resided across the street, except for the one house she'd visited with the outdoor facilities. On her side of the street, several houses were occupied by Black families until the 1940s. Her father resisted offers to sell his house to Central Presbyterian Church, which wanted to buy Lorena's family's property to extend their parking lot.

SCHOOL YEARS

She remembers that because she was not born BEFORE December 1st (she was born ON December 1st), she was not allowed to move up from Kindergarten to 1st grade the first year she attended because she was not old enough, missing the deadline by hours. She recalls being confused at the Kindergarten graduation ceremony when her name wasn't called; Lorena was very, very upset! She convinced her mother to take her to nearby Immaculate Conception School [on Munn Street], where Lorena asked the Principal, a nun, if she would let her attend first grade, and she was admitted! Lorena was ultimately in a class with 60 students in one classroom at every grade level; she attended Immaculate Conception school through high school. She recalls that of the students, there were two of Italian descent and two Black children. One requirement of attendance there was to attend 9 am mass at the church, which she did. She also

remembers being in a little skit, wearing a pinafore and singing “I’m a Little Teapot,” in front of other parishioners.

MORE ABOUT ST. PETER CLAVER CHURCH

She returns to the opening of St. Peter Claver Church, recalling a Mrs. Allworth (sp?) who lived on or near Russell Place, and the Stevensons, white families, who helped financially and in other ways to establish St. Peter Claver. There were many activities centered on the Church. The priest stayed in Orange at Holy Spirit Church but came to St. Peter Claver every Sunday. The Trinitarian nuns taught catechism. She remembers having big “church family” dinners prior to Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. She remembers doing the Stations of the Cross every week during Lent even through her high school years.

HIGH SCHOOL YEARS – FIRST JOBS – DISCRIMINATION ENCOUNTERED

[26:00] She remembers trying to get a job during high school. She babysat for Mrs. Hughes across the street from her house when Mrs. Hughes tutored in the summer. Her neighbor who owned a local “five and dime” store said she couldn’t work in the store, because his customers wouldn’t like a Black person working there, but she could babysit or clean his house. There were many places Blacks couldn’t enter. But Blacks could shop at Max/Mack’s (sp?) Drug Store, at the corner of Park Street and Bloomfield Avenue. Other pharmacies were Legged’s (sp?) on the corner of Church Street and Bloomfield Avenue in the Hinck Building where Anthropologie is today; Whelan’s (sp?) was across the street; Rider’s (sp?) Drug Store was on Midland Avenue. There were four drug stores, but as a Black person she was only welcome in one of them at that time.

[28:51] She recalls that she could get an ice cream cone at Grunning’s, but had to order it at the counter and eat it outside. It bothered her that she was prevented from going there when her classmates were free to go there and stay inside. There were no restaurants in Montclair where Blacks could eat. She would accompany her mother to clean restaurants, but she could not eat in them.

[30:00] She recalls that her mother would make her clothes. They would go into one of the local Montclair shops, Janet’s (sp?) to see what styles Lorena liked. Her mom would then make a pattern from her memory and sew the clothes. She even made her jumper uniform for Immaculate Conception.

Lorena recalls that she could go to the Wellmont movie theater but had to sit in the balcony; Blacks were not welcome at the Clairidge or the Bellevue Theater.

She would earn five or ten cents delivering newspapers to people and saved it up. You could travel to Newark on the bus for ten cents.

There was also discrimination on the busses and trolleys. Blacks could not sit in the front of the local bus or trolley. If you traveled by rail to the South, there was a car that was reserved for Blacks only. Lorena felt resentment about this discrimination, feeling that she was equal to whites.

YMCA/GLENDRIDGE AVENUE YWCA

[35:00] When Lorena was in grammar school, she and other girls were allowed to go to the Washington Street YMCA, where today's Bullock School is, one day per week to learn to float and swim. Blacks were not allowed to attend the YMCA on Park Street. She also went to the [Glenridge Avenue] YWCA when she was in grammar school and recalls Mrs. [Hortense] Tate. She recalled attending meetings at the YWCA and that it was an opportunity to "meet a lot of other Colored people," since she had only one Black girl in her class, and in the entire grammar school. She recalled Mrs. Tate as "a great woman...we looked at her in awe."

