

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Beatrice Green

Interviewed by: Reed Amadon

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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

RA: So, when you first came to town, did you start working for the Bakers right away?

BG: Two or three weeks later.

RA: Two or three weeks.

BG: She was looking for someone to be a nurse to her two children.

RA: What were the names of the children?

BG: The son was James Baker.

RA: The future Secretary of State?

BG: He was the future Secretary of State. He was a little boy. He was about 6 years.

She had a boy and a girl and the little girl was Bonner. He was named after his dad and she was named after her mother. The one who was with him was giving up the job so she interviewed me and she liked me and she asked me could I be a nurse to her children. I told her, sure, I would.

RA: I want to get back to that in a little bit if we could cover some other things. What was your college education?

BG: Two years of college in Selma, Alabama. It is now a 4 year college. It is a Christian college.

RA: What did you study?

BG: Nothing, just general college.

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RA: O.K., just academic stuff. So, like you had math and reading and writing?

BG: Yes. History mostly.

RA: History?

BG: Yes. It is now a university, Selma University. It is affiliated with the Lutheran church.

RA: When you went to college, what would it prepare you to do?

BG: To teach.

RA: O.K., so it was like a Normal School?

BG: Yes. Money ran out so they closed. So, they opened again. Now, it is a university in Selma.

RA: So, you were going to be a teacher?

BG: I was going to be a teacher.

RA: That is great. Now, where would you teach if you were teaching?

BG: They placed you. They usually placed you like in a small town.

RA: But you did not end up teaching?

BG: No, I did not. I ended up coming back into New Orleans, then I came here to Houston. My aunt asked me to move here in Houston, maybe I could find something here to do. It was during the Depression. Everybody was being laid off. Everybody was looking for work. Anything they could find to do.

RA: Now, what kind of work do you think you would find to do here in Houston?

What was available to African Americans?

BG: I really don't know.

RA: Well, what kind of jobs did you look for, were you thinking about working at?



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BG: I was thinking maybe some kind of factory work or whatever I could find. This came available so I took the job and stayed with it off and on for 40 years.

RA: That is amazing. Who was your husband?

BG: His name was Alli Green.

RA: Tell me a little bit about him.

BG: During the War, he worked at Eastern States doing chemicals or different things.

RA: O.K., so he worked in the refinery . . .

BG: And then, from there, he was drafted into the Navy. Then, while in the Navy, he went to Great Lakes, Illinois; from there, to Pensacola, Florida. He wanted me to join him in Pensacola, Florida, so I left the Bakers for 2 years and joined him in Pensacola, Florida. And when I came back, my job was still there waiting for me. From there, she wanted me to stay on. She had a secretary. And then, I became her secretary doing different things for her. And when she went to Mexico, I went to Mexico with her.

RA: How wonderful. What was that like?

BG: That was nice. She was the house guest of a friend and I was a house guest, too.

RA: That is wonderful.

BG: We stayed 1 week. I had a passport and everything to show that I was an American citizen because I could not go without a passport.

RA: What did you do with the Bakers? Tell me the kinds of duties and things you had there.

BG: Well, when her husband died, I answered all the mail, all the cards that came in, except the flowers; would tend to them, drain the water, put fresh water in the flowers.

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And she would rewrite everything I wrote. Answering the cards when her husband died.

He was sick quite some time.

RA: So, you would write it and then she would rewrite it in her own handwriting?

BG: She would look at it and see how it was and mail them out. Then, made the checks, drew the checks and sent them to the bank for Mr. Ball, that would go out for Social Security and just things in general.

RA: So, how would you describe your role? Were you basically running the household?

BG: Mostly.

RA: Mostly running the household?

BG: Yes.

RA: Tell me - what was it like working with James Baker?

BG: Wonderful. He was a wonderful, I said little boy. We were just helping doing different things. Taking them to school, picking them up in the afternoon, going to the country club with them - whatever they had to do.

RA: Well, he said, I understand, later he went to Princeton.

BG: He went to prep school first.

RA: Oh, he did?

BG: Yes, he went to prep school. From prep school, he went to Princeton.

RA: Now, you were tutoring him, right? You were tutoring him or helping him in his studies?

BG: When he was a little boy, yes.

RA: What subjects?

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BG: Those subjects that little children have.

RA: The math . . .

BG: The math, reading.

RA: Do you think that you influenced him?

BG: At the time, I didn't think so but he thinks so. As long as he thinks it, I have to believe it.

