

Rosetta Mask-Griffin Interview Summary

Interviewee: Rosetta Mask-Griffin

Interviewers: Caitlyn Hickey and Zachary Keener

Interview Date: October 22, 2014

Location: Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center Conference Room, Newport News, Virginia

Length: 1 audio file, WAV format, 1:44:57

THE INTERVIEWEE: Rosetta Mask-Griffin is a lifelong resident of the Newport News area since her birth in 1923. She graduated from the prestigious Huntington High School in 1941. During her time there she was involved in the student-faculty council, through which she had the pleasure of working alongside the esteemed Dr. L.F. Palmer. Soon after graduation, she married Leroy Mask and had two children, Leroy and Sandra. In 1957, Mask-Griffin became employed as a clerk at the United States Post Office. Holding this position was atypical for a person of her race and gender in the south. Always active in the community, Mask-Griffin has been involved with the PTA and numerous other activities of community engagement. Following Mr. Mask's death in 1984, she married Truitt Griffin, who later passed away in 2002. Mask-Griffin is a staunch supporter of civil rights. She recognizes the gains made throughout the civil rights movement but acknowledges that the struggle is ongoing as modern America continues to confront ongoing racism.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Caitlyn Hickey is a history major at Christopher Newport University with a minor in political science. Zachary Keener is also a history major at Christopher Newport University, and is pursuing a minor in women's and gender studies. Both students are working with Dr. Laura M. Puaca and the Hampton Roads Oral History Project. The purpose of this project is to record the experiences of residents in the Hampton Roads area to document the influence of the civil rights movement on the communities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted in the conference room of the Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center in downtown Newport News, Virginia. Prior to the interview, Mask-Griffin received a tentative copy of interview questions in an effort to prepare for the variety of questions to be asked. This attests to incidents where Mrs. Mask-Griffin refers to questions not spoken by the interviewers. The interview takes a life story approach beginning with her childhood. Much of the focus is on the effect of the Great Depression and the Newport News shipyard on her and her family's life. Incidents of racism in the area in transportation and employment are described during her teen years and the alternative perspective of her trips north to Philadelphia illuminate differing attitudes towards race based on regional differences. Brief attention is paid to her education, shedding light on her years at Huntington High School and knowledge of the principal, Dr. L.F. Palmer. Additionally, Mask-Griffin provides insight into life on the home front during the Second World War and raising children during segregation. On her employment as a postal clerk, she describes overcoming workplace prejudice and adversity from her co-workers to create an occupation she would come to enjoy. Towards the end of the interview, the views expressed by Mask-Griffin become more personal and add to the personality of the interview itself. Two thirds of the way into the interview, a relatively brief interruption was made in the room where the interview was being recorded but it did not change the fluidity of the interview or depth of responses that were recorded.

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START OF INTERVIEW

Caitlyn Hickey: This is Caitlyn Hickey, and my partner is Zachary Keener. Today is October 22, 2014. We are interviewing Mrs. Rosetta Mask-Griffin. This interview is taking place at the Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center in Newport News, Virginia. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History project at Christopher Newport University. Good afternoon Mrs. Griffin or Mask-Griffin. So today we are taking what is called a life history approach, and so we would like to begin our interview with a few questions about your childhood. Do you want to go ahead?

Zachary Keener: Yes, can you tell us first where and when you were born?

Rosetta Mask-Griffin: I was born in Newport News, Virginia, which is where we are now, on April 22, 1923. It was a neighborhood that no longer exists, like most of the places that I grew up in no longer exist. Everything has changed.

CH: Really?

RMG: The new buildings are gone. The old buildings are gone and they've been replaced by new buildings. Ok, that answered that question. [laughter]

ZK: I think it was interesting--you mentioned that Newport News was consolidated.

RMG: Yes, in 1958.

ZK: 1958?

RMG: Yes.

ZK: So was it still Newport News where you were born, or was it a different county at that time?

RMG: Well, Newport News at one time, like Denbigh and every area from the boat harbor to Williamsburg, I think, was considered Warwick County.

ZK: Okay.

RMG: And Newport News [became] an independent city [in the 1800s]. The length of it was from the boat harbor [on Jefferson Ave.] to 39th Street where there's a railroad track, and beyond that was Warwick County. So I live on Center Avenue. Center Avenue was in Warwick County in 1958 when we were consolidated. That's when I moved there from the city of Newport News.

CH: Okay, so you were--.

RMG: So we consolidated and then, you know how possessive we become about our names. Warwick County did not want to be known as Newport News, and Newport News did not want to change its name because it was an independent city. So anyway, that was all resolved. So now it's Newport News from the boat harbor all the up to Williamsburg, and I think that part is in James City County.

ZK: Yeah.

RMG: Okay.

ZK: So you've lived in that same house since 1958?

RMG: [Yes, we built our house in 1958.]

ZK: Wow.

RMG: We built that house. The city needs--. I was reading something recently about how the city gets its revenue from the state. The state collects certain taxes that they do not share with the cities so the cities mostly have to depend on property taxes. And in 1958, we were already out of the Korean War, but every time we have a war things change. You know, they get better, and then they get worse. So a lot of people had come in this area to work during the war eras, and then all of the sudden they were able to buy homes or buy property, but there was no property for them to buy within the blocks from the boat harbor and 39th Street. So they began to move out into the county, and the tax base was following those people. So Newport News was losing its property tax money.

CH: Mmhmm.

RMG: And we wanted to consolidate, which we did.

CH: Hmmm.

RMG: So, there was no place for us to move. We were living in public housing that was built for defense workers, for the Second World War defense workers. [coughs] And during that time, people had come into this area because the shipyard was building so many ships, and they had a limited number of employees. [They] were coming in to this area from, mostly from North Carolina because some of them were close enough to even commute. Like Gates County, for instance, is just beyond Suffolk, Virginia, and you know how easy it is to get to Suffolk. So, they built special housing for professional [black] people, which was called Newsome Park. The government did this, the defense department. And they built Lassiter Courts, which was a more upper-scale housing development for defense workers. My husband was a defense worker. He worked in the

shipyard at the time--. After a certain length of time, they give you two years to move out as your income increased, which I think is fair, to let people with lower incomes have better housing. So, when we were ordered to move, we were already thinking of buying property, and we did buy this property in what was then Warwick County. [laughter]

CH: Wow, okay.

RMG: So in 1958, we moved into our new house there. It took us [almost] a year to build. And that's how I came to be on Center Avenue.

ZK: And you've been there ever since! [laughter]

RMG: Now, the way I became to be able to be on Center Avenue was--. Although my husband had a fairly stable job working with the railroad at the time--the war was over, and he was a brakeman on the [C&O] railroad [coal piers]. The railroad and the shipyard were the two best jobs for uneducated [black] men I would say, or the post office. So I was a stay at home mom. Most husbands at that time, this was in, 19[42]. I got married right out of high school, which was 1941, and at that time, and even before that, the men in my race did not want their wives to work, mostly because the only thing open to us was domestic work.

ZK: Mmhmm.

RMG: And so we had enough domestic work at home. [laughter]

ZK: True.

RMG: And anyway, as my [two] kids got to be teenagers, I wanted them to go to college. My husband nor I had an opportunity to go to college, so my thing was to try to get a civil service job with just my high school education. I was a good student. In fact I was an honor student all through school. And I had no problem passing the exams, but I never

had enough certification to take the job after I passed the exam with the exception of the post office. Now I passed the civil service examination [for clerks] three times, and each time they destroyed the record. I was always at the top of the list, but they would somehow destroy the register. Because I had friends who were postal workers, who were mail carriers, they would let me know because they were rooting for me to get a job. There were no black women in the South who held jobs in the postal service. So anyway, eventually they did hire me, and when they hired me the only way we--the only money we had saved from my husband's employment was in insurance policies. I had taken out endowment insurance policies for my kids, supposedly for their education, and we used enough of that money to buy the land for the house. Well, after I was trying so hard to get a job in the postal service--. I don't want to lose my train of thought here. We bought the land and at the same time it was 1957 when I was hired, finally hired. Up to that time I had worked at Christmas time at the Post Office. They would always hire extra help, and usually they would hire them from the register. So, low and behold speaking--. Oh, this has something to do with civil rights. After I was employed, I find out that there were many [clerks], not many but quite a few, who had not even passed the exam. Of course they were not my race, because none of my race was being hired as a clerk. We had one black clerk who had practically sued the government or somebody for his job for them to hire him. He was a male, but they still weren't hiring women. So I get this job and then I immediately realized that I'm surrounded by people who have college educations [and no education].