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

[36:40] Being around young people of her own color made Lorena want to leave Immaculate Conception School and go back to Hillside public school, so she would have more Black classmates. But her father insisted that she stay at Immaculate Conception. So, she stayed at Immaculate Conception School and in eighth grade, Lorena proudly reports that she was elected to take the Archbishop's exam.

DENIED ACADEMIC HONORS IN HIGH SCHOOL

In high school, she was one of the first five people when they started the National Honors Society. She studied hard and was competitive with a male classmate, missing out on being valedictorian by a very, very small margin; she thought she would then be salutatorian, but the Principal did not acknowledge that achievement that year, which she infers is because of her race.

COLLEGE YEARS

She was not given any college guidance while from her high school, but took it upon herself to register at Montclair State as a math major when she graduated high school in 1951. Shortly thereafter, she transferred to St. Elizabeth's College after meeting some of the students and nuns who worked there who "very nice and cordial to me and treated me like everyone else was treated. And I was amazed, because that wasn't what happened before."

[40:00] As St. Elizabeth College's tuition was higher than Montclair State's tuition, Lorena searched for a job... at Bell Telephone, at RCA in Harrison, other places, ultimately finding one as a nurse's aide at Mountainside Hospital – for 75 cents an hour -- on the 3:30 pm – 12:00 am shift. She worked the maternity and nursery floor. She also worked in the library at St. Elizabeth's College. She majored in Chemistry and minored in Math at St. Elizabeth's, graduating with the Class of 1955.

[45:00] Once again, Lorena found herself to be one of only two Black students in the school, but when the other student left, Lorena was the sole Black student in the entire college. "But I did alright," she reports. For two years, she represented St. Elizabeth's College in the National Federation of Black Catholic College students, attending the national convention.

TEACHING CAREER

[46:99] Lorena became a teacher. She taught Chemistry, Physics and Math – even English one year. She taught at the Sacred Heart Academy in Hoboken, St. Joseph's High School in Paterson. Then she taught for nine years, 1962-1971, at a high school in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Then she returned to Montclair, teaching remedial math for a few summers at Kean College. She also taught at Essex County College, at night. She also found time to get a Master's degree in Chemistry at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., with her tuition funded by a National Science Foundation grant.

FAMILY

[51:28] Lorena returns to speaking about her family. Her brother George, born 1941, and her brother Charlie, born 1943 were born in the house at 15 Montague Place, in the first floor bedroom, as she had been. In 1945, her sister was born in the hospital – Community Hospital. Her brother John, the youngest, was born in 1947 when Lorena was in 8th grade; he attended Montclair High School and graduated from Harvard University and had died in 2015 with Alzheimer's.

MORE ON TEACHING CAREER

[54:00] Lorena recalls that she taught former Montclair Councilwoman Renee Baskerville Chemistry, and it's noted that Ms. Baskerville went on to become a doctor! She proudly recalls several other students who she taught who reached great successes.

[57:00] Lorena has been active in the St. Elizabeth's Alumni Association Board of Directors for decades. She graduated in 1971, and became class agent in 1975 (involved in fundraising). 2018 will be her 65th college anniversary.

Lorena retired as a teacher from Montclair High School in 1997; she was the Department Chair and had introduced the AP Chemistry Curriculum at the school. She had taught there for 27 years.

WORLD TRAVELS

[1:00:00] Lorena discusses her love of traveling and her many adventures which include trips to Paris, London, Spain, Italy, river cruise on the Danube, South America, Acapulco, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, Austria. She highly recommends Machu Pichu! Later she explains that she prefers domestic travel now, given some health considerations.