RA: What did he say? How did he let you know he felt that way?

BG: By a note he wrote me. You saw his book he sent me? He wanted me to have one of his books that he wrote and he wrote a note in this book to tell me how I influenced his life.

RA: Oh, that is wonderful.

BG: So, it made me feel very good to think that I had had something to do with it.

RA: Yes. Going back, when your husband came back here to Houston, what was his work?

BG: He went into painting and repair.

RA: This is Mr. Alli

BG: He helped build this house. We were renting and they were working on my neighbor's house next door. He said, "We need a house. I am going to build a house. Can you tell us where we can find a lot?" She said, "Oh, there is one available next door." And so, we negotiated and bought this lot. This lot was \$800 at that time. Every lot was taken. You see vacant lots now. There were Howards on these lots at that time. In the past years, all these houses were gone. And right now, I am the oldest person left in this area on this lot.

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RA: Was your husband supportive of your work when you were out working with the unions?

BG: Absolutely. Whatever I did, if it pleased me, it was all right with him. He said, "If that is what you want to do, go on ahead and do that."

RA: Was he ever concerned about your safety?

BG: No, I don't think he was.

RA: Tell me something about - what did you do for the unions?

BG: Volunteer. All of it was just volunteer. My father was not affiliated with the union at all but I had a lot of friends, a variety of friends and some of their husbands were in the unions and they were doing volunteer work and asked if I wanted to. I said, "Sure, I'll go." So, we went to the union hall and we did a lot of calling, a lot of volunteer. They gave us the names to call, like when it was time for a meeting, time for elections, and in the meantime, I was working in the precinct. I worked in the precinct 40 years or longer - just a variety of things.

RA: When you were working for the union, what sort of things were you on the phone about? What issues did the union have back in the 1950s?

BG: Well, mostly like different people running for different offices.

RA: In the local Houston politics?

BG: For the state, the city, like the mayor, councilmen, president - who ever was running, who ever they endorsed, they wanted you to go ahead and canvas different areas, every day calling someone, even if you called from home, that was classified as volunteering. Even from polls to polls, that was like volunteering. During the summer, get on the bus, go to Austin and lobby.

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RA: Now, what were you lobbying for?

BG: We lobbied for different issues - whatever issue was going on at the time.

RA: Can you remember any of them?

BG: No, I can't say what they were. It was something that was right for the people because the war was over then because that was like in the late 1960s and 1970s.

RA: Was the union involved in any of the civil rights issues in the plants of Hughes Tool Company or anything like that?

BG: No, they weren't involved in that. We had to picket some things that they wanted.

RA: O.K., and what did they picket for?

BG: Different prices . . . they weren't getting enough wages. The wages were too low. For the high wages.

RA: Now, who do you picket? What companies?

BG: It might have been Phillips Company some time. Just different companies.

RA: Oil companies?

BG: Different oil companies - whatever was involved at that . . .

RA: So, you were a picket . . .

BG: Yes, I would do it.

RA: You had a sign and everything?

BG: I had a little sign. And in the meantime, just before integration, a group of us went to Austin and sat out there protesting.

RA: What do you mean? Tell us about that.

BG: Well, we were protesting segregation

RA: O.K., now, segregation of what or just in general?

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BG: In general. Just wanted everything to be equal - equal pay for everybody.

RA: But you went to Austin?

BG: Yes.

RA: Tell us about that trip and what you did.

BG: Well, this was like a group of women doing that, decided to go and just sit out on the Capitol to know we were protesting and against segregation.

RA: Were you blocking any pathways or giving any kind of protest? It was just being there.

RA: We protested in our own way. And then, with the union, after the war was over, we made it on the bus, on the Union busses. A bus full of ladies, only women, would go up to Austin and sit in on Congress to hear what was being said. And coming back, you could discuss it and that was how that goes. During the summer in session and Congress is in session - we just go to watch, they sent us to listen which is „what was being said. And there is always a spokesman to come back and tell what is being said. And we would be at the union hall every night, sometimes, just telephoning different people, union people, tell them "go vote." You could not tell them what measure, you could read of and let them make up their mind how they want to vote.

RA: At that time, were there any black candidates?

BG: No. Yes, some of them. Sutton. Dutton. They had some black candidates.

Mickey Leland.

RA: Way back then?

BG: Yes. Anthony Hall. Different ones, you know, at that time.

RA: So, the union would get behind them and get out the vote?

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BG: Pealy. Judge Peavy's father. Those were the older people.