ZK: Um hum.

RMG: All of the black men that I worked with had college educations.

CH: Hum.

RMG: Some of them had been teaching before they went into the postal service, but the teaching jobs paid so little and postal service--civil service--paid so much more and had better benefits. They were not teaching, they were working as mail carriers. Now in the south, mail carriers were black. If you passed the exam and you were white, you were allowed to work inside the office. You could be a window clerk. You could be a supervisor. You could be anything superior connected with the postal service. So, that's the way that went. Well anyway, we built the house on Center Avenue. I was hired, as I said, in 1957. It was very hard because we had no money to back us up at that point, and at every turn there was a tax for this and a tax for that and an interest on this and an interest on that. So anyway, we made it through without any complaints, you know, without any [real] difficulty. And so, that brought me up--. Now what did I leave out about my childhood? You want me to go back to my childhood?

ZK: You may.

CH: Yeah sure. [laughter] I guess we're trying to take a chronological order of things so we'll start--.

RMG: Oh, ok.

CH: It's ok.

RMG: Ok, I was born near where the train station is now on 23rd Street, where [now] that beautiful shipyard building is. I was born a couple of blocks from that. There was a little neighborhood there and it was called "The Acre," and further south of that "Acre" was a little neighborhood called Dawson City, and only blacks had settled that. [They] settled there because they were ex-slaves.

ZK: Oh.

RMG: And the area that I was in was settled by--. I guess right after the First World War 'cause I--. The First World War ended in 1918, and I wasn't born until 1923. But it had a bordello there, and it had several little stores, and one black family did have a restaurant there, as I recall. My mother lived--. All of those houses there, believe it or not--I won't say all of them--but most of them had running water inside, and they had toilets and they were built by people who were, I guess, in some kind of business. Like I said, the bordellos, of course, they had nice facilities. My mother lived in one of those houses. Now she--. My mother was born in Richmond, and in Doswell [*sic*, Hanover County] I think, so she came here probably during the war, to probably earn a living because she had to be young. When I was born, I think my mother was twenty-three. But anyway, she knew how to make beer, called home brew. So that was her business, that's how she sustained herself.

CH: Wow.

RMG: Well, her customers were the seamen that came in because it was a very, very active seaport here.

ZK: Um hum.

RMG: And [foreign] sailors were coming here from everywhere. I remember "Coolies" coming through here on my street because that was just one street long, and some of them were her customers. Well, low and behold, Prohibition came during that time and my mother got busted for making the home brew. [laughter] So anyway, apparently she was never able to do anything else after that. But my father was one of those seamen.

ZK: Um hum.

RMG: And that's how, I'm sure, that's how she met him. But he was a fireman on a ship, and I have tried to determine exactly what the name of the ship was. I have one friend now whose father was also--it was a stepfather, really--one of those seamen, and we have kept in contact all these years, although right now she lives in Georgia.

CH: Wow.

RMG: So she and I have determined that maybe it was the Old Point, or was it the Black Point? The Plymouth, or the Black Point, one of those ships.

ZK: Um hum.

RMG: I even went so far as to research them at the [Mariners' Museum] library one time to see what I could find out about them. Because my father was in my life until I was about eleven or twelve. And then he disappeared. And my mother and my father didn't marry because my father was Spanish, and I don't know anything about my father's family, of course. They would not have been in this country. And I don't know if my father was a naturalized citizen or not, but in doing some research I did find out that there were some instances in which [foreign] seamen could be automatically granted citizenship in this country under certain circumstances, so he may have been a citizen. But anyway, things were going pretty bad. They went from bad to worse after my mother got busted. And I had an aunt here, so she was married, and she didn't have any children, and she was helping my mother to take care of me. And I remember a lot of things that my mother and my father did together, you know, while I was just a child. But, by the time that I was eleven or twelve, and my father was going to disappear, someone from the seamen--someone from one of those ships--contacted my mother to tell her that my dad had had a nervous breakdown in New York, and then later she was told that he died. So

them not being married, we don't know, you know? I never knew what happened to my father, and I haven't gone to that much trouble to really, really dig into it. I just have a curious mind, and I still miss him. But anyway, they were happy, and they made me happy. I was not an abused child. Nobody ever abused me, and I never wanted for things that people weren't able to give me, it seems, you know. It wasn't much, but I never felt just really, really, really--. I never felt that I was in a really, really desperate situation. I do remember one time after my father had disappeared and maybe we hadn't heard from him in a couple years, I came home from school one day and all of our belongings were sitting on the curb. And I think I was, well I can't remember exactly. It seemed that we had moved so many times, you know, that time is just flying too fast. Maybe we didn't stay in one place six months.

CH: Really.

ZK: Wow.

RMG: It might have been something like that. Well anyway, my mother just went out, and she brought all our things back in from the curb [laughter].

CH: She said we're not moving! [laughter]

RMG: But we were living--. What I liked about my childhood as compared to a lot of the kids that I knew was that we always had running water, and we always had a bathroom in the houses that we lived in. So my mother, of course, she had to resort to doing domestic work and doing the hard stuff that was worse than making beer. [laughter] But anyway, I continued to go to school. And, during that time, the situation and the economic situation was so bad in Newport News and I guess everywhere because that was the time of the really, really deep Depression. A lot of jobs had gone somewhere. There were just no

jobs. People who had jobs didn't have well-paying jobs, but then nothing was high, nothing was expensive. You know, you could buy a loaf of bread for five cents, and you could buy--. Everything was just pennies. It was costing pennies. So anyway, we were going to school half a day because of the economic situation. The city couldn't afford to build more schools so they split up the day. And a lot of those times I was going in the afternoon. And I remember that fifth grade was very hard for me. I guess that was the time when the economic situation was really worse for my family, but, I would go to school. I don't know if I was hungry, but my aunt was always giving me money everyday, and I would go to the dime store, and I would get a bag of kisses, and I would sit in school behind the big old geography [book]. And I would try and eat the kisses. And I don't know if it was because I was hungry. [It] probably was, but I can't actually remember being hungry. But I can remember how generous my mother was in spite of bad things. I remember there was a man, who used to come through our neighborhood with a basket, and he would have day-old pastries in one of those vegetable baskets, I guess it was called, with a handle. Maybe you've seen one. He had it on his arm. And before he started selling the pastries he came through one day, and he was hungry, and it was one of those days when my mother had cooked up pork chops. So I guess there were some periods when she had a little more money than she had other times, you know, and she would buy maybe a whole meal and other times maybe we would just be scrambling, maybe we just had a can of beans. So she gave this man a pork chop sandwich. And that gentleman--. I never knew my mother to have a boyfriend after my father disappeared although she was a good-looking woman. [laughter] But she was protecting me. So that man, every time he came in our neighborhood he always stopped and gave us something

out of his basket. Sometimes we really needed it. And to speak of the beans--. One day I know my mother had gotten down to just five cents, and you could buy a can of Phillips beans for five cents, and she sent me to the store to get a can of beans. And I don't know if we didn't have heat in the house, but for some reason we were standing up eating the beans off of a dresser top and my dad came home. And when he came home, of course, he always brought plenty, plenty with him, you know. But that was the closest that I can ever remember coming to us just not having enough food or not knowing if we were going to eat that day. So, you know, I was an only child. I don't think--. I can't ever remember my mother spanking me, although she scolded me a lot because I was kind of sassy. [laughter] And being an only child, I guess that's what you called spoiled.

[laughter] But I remember her saying to someone that she never spanked me after I was twelve. No, she said, "When Rosetta became twelve, I knew it was time to stop spanking her because she hit me back." [laughter] [She did threaten to send me to reform school.]

CH: So you were sassy!

RMG: But I always had a, you know, felt a responsibility to look out for my mother more than she was able to look out for me. So, I didn't have [siblings]. I was an only child. I now have [two] very close families that I accidentally came to be a part of, and they are like family to me, and I'm like family to them. Some of them think that I'm their blood relation because we have been so close for so long.

CH: That's wonderful.

RMG: So now you know why, as a child growing up in the Great Depression, your family was affected by tough economic times.

CH: So you mentioned that you grew up in different--. You kind of moved a lot.

RMG: I grew up in what?

CH: You moved frequently. Did you experience any differing race relations in those communities, or how would you describe the race relations?