WORLD WAR II

1:09:15 When asked if she had any memories of World War II, she recounts that she has a distinct memory of when it started: during her birthday party on December 7 [1941]. As a seven-year-old, she did not know at the time why her family visiting from Pennsylvania left so suddenly that day [presumably because Pearl Harbor had been attacked]. Lorena also recalls men going off to war.

RUDD'S DAIRY

[1:10:00] She remembers Rudd's Dairy in Montclair, where her father was the business manager. She notes that her father had only had an eighth-grade education in Bermuda, but he was a self-made man and handled the books for another business as well. He was also active in the Democratic Committee in Montclair. Her father was not called into service for World War II, for which the family was most grateful.

WHAT MAKES MONTCLAIR SPECIAL

[1:16:22] When asked what makes Montclair special, Lorena says it is because she was born and raised here, and she doesn't want to leave to go any place else. She wants to stay in her home. She's still very active attending meetings after long-serving in various committee roles with the Alumni Association at St. Elizabeth's, with the Retired Teachers Association of Trenton/Montclair/Essex County.

She was also active on the Democratic Committee until recently, having been elected as [District Leader] of her voting district for many years.

FIRST TV, FIRST CAR

[1:22:21] When asked when her family got conveniences like a TV, Lorena explained that other neighbors had a TV first. Her family would ask if they planned to watch a certain program and if

Lorena's family could watch with them. Her family got their own TV after 1951. Her brother Alfred got a car after he graduated from college, around 1957, for his job. Alfred would then take their mom to the Food Fair grocery store on Bloomfield Avenue, but prior to that, their mother had taken a children's wagon to and from the Food Fair to transport the groceries.

CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

[1:25:00] Lorena recalls that on Christmas Eve around 7pm or 8pm, her father would go down to the Lackawanna Station train yard and get a Christmas tree – he would get one of the last ones! The family would decorate it, and the children woke up to a modest number of presents on Christmas Day. Lorena notes that people didn't decorate for Christmas as much as they do now. The decorated tree inside the house was visible through families' windows, but people didn't display a lot of outdoor decorations.

Money was tight, and she recalls her mother keeping very detailed notes in black and white composition notebooks about the expenses: groceries, telephone bill, taxes, etc.

MORE TRANSPORTATION TALK

[1:27:10] When asked how she got around town, Lorena said she most often walked. She would walk from her house on Montague to her cousin's house on Rosedale Avenue, off Orange Road by Rosedale Cemetery [approx. 2 miles]. She walked to St. Peter Claver Church, to her job at Mountainside Hospital. She also took the bus places.

GRANDMOTHER'S VISIT – A SET OF DISHES AT THE MOVIES!

[1:32:25] Lorena notes that her relatives from the South didn't travel north very often, but one time, her grandmother did visit and stayed with the family when they were still living on North Fullerton Avenue. She remembers that her parents asked the grandmother to watch the children one night so they could go to the movies. At that time, when you went to the movies, they gave you place setting of china, and her mom was trying to collect a set.

[1:34:19] Returning to the topic of discrimination, she was told she couldn't enter Hahne's Department Store [on Church Street] until the 1970s. She recalls that it was a few years after Martin Luther King, Jr. had visited Montclair High School [September 1966], and it is noted that there is a plaque in the Montclair High School music room commemorating the visit.

TEACHING HONOR

[1:36:15] Lorena notes that she got the Princeton Award for teaching chemistry; only two teachers out of a whole state of New Jersey got that award. The committee had come to the high school to observe her teaching and had interviewed her colleagues. Lorena explains that she

liked to make the lessons interesting and engaging for the students, giving them examples they could relate to, and she gives some humorous examples.

DISCRIMINATION REMEMBERED

[1:38:45] in the final moments of the interview, Lorena shares some of the disappointments that she endured because of racism: she was not given the salutatorian recognition which she believes she was eligible for at Immaculate Conception High School when she graduated and she was denied entry to many Montclair stores and establishments as she was growing up here.