RA: We will get back to some of these things but I wanted to ask you . . . I know you were a Lutheran in Louisiana and there are not too many Lutherans in Texas - there weren't when you first came - what did you find when you came to Houston? What did you find here in town?

BG: When I came to Houston, I went to find a Lutheran church and I saw no little black Lutheran churches. So, I said, oh well, we will go to a white Lutheran church. Now, I had some relatives here who were Lutherans but they had not investigated any Lutheran churches, any black Lutheran churches, so they were going to a Baptist church. So, I said, "Let's go to a Lutheran church." She said, "Well, let's go downtown." We got dressed and went downtown. The Trinity Lutheran Church downtown. We went at night. We went to the front door to go in and there were men greeters at the front door. When we got there, they told us we couldn't come in. They said, "Oh, you can't come in. You can go around the back door to the vestibule and you can hear the sermon in the back." So, they put chairs for us in the back to sit down to hear the sermon. So, after that, we left and didn't go back.

RA: Well, how did you feel about that?

BG: I was very upset over it. I said I wasn't going back anymore because I didn't think it was right that you could not go in and worship, so we didn't go back. So, some of the men, the deacons came back and said . . .

RA: The deacons came to you?

BG: Yes, the deacons came to us. They just felt bad about it. They said, "We can have a minister come to the house." A minister came to the house and preached once or

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twice. Then, after that, they said, "We will find a place." So, we went to Blackshire School and they set an area where we could have service. Then, I don't think the white Lutherans were happy so they said, "We will find a place to build you a church." There was one man, I think he might have been a millionaire, he said he had some apartments that were vacant. He said, "I will tear down the apartments. You can have some lumber. There is a vacant lot. I will sell you the lot." So, they built a pa.rsonage and a church and they sent us a vicar. His name was Gerhart Lang. He came from St. Louis, Missouri. He could not join the people at church because he was not a minister. He was just a vicar. He could give instructions. He could not baptize, manT, nor give communion. So, he said, his brother, Walter L*g was looking for a church, some town in Texas. He said, "If you want him, you can give him a call and he will come and be your minister." So, Paster Walter Lang came. The vicar could give instruction. He gave instruction to 13 people. And my husband was the first black man to join the Lutheran church in the state of Texas. And, in fact, Holy Cross Lutheran Church is the first black church in the state. They had no black Lutheran churches nowhere in the state.

RA: Is the Lutheran church now integrated?

BG: Oh, yes. It has been integrated for years.

RA: O.K., so you could go to any Lutheran church now?

BG: Anywhere you want to, you can go and be a member. But I never left my church.

RA: When did the church integrate?

BG: It integrated so easily, you don't know when it integrated. It was so easy. All you know you're mingling. And this man, Mr. Waltman, he gave money to the different churches. He gave us the lumber and among our relatives, we had carpenters and

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painters, so a lot of them put the church up, built the church. And years later, we rebuilt the church and turned it another way. It is a big church now. Before, it was just like a lumber.

RA: Where is it located now?

BG: It is located on Rosalie.

RA: Rosalie.

BG: It is across from Ryan Middle School. Ryan Middle School is on Elgin. It is right across from Elgin, on Elgin. It is Stewart and Rosalie.

RA: That used to be Yates High School. I

BG: Yes. Around that area now, it is barren because many houses have been torn down.

RA: Do you remember you told me that there were civil rights activities going on, let's say, about that time. Were you conscious of what was going on around you - the sit-ins and things like that?

BG: Yes.

RA: Did you have any experience with any of that?

BG: I experienced going to the different stores. A lot of the stores were segregated.

All of the large stores were segregated.

RA: What would that mean to you?

tsG: It meant I couldn't go in.

RA: O.K.

BG: You could go in the small stores. You could go into Foleys but you didn't go

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there too much. But the large stores, when you got to the door, they would tell you you

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couldn't come in. They said, "No coloreds can come into this store." That was downtown. But somehow or another . . . I don't know when Foleys integrated but you could go in all the little stores like Lerners, Penneys, but you could not go into Sakowitz or Everitt-Buelows - none of the large stores.

RA: Tell me about that story where you walked in on a sit-in.

BG: Oh, yes, I did walk in on a sit-in. I walked in on a sit-in in Walgreens Drug Store.

All the kids were sitting on the counter. I walked in, I looked around, I walked out. It embarrassed me.

RA: Really?

BG: Yes.

RA: Why was that?