RMG: The race relations? [Newport News was segregated—Negro, Jew, white.]

CH: Mmhmm, in the communities that you grew up in.

RMG: Well in my community when I was on “The Acre” everybody was friends with the white business people that were there. And there were a couple--. There was always a few white people who were there for whatever reason. I don’t know [if] they were born there, [if] they were just there. Maybe they were there hustling, or they just happened to be there because they liked the area. Or maybe they were there before the war started and didn’t move. I don’t know. But as far as I know race relations were good. [Blacks could be jailed for trying to integrate, but black and white were civil to each other.]

CH: Really?

RMG: I knew that we lived in a segregated society, and your parents were not ignorant of what was going on in the south against their race, and so they were very protective of their children, you know. If you were told that you were not accepted in a certain area [and] you had to sit in the back of the bus, we sat in the back of the bus. Now when you say race relations, are you, what time period are you talking about? [Growing up in Newport News was very restricting--and cruel things happened to those who strayed into “white” areas--stay out!]

CH: Really anytime--.

RMG: Was that in your question?

CH: We didn't specify a time period, but I guess throughout when you lived as child.

What they were like in your communities then when you moved up towards Centerville?

Is that it?

RMG: Center Avenue. [There are many areas outside of Newport News' thirty-nine blocks that no blacks dared to be seen in before civil rights were enforced, except as domestic workers in daytime hours only.]

CH: Center Avenue. So what they were like when you lived up there or--.

RMG: Well, when I moved to Center Avenue there were three streets up there, Center, North, and South, that were settled by ex-slaves. Those ex-slaves were--. Let's say Fort Monroe is very famous for having let slaves stay there protected during the Civil War. So there were always a lot of [ex-]slaves in this area. And, after the Civil War, they had to find some place to live. Now imagine they were going to try to live together. So they moved to an area not too far from the train station on 23rd Street in Newport News that was called, I think it was called "Brown's Point." I don't know if it had something to do with skin color or not, but they were there. Well, when the city wanted to use that property for something else they just automatically tell a group of people, "Well, you have to go somewhere else." Well, that somewhere else was North Newport News. It was way beyond 39th Street. It was in Warwick County. And some of those people there now, a lot of those people that live in my area now probably can trace their heritage back to some slave that they remember. So now there was nothing but woods on this [east] side of South Avenue. There was nothing but woods on [the west] side of [North] Avenue. Those three streets were just there and that's on both sides of Jefferson Avenue and Warwick Boulevard. Now what they did do. They would not let the [blacks] settle on the

waterside, which is between the James River and Warwick Boulevard. All those residents that lived down there in those three streets are white. So the blacks were living between Warwick Boulevard and what they call Newmarket Creek, which separates Newport News from Hampton. Newmarket Creek was where the mall is, where Sears-Roebuck is. It's the creek running down there. So those were the dividing areas. Well, those people were ex-slaves, but they were not dumb. They were smart people. When I moved to Center Avenue, there were a lot of people up there. So many of them were related. But on my side of the street were the ones who were not doing so well. So we had to actually clear some land that had never been cultivated in order to build the homes that we live in, which went from a [cross] street called Swan Avenue all the way back to Newmarket Creek. They were sort of like newcomers, you know, and the other people--. Well anyway, we found that most of those people between Jefferson Avenue and Warwick Boulevard in our race, they already owned their homes. Practically everybody up there was a homeowner. Very few on the side of the street that we live. And, of course, most of them, they had built their own homes. It's not that somebody built a settlement, you know, and said you come and buy this. So it made me very proud to be up there. But because they were kind of clan-ish, you know, not like the McCoys, and what's the other group in West Virginia? [Everyone in our new settlement cleared the wooded land and built their home.]

ZK: The Hatfields? [laughter]

RMG: The Hatfields and the McCoys! [laughter] It wasn't like that, but all people, you know, they sort of sort of look down their noses at newcomers, you know. So we were

the newcomers and we had to get accepted. My kids had to get accepted. And, so--. Am I telling you something that you don't need to know or--?

ZK: No, this is all important.

RMG: Hmm?

ZK: This is all important. [laughter]

RMG: Okay, what occupations did your parents hold? [pause] The most important thing I think they taught me was love. I never felt un-loved. I always felt loved, and my mother taught me to read before I went to school. And--. [She only had an eighth grade education. Dad was a fireman on a cargo ship.]

ZK: Wow.

RMG: So I was always a good reader. I remember her. I know she always read the funnies to me. [laughter] And she taught me to pray. But when I was growing up, and even later, I don't--. The only reading material that I remember in my house was the newspaper. That's the only reading material and, of course, it always had a comic strip in it. The comic strip was usually a little story that ran more than just one strip: "Maggie and Jiggs," "Little Orphan Annie," and there were some little kids in there that I used to be so fond of. And I know that my mother had a Bible because it was in her effects when she died. A very old Bible, which I still do have. And she taught me to pray, but I [seldom] went to Sunday school. My mother was not a church-goer. I guess they would not have accepted brewery makers. [laughter] Beer makers! [laughter] But anyway, my mother was--. She was just, as far as I'm concerned, she acted like a Christian, you know. I mean, she was not a cussing person. She was not a drinking person. She was not a low-life person. She did develop a drinking problem after I got married, and I think that was

because things just never got good for her. It was just always a hard life for my mother. Always just, you know, a day-to-day survival thing with my mother. But one thing I thought about this morning about those times, as bad as they were, as bad as they were with low-income jobs and no-income jobs and no jobs, no business ever went bankrupt. As far as I know, no business went bankrupt and I've always heard the saying you can be sure about insurance [companies], putting your money in insurance [companies]. Because insurance [companies] don't go bankrupt. Well, they never did until a couple years ago. [laughter] So nothing is certain.

CH: Almost made it. That was almost true.

RMG: I don't want to get ahead of you in the questions that you have in mind now. But you asked me about race relations. Well, there was one theatre when I was a kid and--. They had put theatres in the newspaper recently. Somebody's been researching the old theatres that have gone out of business, and that theatre was on the corner of what was 25th Street and Warwick Avenue, which they have renamed Terminal Avenue. It was called the WE-US Theatre. And that's where we would go, my mother and my daddy would go. Because like I said, there were a lot of white people that lived in that area also. And they were there because they were doing things that were illegal, you know, and white people, like black people, they do things that are illegal. So we would go out and get all dressed up, and I can remember myself wearing white gloves and a little bonnet and--probably was [it] Easter--going to the WE-US Theatre. And I've always liked cowboy movies, and I still do. And we would go to see Buck Jones and Tim McCoy and somebody. [laughter] Anyway, that theatre was not mentioned. But now on Jefferson Avenue, which was [the black] business area, there was the Dixie Theatre, the Moton

Theatre and the Jefferson Theatre. The Jefferson Theatre was a higher-class movie and not so old as the Dixie Theatre. The Dixie Theatre looked like it attracted people who didn't care too much about themselves, and the Jefferson Theatre was attractive to people who cared more about themselves. So that's the same everywhere. You had them on Washington Avenue, you had them on Jefferson Avenue. So no white people went to our black movies, but white people did establish businesses in the black neighborhood. White people also "bankrolled" businesses in the black neighborhood. It would be a businessman who was doing well someplace else and he knew a man who was business minded--a black man who was business minded but couldn't afford to start his own business--and he would [invest in his business]. And you know, nobody would know who owned it, but he did own it and a black man was working for him. But the banks were stingy then just like they are now. They did not want to lend [blacks any] money. But they were keeping the money like they are keeping it now. And so now they just--. If you put your money in the bank, you may not still be able to get a loan because they're loaning the money to each other and making a profit off of it. So we had a few of those in my neighborhood but we had a lot of independent black businesses. [We had black professionals in every trade]. We had everything we needed on Jefferson Avenue. We had nice little stores. Of course, they were mostly the Jewish people who owned the department stores. And well, you know, you picked the places you wanted to do business with, and it depends on how they treat you. If they're nice to you, they treat you as a valued customer, you shop there, and if they don't, you just don't shop there. Of course, a lot of us shopped off of Washington Avenue. Now on Washington Avenue, the big department stores, at least one of them, always had a lunch counter. Now you could

spend as much money there as you had, but you couldn't eat at that [segregated] lunch counter. And so we did what we had to do. If you had to go to the bathroom, you had to go home because no [store] would let you use the bathroom. You know, something about the bathrooms. But anyway, Sears-Roebuck opened a new store. Now we used to be partial to Sears-Roebuck because, historically, they said Roebuck was a black man, and he helped Sears go into business to begin with. In later years, you know, they removed Roebuck from the name, and now it's just Sears. But if you research the history, you'll find out a lot about Roebuck. So anyway, I shopped at Sears, and Sears built a new store at another location on [Huntington] Avenue, and they put a little lunch counter in there. The lunch counter was white only. Well, I stopped shopping at Sears. I don't like Sears now.

CH: I don't either.

RMG: That might seem like a small thing, but what weapons do you have?

CH: Mmhmm.

RMG: Somebody said, [pause] "A black man has no rights that a white person is bound to respect." And that's the life we had lived. So, the only right I had was not to shop at Sears, so I didn't shop at Sears. I go there now, I'm not a mean spirited person. But I don't like Sears.

CH: Um hum.

ZK: Um hum.

RMG: Now, [referring to written questions] "How do you remember discrimination in public in Newport News? Was this different than when you visited other areas?" My first [personal] experience at being--and actually being--discriminated against was when I was

fifteen. Was I fifteen, or had I already gone away? When I was thirteen, I was always a big girl. And at that time, my mother not being able to take care of me, I was living with a foster aunt and her husband. I think this lady was an Indian. She never said she was an Indian, but she looked like she was an Indian. And her husband had a very good job as a [longshore, loading cargo ships]. My father was a fireman on a coal carrying ship, but there were all kinds of ships that came in with all kinds of merchandise. None of these big containers that you see now but it was a well-paying industry. So, they let me [live] there based on my friendship with a girl that they had raised who lived in Philadelphia. She used to come here during the summer and she became so close to me, although she was older. She asked [a woman] who she called her aunt also--she was not a relative, just a good friend of the family--to let me stay there. So they ended up being good people. They let me stay there. And having a good income, you know, I was living well while I was there. But anyway, because they--. She had friends in Philadelphia. They asked me, knowing that I had nobody to give me anything--my mother wasn't able to give me anything, my father was out of the picture--to come to Philadelphia, and they could get me a job as a mother's helper [during the summer of my thirteenth birthday].

CH: Hum.

RMG: So I went to Philadelphia, and I noticed that in Philadelphia you did not have to sit on the back of the bus. You know? So, that helped me to remember discrimination in public life. [I was welcomed everywhere in Philly. No signs.]

CH: Do you remember what year that was?

RMG: If I was born in 1923, when I was--. I think I was going on fourteen that would have been 1937, okay.

CH: Okay.

RMG: And I did that for the summer, and I went to Philadelphia for two summers. So of course, I felt free in Philadelphia but because I had no reason to [pause], I had no reason to really notice anything different, you know? I just--. My family up there, they never said anything about "You can't go here, you can't go there, be sure to sit on the back of the bus, or be sure to walk on the other side of street when you see somebody coming that you don't want to be confronted by." So I accepted all that. I just accepted what I saw. [I liked it. I felt equal.]

CH: Uh hum.

RMG: But when, I think I must have been fifteen, when I got a [summer] job in the county, which was "Morrison." Morrison was in Warwick County. And I had to take the bus there. A long, long bus trip to get from Newport News up into the county. And I was working at this little restaurant that sold barbeque sandwiches. Run by a white couple, an older couple. And I got the job because they were friends with the people in my neighborhood. And this was a black and a white [common-law] couple, the man [he was Dutch] ran a dry cleaning shop in my neighborhood and this lady was very kind to me. She said I think I can get you a job there, and you know I--. All of this is just bringing back so much. [laughter] So anyway I went on up there, and I got this job making barbeque and doing whatever I had to do in the kitchen. And there was a lady working there, one of my race, also working there. She had been working there for years. She was an older woman, and I was a teenager. So one day I was going to work, and when I caught the bus it was always crowded. A lot of people were going out [to] the county for some reason early in the morning. And there were no [vacant] seats except one seat, and

that was right behind the bus driver and the seat beside the [white] lady was vacant. So my manners have always been impeccable. I said “thank you” and “excuse [me]” to myself sometimes. [laughter] So anyway, I was standing up and I said to the lady, I said, “Do you mind if I share the seat with you?” And she says “Are you used to sitting up front?” And I said, “I’m used to sitting”. So I sat there. Well, that didn’t make the headlines but everybody on the bus I think said something about it to somebody. Because the lady that I was working [for] confronted me [one day], and she said, “You think you are white.” And I said to that old lady, “If everybody white is like you, it’s something that I don’t never want to be.” I walked on out to the bus, and I said, “Are you going to pay me?” Well she didn’t pay me enough, and I told her I was coming back to get the rest of my money.

CH: Wow, so you quit that day. Good for you.

RMG: I had to go out and stand on that county road and wait for a bus, but it was a county and buses didn’t run, you know, but so often. I was so mad. I guess I couldn’t get scared. But I think about it later, and you know, she could have shot me. If she would have shot me, she would have gotten away with murder. But anyway, that was the worst experience that I had, you know, dealing with people of the other race. Just recently, maybe about ten years ago, maybe a little bit longer than that, when [J.C.] Penney’s was in the mall off of Jefferson Avenue, I stopped there to shop. And you could drive--the parking spaces--you could drive right up to the curb. So I passed a car that had two little kids in it, little white girls, and they couldn’t have been more than five or six. And one of them said to the other “That’s a nigger.” And I said, and it amused me, and I said, “Did

your mother tell you that?" And she said, "Yes ma'am." She had good manners, too. I said, "Then your mother is a nigger." [laughter]

CH: Oh, my goodness.

RMG: And, of course, when I came out, the little kids were still in the car, and I waved my goodbye to them, and they smiled and waved goodbye to me. So I don't know what the mother's reaction was, but I hope that it opened her eyes to what she was teaching her children. Maybe she didn't want their eyes opened, I don't know. But that's the only time that anybody ever called me nigger to my face so, you know, I have been treated very well face-to-face, even when I was working in the post office. Except, it was one lady who had been there [a] long time--. Because during [World War II], when all the men [were drafted], they had to hire women [as clerks], you know. They just weren't hiring any black women. They didn't want to hire women, but they did hire white women. And there was one bathroom on the workroom floor where I was, and it was the bathroom that the mail carriers had normally, you know, allotted to them because they were all black. Then the bathroom for the white [clerks] was in the basement. So anyway, the black guys used that bathroom in the basement. I never saw it, so I don't know what the facility was like. And [the carriers] gave their bathroom to the white women that were working there. And this was one lady, she was just as bigoted as--. Only bigoted, really, white person that I ever had any direct contact with, except that lady in the barbeque restaurant. But anyway, she was determined that she was not going to use the bathroom with "no black woman." And every time I'd go to the bathroom here she would come. But I think after she got into the bathroom then she lost her nerve and she didn't say anything to me. [laughter] But how people treat you a lot of times is how you treat them and how you

respect yourself, and I have always respected myself. So I became friends with that lady. In later years she began to treat me just like, you know, she should have been treating me to begin with. But [before] I was working there, they had always been granted the privilege of going across to the Warwick Hotel, which was directly in front of Newport News Post Office. The building is still there.

CH: Oh, ok, it's right, its right over here? Ok.

RMG: Uh huh. At Christmas time to have the little Christmas party. So, low and behold, right around me suddenly there were no women. And there was one guy who had come there from New York. He transferred from [a] New York post office--a white guy--and he said to me, "Rosetta," he said "Where has everybody gone?" And he knew where they were, you know. So he was making a joke out of it. And I didn't know where they were so he told me. He said "They're over at the hotel." [laughter] But you know, we can be awakened to our bigotry and our racial differences and our prejudices in so many little ways. They never went after that because they could see no reason to dislike me. They couldn't see any reason to dislike me, other than that the law said you're not supposed to be with certain people. So [at] Christmas, what I did, I went to Broadway department store, and I was going to buy a gift for every one of them because they had all been, as far as I was concerned, nice to me. Everybody had been nice to me. I had even included the lady that was not nice. And I always liked beautiful handkerchiefs, and you could find them. Now, you can't find them. And they always had handkerchief boxes, which were made a little bigger than this [ten inches], they were square. You could spread out a pretty handkerchief in the box. So I brought a handkerchief for every one of them, put it in a box, decorated the top of the box, and put it in everybody's locker. You know, we all had

lockers, everybody got one. This lady got one. Everybody thanked me except her. So now Christmas time, she played poker or she played cards. She probably played cards with the post-master. [laughter]

CH: Wow.