BG: Well, to see these kids sitting around and not being served. That was an embarrassing situation. They were just sitting down, some of them just studying their lessons. I said, why should I come in here and be served and these kids are sitting down, their right to be served, and not being served? So, I looked around, I turned around and walked out because I was for what they were doing. They were for the right thing.

Trying to integrate Walgreens. Even Walgreens. And riding the bus. The busses were segregated. You'd get on the bus, drop your money in, go around the back to get on the bus. I did not think that was right. And if you were sitting half way and there were vacant seats in the back, when the other whites came in, the bus driver said, "Move the sign back and get back." You always had to get behind that sign. The sign said Colored

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on one side, Whites on the other side. So, the whites had white. You could not sit above that. You had to get behind that. And if the white had filled up and there was a vacant

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seat in the back, then you would take that sign and move it back and they filled up to get into the back. You could not go above that sign. You would have to stand up in the back and hold onto a rail. And you never could go out the front. You had to get out in the back. You'd pay in the front, go around to the back and get in the bus.

RA: What about restaurants and things or going to get an ice cream?

BG: You couldn't go into a restaurant.

RA: So, if you went to a restaurant, you went over here in this neighborhood?

BG: I never did attempt to go. I imagine they had seated colored and white but I hardly ever went to a restaurant.

RA: Well, the last time we talked about this . . . how did you feel about that? How did you deal with it?

BG: I really didn't feel good about it at all because I felt it wasn't right. I always thought everybody was equal, see, God created everybody equal, so I thought everyone should be equal regardless of race or color. I know when we were working at the polls, we had black polls. I worked that poll 40 years. And now and then in the community home, integration, and you see whites trickling in, other nations trickling in. But I really did not feel right about any of it.

RA: You grew up on Louisiana and you said Louisiana \^,here you were was relatively integrated.

BG: Well, where we lived, it was like a commune. They were all mixed up. Whites

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here, blacks there. I imagine that is where they grew up and they did not move out of the area.

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RA: When you were here in Houston, were you aware of other things going on? I guess the question I asked you last time was how did you feel, what did you feel the result of civil disobedience was going to bring about? Were you afraid that it would lead to violence?

BG: I was afraid of race riots. I was afraid people were burned in the black area, not the white area. I was afraid that robbing would go on and just bomb out all the black people. Somehow, I did not want anyone to get hurt or get killed, neither race to get hurt or get killed. I longed for everybody to try to get along with one another if possible.

RA: But you had a feeling of anxiety about the possibility of bad things happening?

BG: I did, because you never knew what was going to happen. All the riots, the burnings, people getting killed which really wasn't, to me, fair. I felt that God had created everyone equal but there was no equality at all.

RA: When you look back at all your years, are you happy with the progress that has been made? -

BG: Well, there is still more that could be done but we have come a long way.

RA: What do you think is left to do?

BG: What is left to do? Well, better jobs. I still feel that a lot of blacks are not getting top jobs and a lot of them are really qualified for top jobs and top pay, equal pay. If you are qualified for a job, I think you should be paid for the job and not paid less because when I paid. . . like, if this chair was a certain amount, I feel I should make enough

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money to pay for that and not look at it, walk off and leave it - and somebody else come along; in other words, "I'll take that."

RA: Because they can afford it?

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BG: Yes. They could afford to get it.

RA: If you had the chance, or, I am sure you do have the chance, what will you tell your children about your experiences and how they should act or how they should deal with today? What do you think is important about what you have learned? What would you tell your grandchildren?

BG: I would tell them how it used to be, how things were and tell them to be thankful and be appreciative of what is going on now. And they say, "Oh, we are glad we didn't live at that time." They say, "Oh, that is old time." A lot of things, they say, "in the olden days. When you lived in the olden days." They say, "We live in the now days now." I tell them to look back and see what history was at that time and how things have changed. The young people today, I don't think they are that interested. The ones that are coming along now - "Oh, that was then. This is now." I say, "But you have to learn history, what was in the past, and just keep looking for better days. For equal pay. Equal pay for everyone."

RA: Do you think your children are as interested in education or do you think they are

BG: I think the majority of them are. Now, some are not. Some are just happy go lucky, as things are. "If I have a roof over my head, something to eat" they are satisfied. But now, they are reaching higher goals. They say, "If this one gets it, why can't I get that, too?"

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RA: So, they are competitive?

BG: Yes. Climb higher. Reach the pinnacle. Don't look down. Keep going forward, you will reach the goal you want to attain.