RMG: You know anybody that was anybody in Newport News played poker and so she used to brag about that, her poker friends. And she would [call] them by name and, “Oh, they gave me this, and they gave me that, and somebody else gave me this,” but she never mentioned my handkerchief. [We weren’t on speaking terms. I became a window clerk, she did not.]

CH: Oh my goodness. [laughter]

RMG: So I just took it as a joke, you know. I didn’t say anything to her about it. She never said anything to me about it. She didn’t give me back the handkerchief. [laughter] But anyways, in later years I said--. She came around. She got over her prejudices, you know, and I really liked the old lady. She’s much older than I and she was having problems, you know, and I--. So anyway, that’s the story of my life.

CH: So let’s move to maybe a little bit of your education. What do you remember about your experiences at Huntington High School?

RMG: What I remember about Huntington? [Excellent.]

CH: Um hum.

RMG: Well, [in 1937, it replaced an original Huntington High building and] when Huntington was built, it was a very elite high school in the south. Very elite. I don’t know if the government had anything to do with that. I’m sure that it had a lot to do with it, come to think of it. But that was before [the U.S. entered] the war [in 1941]. The Second

World War started [in Poland]. But anyway, it was an accredited high school. All high schools are not accredited, and I don't know what you have to do, what the criteria is for accreditation for a high school, but it was the only black high school in the south that was accredited. And we had teachers and school administrators, black, come in from other states, coming here to this school to find out how we got to that point because we had "dynamite" students there. We had "dynamite" teachers there and a "dynamite" principal. There's a question in here [referring to written questions]. What about Professor Palmer?

CH: Palmer, um hum.

RMG: When we were going to school [as freshmen]--. Immediately when we got to [high] school, when we first had our first orientation in the assembly room, we were told that we were ladies and gentlemen. Nobody ever addressed you without a title. You were Mister Zach, what's the last name, Keener?

ZK: Keener.

RMG: You were Mr. Keener. And you were Miss?

CH: Cait.

RMG: Casey?

CH: Cait. Hickey.

RMG: Cait Hickey ?

CH: Yes.

RMG: Oh, alright.

ZK: Miss Hickey.

CH: Miss Hickey.

RMG: And that made a big difference. We were not going to fight, you know. Kids used to fight in elementary school but nobody fought in high school. You were somebody.

CH: That's great.

RMG: And that's a part of Mr. Palmer's legacy. He was a strict man, but he was not a mean man. He was somebody that you looked up to. So we all loved Professor Palmer.

CH: That's great.

ZK: We have here a picture of you with him from 1941.

RMG: That's him.

ZK: With the student council.

RMG: Of the principal?

ZK: It's a little hard to see.

RMG: Oh yes, that's me. It's in my yearbook. Now how did you happen to get a picture of my yearbook?

ZK: No, this was in a different publication.

RMG: Oh, ok. And my name is on there?

ZK: Yes ma'am.

RMG: It sure is.

CH: That was written by Hattie Lucas.

RMG: Uh huh.

CH: It was her history of Huntington High.

RMG: All those students, all my teachers thought a lot about all those people on that row and all of us, really. Of course, some of us excelled, you know, more than others. But I may be the only one on that row that didn't go to college.

ZK: Wow.

RMG: I may be.

ZK: So what sort of activities did y'all do in that council?

RMG: What did we do? That's a good question. [laughter]

CH: Good question. That was a long time ago.

RMG: That is a very good question. I can't remember what we did. Organized a force to better understand and enforce the cooperation between students and faculty, the democ[ratic way].

CH: Did you just do internal things like with your school or did you organize any community events with the school?

RMG: Well, yes, I did everything. [I was co-editor of the "Year Book."'] I know we had a student council. Is this the student council?

ZK: Yes ma'am.

RMG: Or is this the student-faculty council? But we had a student council. [We were concerned about equality.]

ZK: Oh.

CH: Ok. Just-.

RMG: And we elected officers for the student council. And I guess we discussed academic problems or--. I really can't say. I can't answer that truthfully. We did something. [laughter]

CH: We did things. Do you remember anything about Dr. Palmer being fired and how the community responded to that?

RMG: Well, [pause] it was hard for the community to be really outspoken about things that they were unhappy about. But Mr. Palmer was one of-- He was head of the faculty of course, but we had two faculty members [pause] who were complaining, just like Mr. Palmer, about the differences in the wage scale between the white [and black] teachers. We had an accredited school.

ZK: Um hum.

RMG: So there was no reason why the [black] teachers shouldn't be paid the same in this accredited school as they were paid in other accredited schools. So they protested against it, and they were fired because of that. Now, I don't know if Mr. Palmer went to Hampton University or he retired. But I know [about] my civics teacher, Mr. [William H.] Robertson. He became a professor at Hampton University. He was my favorite teacher. So, how the community responded I don't know. They were just unhappy about it. But it was hard to form a protest because, you know, the Klu Klux Klan was still as active then as it is now. And, so you didn't want to bring harm to yourself unnecessarily if you have no weapons to fight with, you know? Nobody was on your side. But during that time, after Mr. Palmer was fired, because I was out of high school, we had a very belligerent civic-minded [lawyer.] He had been a teacher, but he was a lawyer, Hale Thompson. He was what you called a "firebrand." He tried to get a job on city council and that was not successful. But-- [pause] What was he running for? During that time he was running for city council, I was working with him, and I went with him to the [all-white] school board. The school board had a lot of power, as far as what went on in the schools, and I guess it still does wield a certain amount of that power. I don't know if they set the salaries, but I think they do. And I went with him in a small delegation to

petition the school board to change that pay situation. Hale, I don't know what kind of answer they gave him, but they probably gave him the kind of answer that a bigoted person would give to a black person. "We don't have to do it, and we're not going to do it," something like that. So Hale immediately jumped up to leave, and I was a little embarrassed about that but, anyway, I jumped up with him and we all just jumped up and walked out. I do know that he sued one of the universities that was giving a degree in something pertaining to law that he couldn't get in a black university. And it was a state university. They let him go to it tuition free, to that university, as a part of that suit [and he became a lawyer].

CH: Wow.

RMG: So anyway, I guess that all had to do with Mr. Palmer being fired. "What do you remember about any personal experiences you had with the student council?" [Mrs. Mask-Griffin is reading the questions provided by the interviewers before the interview] Well, we use to make fun of our president of our city council, I mean the student council of course. Good hearted humor. [laughter] You say, "He's not doing anything" but whatever. [laughter] Anyways he was a good guy. He went on to college and made a good life for himself. "What encouraged you to be so active in the community?" [Mrs. Mask-Griffin is reading questions provided by the interviewers before the interview] I don't know--. [I was always encouraged by educators in our school system.]

CH: I guess this is involving--. Sorry to interrupt. Involving like the PTA and the women's voters [Negro/black women's league of voters]. What encouraged you to do that?

RMG: Yes. [I was always encouraged.] I was always active in whatever I was connected with the school and with my children in school. When I went to the Post Office, the government had some kind of rule or law, and I don't know, I can't quote it, but you are prohibited from engaging in certain civic activities as [an] employee. So, immediately when I went to work, I almost disconnected myself from everything because I didn't want to jeopardize my job. And, of course, there was NAACP; the government was death [to] the NAACP [and all of its members]. They thought it was a communist organization, and they thought that we just ought to accept the status quo and not do anything and not say anything and just be satisfied with being segregated against. So that, as I said, that almost ended my civic [involvement].

CH: What kind of things did you do in those organizations?

RMG: Hum?

CH: What kind of activities or, I don't know, community events did you do in those organizations?

RMG: Now, I understand your voice a little better than hers. What exactly did she ask me?

CH: Sorry.

ZK: What sort of activities did you do when you were in the organizations?

RMG: [Registering and voting and meeting candidates was primary. Attending P.T.A. meetings and conferences was important.] Ok, well, the [Negro/black] women voters, as I recall, was mostly to make sure that everybody was registered and everybody could get to the polls, and everybody had some information about who was running. [Equality for black students and voting.]

ZK: Yeah.

RMG: Nobody black was running. [Never on the ballot because of prejudice.]

ZK: No.

RMG: So, we tried, and we tried, and we tried. We never stopped trying but that was what, as I recall, the [Negro/black league of] women voters was about [for blacks].

ZK: Did you concentrate on helping women to register or helping other African Americans to register?

RMG: I think we just concentrated on getting women doing the work [of teaching the urgency of voting; eliminating the poll tax].

ZK: Okay.

RMG: Okay. But there were no men in the [Negro/black league of] women voters. But, of course, when we were trying to get somebody registered, we were trying to get everybody registered, as I recall. Now, what [age] were you when you registered to vote?

ZK: What was it? Four years ago I think.

RMG: You were eighteen?

ZK: Um hum.

RMG: Ok, I didn't register to vote until I was twenty-two.

ZK: Wow, that's how old I am now! [laughter]

RMG: And it was mainly because, I guess it wasn't mainly because, but it was partly because of the poll tax. Now we always had a big resentment against the poll tax because we knew there was a time when there was no poll tax [but excessive requirements].

ZK: Um hum.

RMG: When a rule comes up that adversely affects a certain race, you know that the other race is making that rule to be detrimental to you. So the poll tax came about. You had to pay a dollar and twenty-five cents to vote. Well, this Indian lady that I was staying with that I say was an Indian, but she was black--. And they used to come around, the tax [collector] would come around to the door, you know, and collect the taxes on purpose. When the tax payer one time came to her door, she very arrogantly said "I've never paid taxes and I'm not going to pay them now." But I don't know if because it was resentment against the poll tax or resentment because she was an Indian and the country was not taxing Indians.

ZK: Oh yea.

RMG: Because this is their country. This is not your country; this is Indian country. [laughter] But anyway so I didn't even think about paying poll taxes. But when I did think about paying poll taxes, I had to pay it retroactive. So then I had to pay for the three years that I did not pay. Like instead of paying a dollar and a quarter, I had three dollars and seventy-five cents or something like that to pay for the first time. Well, of course, eventually I think the NAACP was very active in eliminating the poll tax, getting Congress to say that it was unlawful to tax people to vote so we no longer have to pay a poll tax. Now you just have to take your picture ID with you when you go to vote. So where was I? Following the Second World War--. "How did living in a wartime country affect your life?" [Mrs. Mask-Griffin is reading questions provided by the interviewers before the interview] Oh, did it. I have somewhat of a resentment now against there being no real effect in this country--or was not--when we went to war in Iraq. People were going about their business as though we were not even at war. And yet we had sons and

daughters and all kinds of relatives [volunteering,] giving up their lives, coming home crippled, and we're acting like we're not at war. We have not had to give up a single thing because of either one of these [last] wars. Except to maybe pay more taxes. Now, [during] the Second World War, butter was-- [pause].

ZK: Rationed?

RMG: Rationed. Sugar was rationed. Steel was nonexistent. All the steel was going to war. The first sofa that I purchased didn't have springs in it, I don't think. [laughter]

CH: You just fall into it!

RMG: I don't know what it had, but steel was going to war. Everything was rationed.

You had ration books just like people have food stamps, you know. You had a book, you had a ration. Alcohol was rationed. Whiskey was rationed. Gasoline was rationed.

Everything you had to have a coupon [for]. There was a certain amount that you could buy. They stopped making cars, you know, because steel was rationed for [the military].

So it was affected in that way, and we just managed. Something else may come to me, what I can't think of right now but a lot of things were rationed because of the war. The first income tax that I recall paying was during the war, after the war had started. Maybe the people in, I'm sure they were, in higher incomes were paying it. But people in low-wage earnings didn't have enough money to pay poll tax, I mean not poll tax, income tax. So there was no income tax [for my family]. But I remember the first income tax that I paid was seventeen dollars [while my husband was working in the Newport News Shipyard].

ZK: Oh.

CH: Wow.

RMG: And that was after I was married. I paid an income tax of seventeen dollars. And there were [U.S.] war bonds. The government was really pushing the sale of war bonds. And every job that you had, like if it was an industrial job, they had a way for you to pay [for] war bonds through your employer. He would take [bond money] out of your income and withhold your income tax and withhold money for the bond, so a lot of people saved money like that. We had saving bonds. What has changed [is that] now you can no longer [buy them] at the bank. But that was [also] a way for people to save money. And to get back to during the war, everything went up. The depression was over when you could buy a five cent can of beans. The Second World War came and a can of beans cost fifty cents.

CH: Wow.

RMG: Same beans, I'm just saying fifty cents but it might have been more than that.

CH: But still.

RMG: It was the same size, the size of the cans had not changed. But what did change during [this] war, and I noticed it at the dollar store now because I shop at the dollar store, you could buy a pound bag of gingersnaps for a dollar. You get [twelve] ounces now for a dollar. As soon as this [recession] hit, they reduced the size of everything. It costs the same but the size are reduced. Now during the Second World War, the same thing happened. We use to buy five pound bags of sugar. Suddenly you paid the same amount for a four-pound bag. Everything was reduced. And of course, I don't know if there was butter. Butter was rationed but margarine was manufactured, or whatever you call that [process], for the first time.

ZK: That's right. Oh yeah.

RMG: That was the Second World War. And then the margarine package--. It was colorless in a sealed plastic bag, the white margarine with a little round orange colored ball in it. And you had to keep [squeezing] it until you could bust that ball to get the color out of it to color the margarine [to look like butter].

CH: Ew. [laughter]

RMG: It was not in sticks like butter is now. And I think in Wisconsin, which is a dairy state--. My daughter's there, so I go to Wisconsin a lot; they [didn't] let anybody in Wisconsin sell [colored] margarine [in 1969]. [laughter] Wisconsin is right across the border from Illinois so I guess if you live close enough to the border you can buy [colored] margarine in Illinois.

CH: That's funny. I didn't know that. [laughter]

RMG: That's competition. [laughter] I bought so much margarine that when my kids got to the place when you could afford butter, they didn't even like butter. [laughter] They liked margarine.

CH: They liked margarine better.

RMG: But food tastes much different with butter in it than it does with margarine. It's a subtle difference but if you tasted both of them you would notice the difference. So anyway, in 1952 the library was segregated. Well, I always had a certain feeling about these places that's like, "What's so great about a white library when black people can't go to it?"

CH: Right?

ZK: Exactly.

RMG: What's so great about it? But anyway, I had no library except my school library when I was going to school and, of course, after school I didn't have a library at all. But so I thought, well it's about time, you know, when the library was [integrated]. It's about time. We were very handicapped not having a library, you know. I think some provision had been made where you could order a book through a library or by mail or something and the library would order it for you or, I don't know, give you some kind of access to it but you were not permitted to be inside that library.

CH: Wow.

RMG: "Is there anything in particular that you remember about the polarized views of whites and blacks on the desegregation process of this institution?" [Mrs. Mask-Griffin is reading the questions provided by the interviewers before the interview] Oh, oh the library? [This was a time when I realized how bigotry expresses itself. Integration was a trigger word. (no "nigger"; no negroes.)]

CH: Mmhmm.

RMG: No, we just kept on petitioning. Petitioning, you just keep on petitioning, you know, and in particular like me trying to get a job in the Post Office. They turn you down, and you just try again and you just keep on trying, and then you just keep on trying, and that's the way I guess it is with every minority. You just keep trying. And if [someone] were to ask you, for instance, what's so great about being white, what [might] your answer be?

CH: Not a damn thing. [laughter] Excuse my language but--.

RMG: No, you can't get a better answer than that. [laughter] Would yours be? Ditto?

ZK: Almost. [laughter]

CH: Maybe more eloquently put than mine.

RMG: “What were you and your family’s thoughts on school integration, and how did you see this process ensue?” [Mrs. Mask-Griffin is reading the questions provided by the interviewers before the interview] Well, everybody was just so elated because they thought it would just be such a great thing to have a book for instance that was not outdated. [laughter] All we got was outdated textbooks, you know. Somebody else had already had it and the latest thing was no longer in the old book, so it was a great thing. But none of the schools looked any better really than Huntington High School, you know, the white schools. [Home economics and carpentry were recommended for black students to supply the work force. No business skills except in white schools.]

ZK: Mmhmm

RMG: And I was elated to find out through the people who had charge of the schools and were active with both schools that there was no vandalism in the black schools. There was no vandalism in black schools, and it was rampant in white schools.

ZK: Wow.

RMG: There was none.

ZK: Mmhmm.

RMG: And right now you find more [vandalism] in the city parks in the white section of Newport News than you see in Southeast Newport News.

ZK: Mmhmm.