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RA: When you were living here in this community, you were very busy. I mean, I remember seeing all the photographs of all the things you did. I picked up this real sense of a strong community. Does that still exist? Do you feel that the neighborhood has changed?

BG: Well, it has changed. A lot of people have moved out, gone way out. You can look around. This was a beautiful neighborhood at one time. Most of them have died or moved on. They were doctors, lawyers, professors, teachers. It was just like a little network where you could not go beyond that. But after integration, segregation, they moved all over, they left the neighborhood, moving out towards River Oaks University. You just don't see them anymore. Even in the churches. They are all going out to the mega churches. Now, next door, Dr. Bartlett, well, he is dead now. Across where the Duprees lived, they are gone. All the people around - the doctors, the lawyers from my generation - they are gone. And so, the young people are not coming back this way. They used to call Third Ward was the elite ward. If you lived in Third Ward, that was great. But now, people are spread in every direction.

RA: Do you feel like we have covered everything pretty much?

BG: I think we did. What do you think?

RA: I think we have. So, is there anything you can think of that would sort of revitalize the neighborhood, that would bring some of that back, do you think?

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BG: What is happening is so many houses . . .

RA: Well, do you think there is a chance for the neighborhood to come back or do you think it will be overtaken by the development?

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BG: It has changed and so many houses are torn down. One time, they thought the University of Houston would take a lot of this area. I don't know. TSU might take some of it, too. When you go down Elgin Street, all these houses are gone. You go to Holman Street, some are vacant and gone, too. One time, they were calling Third Ward Neartown and another name besides Neartown. They weren't saying Third Ward too much. I think eventually, there won't be any more wards because where Delores is, the rail is coming that way from the west on down connected with Rice or St. Thomas, TSU and on down, the University of Houston. And then, there is another one over on the east side. And they say by 2012, it will all be built. So, that means they would be tearing down the houses, uprooting trees. So, I would say in about 25 years from now, you never know what this will look like because 25 years ago, this was thriving.

RA: Are there any pictures of what it looked like back then?

BG: No, I really don't have any.

RA: Yes, that would be very interesting.

BG: Because there are 2 houses across the street, they are gone. There is the corner gone. And especially since Hurricane Ike destroyed a lot of houses . . . now, the house across the street is being renovated.

RA: This one right here?

BG: This one right here is being renovated and the one across the street, too.

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RA: Is there anything you would like to say? This is a chance for you to kind of just . . . this is going to be here for a long time. Is there anything you would like to tell us, anything you would like other people to know about your life and about your experiences?

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BG: About my life? As is or was?

RA: Whatever -- just what you want people to know, what is important for people to know.

BG: What is important for people to know? Well, always do the best you can and help your fellow man. If you can raise someone else up, do so. Instead of downing a person, uplift that person. Put God above things and I think your life will be fine. A lot of people don't believe that way though.

RA: But you always grew up that way?

BG: I did.

RA: Do you have a large family here still?

BG: il.r" i, Houston?

RA: Yes.

BG: Oh, yes. I have family in Houston. As I was telling, we are getting ready for our family reunion. Delores was there the other day. The largest we have had . . . if all my family came together, there would be over 300 or more. They are scattered all over the United States now. We are planning a family reunion in July at the Marriott Hotel. We hope we have a nice attendance. We don't know as of now.

RA: Oh, you have not had your family reunion yet?

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BG: Not yet.

RA: Let me go over some things here. You said when you were living in town, the trains were segregated, the busses were segregated.

BG: Oh, yes, the trains, the busses, everything was segregated. As I said, you had to get in the bus from the back.

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RA: Did you know when integration came in, how did that . . .

BG: To me, it was smooth. I mean, well, it wasn't like a lot of other places - all these riots and burning, burning, where they said burn baby bum.

RA: So, Houston ended up not having the violence that you had . . .

BG: Not as much as other places. I don't know why . . . it wasn't bad.

RA: Do you know why that happened? Do you have any idea why it was different?

BG: Maybe because Houston is a melting pot - so many different nationalities trying to get along with each other. Maybe that had something to do with it.

RA: Yes, well, Beatrice, I appreciate talking with you and I feel like we have gotten a lot of good information. I think we have covered pretty much everything. I really appreciate it. We might find out there might be some other tidbit we missed, then we might want to come back and do something but I think there will be some good bits here. Do you think, Scott . . .

RA: Did we ask Beatrice about her involvement with Yates High School?

RA: No, she wasn't really involved.