RMG: And I don’t know if certain people think, well-- I think it is an arrogance. They say, “I can get away with anything.” You know, and some people are just mean spirited. They just like to tear things up, and if, you know can get away with it well, why not?

CH: Mmhmm.

RMG: Now my thing--. Not growing up in a religious house per se, although I know my mother was--. I know she believed in God, and she taught me to pray. But I just didn't want to go to jail. [laughter] You know, doing some things [is] going to put me in jail. No, I'm just not going to do that. And I had no reason to want to do it. I was not a mischievous person, and I was not connected with anyone that was particularly [unlawful] or --.

CH: Mischievous?

RMG: Mischievous. So uh--.

ZK: You were just sassy.

RMG: [Yes.] About integration now: of course, integration was not easy. You hear a lot about bullying now in school, and you can imagine what it was like with one black kid. Usually there was one black kid in a class just to say that we integrated. And so they had to put [up] with a lot, you know. But if you watch public television, you see it sometimes playing over and over again, what these kids had to go through. Of course you had to be coached, you know, you had to be told. Like the story of Jackie Robinson, you cannot react. It's so easy to react. So my kids did not go to an integrated school because they were [out of] high school before the Civil Rights law was enacted, so I couldn't get this first hand you know.

[Interruption, 1:19:13 – 1:19:47]

CH: So would you say that your two children experienced any of the attempts of integration first hand? Did they come home with any stories?

RMG: [Once when my son asked why we were segregated, my answer was “because we allowed ourselves to be slaves.” Untruthfully.] Well, my children never had to use public transportation, for instance. That’s the one place you would have told your kids, “You know, be sure to sit in the back of the bus.” Once you tell them that I guess you don’t have to keep repeating it. But, by that time we had an automobile, and they didn’t have to rely on public transportation. But now, I keep flashing back to things that you don’t want me to repeat.

ZK: No, it’s fine.

RMG: I took my [two] kids to New York City because I had a classmate who had made her home there after she graduated, and we went on the train, and so we were going to eat in the dining car. Well, I guess maybe because of my complexion, I don’t know, I seem to have a little more courage than some people who were darker skinned than I who would draw back from the same situation, you know. Not that I thought I was white or considered myself white but maybe [it was] because I know how white people looked at me a little different than they looked at the darker skinned people. So we were going to eat in the dining car, and I didn’t think anything about segregation. They got a dining car, they must have some place, you know, for us to eat. So anyway, they had a corner and the corner had, like, a shower curtain, like how it can go around. Well, service on the train was very good then. And I was so proud of my children. We sat there and ate and they didn’t even get a crumb on the table cloth. [laughter] That was our first time to eat out because there were no [white] restaurants in Newport News that you could “eat out” but two nice black restaurants.

CH: Wow.

RMG: And anyway, they pulled that curtain around us, and our waiter, of course, was black because, of course, all the porters on the trains were black. And, if you were white, you could not get [that] job. So, that was discrimination against you. [laughter] It didn't hurt you. [laughter] So anyway he acted like he was very proud to serve us, you know. But that was just an offhand remark. Let's get back to here. My children would have been--. How did this affect the--. [re: how her children would have been affected by busing in between counties] It didn't affect their school experience, school integration. I thought it was about time, but my heart was really heavy for the kids that had to go through this. I mean, I felt so sorry for those kids who had to go through this. And I couldn't understand how people could be so mean and so hateful like I was seeing it on television, you know, to people that were not of their race. Of course, when I see it on television now with the [Sunnis,] Kurds and Shi'ites and all those [Arabic] people, they all look alike and they're raised in the same country and still they hate each other. Hatred is a terrible thing, and I cried a lot during that time. But I can't say that I actively did anything about it. But I still had a spirit of it's not right. And I remember my son got--. He didn't go to college, and he became a welder. He went to the apprentice school and became a welder and got a job in the shipyard. And I knew that in the shipyard they still had drinking fountains that said "white" and "colored." We were not black then. We'd been so darn many things that we don't know what we are. Anyway it was always white and colored. Well, I never drank at either one of them. I just ignored them all. And I told my son--. He was going to the shipyard. His daddy did not want him to go to the shipyard, and his daddy was a brakeman on the [C&O] railroad as was his father and also his brother. But anyway, he went into the shipyard, and he wanted to be a plumber, but he

didn't tell me this until some years later. So the [college] money that I had, of course, for him--. He went into the shipyard, and that money was used to send my daughter to college. But I said to my son, I said, "Now when you go into that ship yard, you act just as white as anybody in there. Don't you go in there acting black [or scared]." And my grandson became an architect. And it's always good to know somebody that knows somebody, and I knew somebody who knew somebody in [a white] architectural firm. And my black friend told me, he says if my child or my grandson wanted to be an architect, "I would do everything I could to help him," and he told me [that] he could get my grandson a job as an [intern] with a firm for the summer. They hired [interns] for the summer. And so my grandson, at that time, was living with me because I had become a widow. He stayed with me for about a year. And I told him I said, "When you go over there, you go over there dressed in a shirt and a tie. You know, don't go over there looking like you came to clean the floor. Go over there looking like you want to be a professional." I said, "Now after you see how they're dressed, if they wear jeans and t-shirts, you know, or more casual wear," I said, "you do what they do. But you go over there looking like you want to be a serious architect." So he did, and he told me, he said-- he calls me Nana--he said, "You know Nana," he says, "I was treated better than I've ever been treated in my life on a job." And he had [had] little menial jobs, you know. He worked at Williamsburg when he was in high school, in the kitchen I think, and maybe somewhere else when he was living with his mother. So anyway, I've always asked people to respect themselves, and act like you expect to be respected, and that's what I had instilled in my children, to treat other people the way you want to be treated. That's been my mantra, and that has been their mantra. And I don't even remember them fussing

or having any arguments about what went on in school, or being mad at the teachers, or knowing anyone else who was mad at the teachers. That just didn't happen. Now when I was in elementary school, I knew there were a couple of boys who were just bad boys [didn't go to high school]. You know, they were mischievous boys. I don't know if they did anything really, really harmful but they just didn't want to sit still, didn't want to do right. I don't know. [laughter] But there were always a couple. It was never a big thing. And I was always helping somebody. I was always looking for a reason to help somebody. I remember when I was in high school, [some] of the girls were drinking. I knew [some] of them were having sex, and I heard some things about that, but that was not something that would be expected of me. And nobody was going to whip me if I did something bad, but it was just not expected. So I'm I--. This one particular girl, she remained my friend until she died a couple of years ago because of this one incident. She was in school--. You could smell that cheap wine, and I had an orange in my locker. And I forget her name right now, but anyway, I said, "Look in my locker and get that orange out of there," and I made a face, you know. So she got the orange, and so that sort of took care of that stinky breath. [laughter]

CH: The cheap wine breath. [laughter]

RMG: Uh, huh. Ok. [Mrs. Mask-Griffin is reading from questions] "The most important gain of the civil rights. Do you remember how the Newport News community reacted to [the Civil Rights Movement]--" Oh, yeah we did that right? [In retail stories, maids and janitors became clerks. The peers of white employers had called them "nigger lovers" if Negroes were helped.]

CH: Mmhmm.

RMG: [Our weapon was boycotting retail stores for one year.]

ZK: So what do you think is the most important gain of the Civil Rights Movement?

RMG: Most important gain. Well, maybe I don't know the most important gain. Most important gain, most important gain? I guess the most important gain was with those people who did not respect themselves. They learned that they had--. We learned that we had a right to respect ourselves. If I could put it in one sentence that might be it. [Also it was a new feeling of equality and freedom from fear.]

ZK: Mmhmm.

RMG: Mmhmm. But I was not a candidate of busing. I don't think a lot about busing. I don't know how else things would have happened because white kids had always been bused [when] black kids had to walk to school. But I just never liked the idea of busing. I don't think it did the kids any good to be bused to school. I walked to school, and when I went to high school from where I lived, it cost me five cents to get on the trolley. We had trolleys then. And if I were late, I'd catch the trolley, but most of the time I walked. And that was maybe about fifteen or twenty blocks I had to walk to school. It was an exhilarating walk. [laughter] I loved walking! But kids now can't even hardly walk a block. You know they stay on the bus half an hour or 45 minutes and don't even get to walk a half a mile. So--.

ZK: Do you think that there's anything unfinished from the Civil Rights Movement?

RMG: As long as I stay black, there will be unfinished business. Yes, it's unfinished because there are so many hate groups. If you look on a map, if you were interested in doing that, and if you look on a map--. I was in Wisconsin one year. We had gone to Green Bay to watch the Packers. When I go to Wisconsin, I go to Mequon, a little town

outside of Milwaukee. And my son-in-law and my daughter took us up to Green Bay to watch, and someplace else, so we watched the Packers practice. And coming back, we were on a little road, and the road was taking us to whatever highway we had to get on, but I noticed on the side of the road there was a clearing leading to another road that was barred, and it had a sign there that said "Only Germans Allowed."

ZK: Huh.

RMG: I didn't say anything to my son-in-law about it, but it has stayed in my mind. So recently I came across a map, and the map showed all the hate groups that are in all the states, and there's only one state I noticed that didn't have a hate group in it. And that's North Dakota, and Wisconsin had about five swastikas.

ZK: Mhmm.

RMG: Showing Nazi groups in that state. Now Wisconsin, I think, was one of the states that at one time was communist or mostly, I mean, you know, they were embodying [communism]. There's a lot of that in the history of Wisconsin. But things like that happen because people are just dissatisfied with-- for some reason--are dissatisfied with the government. So we got all these hate groups, and most of these hate groups are dissatisfied with blacks because they want this country to be a white country. Well, the Indians were here [first]. Now when I heard--. What's the lady's name that was running for the Tea Party? The Alaskan lady.

CH: Palin? Sarah Palin?

RMG: Palin says we want to take our country back. And I laughed. I said, "Well, it's about time the Indians were heard from!" [laughter]

CH: That's funny.

ZK: That's very true.

CH: Uh huh, yep. [laughter]

RMG: Well anyway, no, I don't think--. It's because some people just got to have something to hate. They just have to have something to hate, and if it's not me it'll be you. If it's not you, it'll be somebody else because some, they get this superiority complex, and they don't they don't know nothing. Most of these hate group people, the ones that join them are illiterates. Some of them can't even read or write, you know. So they have no consciousness of self-respect. They just follow a leader that's hating somebody. And I've heard stories of how they felt when they actually got out of it or was able to get out of it. How emotionally upset to realize how they've been taken in by this hate stuff.

CH: Mmhmm. So you don't think that race relations will change?

RMG: Well, it's all in people's hearts. You know, you can pass all the segregation and integration laws you want to have, but people's hearts have to be changed. And I'm a Christian. I try to practice a Christian life, and it's my belief that God and prayer is the only things that's going to change your heart. Now I wouldn't bore you with how I came to that conclusion. But there is a God, and he has manifested himself in my heart and changed me in a way that I cannot forget and will forever be grateful for. So if that ever happens, yes. [laughter] But, hopefully, the lady whose little girl called me a nigger, hopefully her heart has changed, you know. So if you [are] in a bad situation, and I'm black, and you're white, and you need my help, you may not want my help because I'm black because--. I know at one time they didn't use our blood.

ZK: Yeah.

RMG: You could get--. The Red Cross was taking blood, but if they took any black blood they threw it away. Uh huh. Mmhmm.

CH: Wow.

RMG: It was something in the blood. I think the country--. I read my Constitution every once in a while. I don't know if this is in the Constitution, but there had to be a way for the country to define who is black. And it was if you had a certain amount of black blood, you know, one quarter of an inch or one milligram or something, then you were black. All white people don't know what's in their blood. But it's a great advantage to them to say "I'm white" because no laws have ever been put before the government that says white people cannot do this, you know, or you can[not] do this if you're white. So you have a great advantage there. Well, the hate people, of course, you know, are now dealing with the fact the country has a black president. My thing was we were going to have-- [a black president]. Our first [black] president was going to be a woman. I was so firmly--. No, no, no, that's not the way it was. I was firmly satisfied that we were going to have a black president. Now maybe this is one of the advantages of civil rights that you asked me. We have so many black men now and black women, too, who are intelligent, educated, highly educated, PhDs, and then whatever you can get beyond that, that we did not have before integration because there were certain schools that would offer these degrees and studies that we were not privileged to be a part of. We didn't even have the money to go there, you know, to study. There's just too many smart black women [and] men for us to, for this country not to have a black president. There's just too many. And how many white people are not really white? [laughter] They just think they're white, you know, so who are they going to vote for? If this person is running, they going to vote

for? Who got Obama elected more than the black minority? The Latinos. Alright. They may not have any Negro blood, but they are mixed in some way that this country doesn't consider them white. Now I was a census taker about twenty years ago, and I was taking a census up in Hilton, with no black people formerly were living up there. Now there are, of course. Integration allowed us to live anywhere we could pay to live. That's not always been a comfortable place to be. But that's one thing integration did. It allowed you to live anywhere you could pay to live. Well anyway, I was interviewing this lady, and she was whiter than you are as far as looking. And when she put race on her [form], when she filled out the place for race, and she said black. I didn't question it because the census tells you to write, now they said you to put whatever race you feel you identify with, and she put black. So she knows what her heritage is. I have known black people who pass for white. But it's always a shameful thing. They were never comfortable, and they couldn't let their parents know, they couldn't let their [white bigoted] husbands--. I mean black women, they couldn't let their husbands know about their [black] families. You had to lie about everything. They wouldn't have children because they felt like the Negro trait would show up in the children, which somewhere on the line it's going to be. If you got some black blood in you somewhere in your line, you going to have a black child. I don't care how white you [look] or how long you think you've been white. It's in the genes. Okay. In the DNA. [laughter] But anyway, so I was satisfied that we were going to have a black president. And I had told so many young people then, about five years before Obama was elected, it was my thing. I couldn't get a single black person to agree with me: "Oh girl, it ain't gonna be." One thing, they were afraid, and we're still afraid. We were so afraid that Obama would be assassinated. But the country was not

ready to have another civil war. So I understand that they doubled up on security. He has had the most security that any president has ever had. So I never knew--. I've heard of instances where people were plotting to kill him. As far as I know nobody ever got close enough to carry out that plot. But I would tell them, I said, "We gonna have a black president." And I would tell this to girls. I said, "We [are] gonna have a black president, and it's gonna be a woman, and I want you to be that woman." I have [challenged] so many young girls and made them think more of themselves and the way they behave because I said, "You[re] going to be the first black president." Well, I was so surprised when it turned out to be a man. I was happy but shucks! [laughter] It was supposed to be a woman! [laughter]

CH: You got half way there!

RMG: So anyway, we have the black president and, you know, we were all a little afraid and I'm glad that so far [he] has not been assassinated. I'm happy. He's now been a president, a perfect president, and this is the only time I ever--. I have voted in every election, every election because, even being a civil employee, I could vote, but I never had an opportunity to vote for a black president. And you mean to tell me I would miss this opportunity? [laughter] [Blacks could not get on the ballot. Gerrymandering was guaranteeing this.]

CH: No, you're not going to miss that! [laughter]

RMG: So anyway, he's articulate. He's educated. He's smart. He has character. He has charisma. He has everything I would want in a husband. [laughter]

CH: That's perfect!

RMG: So you can't say anything worse. I mean, can't say anything bad about that. So anyway, the next president will have a lot to live up to.

CH: Mmhhh.

RMG: Maybe he'll be better. I hope he'll be better.

ZK: Maybe it'll be you! [laughter]

RMG: We certainly need the very best we can get that's for sure.

CH: Yes ma'am.

RMG: So now.

CMH: So you mentioned in one of your phone calls with Zach that you had participated.

RMG: Wait a minute, say that again?

CH: Sorry. You had mentioned in one of your phone calls with Zach that you had participated in something like this before--. [Pause] I just ruined that question. I'm sorry. Hold on. [Pause]

ZK: You mentioned to me that you had done an interview similar to this before.

RMG: Oh yes, yes, with a young [black] lady [from another university].

ZK: What is it that you believe is most important about participating in these?

RMG: This? Well, one thing, if you don't know your history you're doomed to repeat it, so this is history. [laughter] I don't know anything else. I don't know how much importance you're putting on this, but it's important to me in a way because I tend to forget how I get to where I am now. You know, if I don't get a chance to voice it like I'm doing now, I tend to forget it, and if you forget it you can't pass it on. [laughter]

ZK: Well, we have it documented now. [laughter]

RMG: Yeah. Is that a good enough answer?

ZK: It's perfect.

CH: Perfect.

END OF INTERVIEW

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