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Flora Williams: Again?

Fred Beaton: No, Just keep on.

FW: And I was born in Manning, South Carolina, but later moved to Jacksonville, Florida with my parents. Went to school there, elementary school, high school, and also entered nurse training school there at—formerly Brewster Hospital. After three years of training there, I did some private duty nursing in the city, about two years, and then decided to move to Tampa, Florida.

FB: Okay, can you tell me what year this was when you came to Tampa?

FW: Uh, nineteen—1938.

FB: Nineteen thirty-eight.

FW: And I worked about seven months at Clara Frye Hospital.

FB: Okay. Can you give us some of the conditions of Clara Frye Hospital when you worked there?

FW: Well, the conditions at that time were deplorable, because it was just an old house—not really built for a hospital, but sort of a makeshift thing that they used as a hospital. And there were many nurses working there, and Dr. T.W.P. Johnson was the—

FB: Superintendent?

FW: —was the superintendent at that time.

FB: Okay, can you name some of the nurses that was there when you was (inaudible)?

FW: Mrs. Inez Hooks. Mrs. Julia Pickens. Mrs. Coreen Glover. There were others, but I can't recall them. And we lived right in a small section, a small house, right opposite the hospital building, the nurses did; [that was] the nurses' quarters. We lived two in a room at that time. Living conditions were very poor, and salary was very meager. The salary was forty-five dollars a month.

FB: Can you tell us a little about Clara Frye? Did you come in personal contact?

FW: Well, Mrs. Clara Frye? She was dead at that time.

FB: She was dead?

FW: Right. And had died many years before then, I don't know exactly when. I know she had two sons that were still living in Tampa at that time. Other than that, I didn't know much about Clara Frye herself.

I got married, and I didn't do any work, then, for several years. I decided to go back to work, but I became pregnant with my first child so I didn't go back to work then. Later on, I decided to go back—after he had gotten up about eighteen months, I decided to go back work again. But then I became pregnant again, so that delayed me. And I did not apply for work until after my second child was born, and that was in the year of 1942. I applied then, but didn't get work then. So, I later applied to Hillsborough County Health Department in September of 1944, and I got a job then as a staff nurse under the direction of Mrs. Jean Martin Moore. Dr. Charles Pease was the head; he was the director at that time.

FB: Okay, where was this building located?

FW: This building was located at 1402 Tampa Street.

FB: 1402 Tampa Street. Okay, now, during this—

FW: 1402 or 1420.

(Dog barks)

FB: We'll find it. Okay, during this time, say the thirties [1930s] and forties [1940s], what were the present conditions of the black people as a whole in Tampa?

FW: The thirties [1930s]—

FB: Thirties [1930s]—

FW: I can't tell you about the thirties [1930s].

FB: Or the forties [1940s].

FW: But the forties [1940s]—the condition of the people?

FB: Of the people.

FW: Was terrible, because during the forties [1940s], there was war going on. Transportation for black was very meager, because they had to depend on—either walk, or depend entirely upon the streetcar. That was the early forties [1940s]. You had to travel distances for work and so on and so forth. During that period of time, most blacks were depending on domestic work in white homes, because there were no other jobs available to the laboring class of people.

FB: I see.

FW: So, the women depended on the domestic work, and of course, the men depended on the work with the city: sanitation, and the city streets, city sewer, city water works department, and so on and so forth like that, you know. Because at that time, they had no jobs. There were no jobs available at that time for black people, say running, driving heavy equipment, telephone service, and with TECO [Tampa Electric Company] and with GTE—that's just General Telephone. And there just were no jobs available, that's all.

FB: Okay, now—

FW: And for the young people, no jobs. If you weren't a schoolteacher or a nurse, you just didn't get anything to do. And of course, the youngsters had nothing—teenagers had nothing to do at all.

FB: Okay, getting back to your work as a whole. When you first got there, were there any other blacks employed there?

FW: Yes, there were three other black nurses employed there when I first started: Mrs. Madelyn Norton, who is deceased, Johnnie Mae Abrams, and Mrs. Kurbo. But they didn't stay long, because Mrs. Norton expired and Mrs. Abrams moved out of the city, and so did Mrs. Kurbo. I was the only one left there for a while, until several others were hired: Mrs.—(murmurs to herself)

FB: (inaudible)

FW: Mrs. Ruth Carr Green, now deceased, and several others. I can't remember their names. During those years, there was quite a period of turnover with black nurses, as well as white nurses, you know. But then, in later years, they decided to hire more black nurses. I think Mrs. Martha Kennedy, Mrs. Johnnie Mae Fleming, and Mrs.—well, several other nurses, but they also stayed a while and finally moved away, you know.

FB: What was the policy concerning the white and black patients? Were there any differences?

FW: Well, yes, there was difference not only with the patients because there was difference with the nurses. During that time everything was very, very segregated, because everything was black and white.

FB: (inaudible)

FW: And everything told you “black,”—not “black,” but they said “white” and “colored.” At that time they didn't use the word “black;” they said “white” and “colored.” “White” and “colored” signs over fountains, because you had a white fountain and a colored fountain to drink from, white water and black— (inhales sharply) But then they had lavatories; you had a white lavatory and a white restroom and a black restroom. And the white patients sat on one side, and the black patients sat on the other side.

I never saw anyone actually mistreated myself, but they said that—people often made the statement that the nurses weren't very nice to you and some of the doctors hollered at you or spoke rudely to you. But I never knew of that happening myself, because I never saw anything like that. As far as I was concerned, the nurses—whichever nurse waited on you, white or black, they were all very courteous and very nice to you.

FB: Oh, so what you're saying is that the white nurses did get a chance to wait on black people?

FW: They did, all the time. We seldom had enough black nurses there to wait on the white patients, but the black nurses were not waiting on the white patients in the beginning. See? But the white nurses did wait on the black patients.

FB: Okay, were there any black doctors there?

FW: Yes, the only black doctor—well, during those early years, Dr. [Edward] Archie was there. He was not right—he was Hillsborough County Health Department, too, but he was with the city. Dr. White really worked with Hillsborough County Health Department, because he did all the immunizations and the physical examinations in the schools for black children. And of course, they had white doctors to do it in the white schools for white children. Then there were clinics, too; there were white clinics and black clinics.

FB: Do you recall a white or black clinic?

FW: Well, the black clinics were on one day and the white clinics were on the other days, because they had white child health care conferences and black child health care conferences. They had black maternity clinics and they had white maternity clinics. And of course, there were not enough black nurses to take care of all of the black patients, so white nurses were scheduled to come in and help the black nurses. But the black nurses,

in the beginning, ran the black clinics.

FB: Oh.

FW: Yeah. We ran all of the black clinics, the black child health conferences, as well as the black maternity clinics. (Dog barks) But after integration took place, in the beginning, they—

FB: Excuse me, when you say integration, what years are you referring to?

FW: I'm referring to—let's see, ten years ago or twelve years ago. That would be—no, it's been more than that.

FB: Round about sixty-eight [1968], sixty-nine [1969], right there?

FW: It was before by then. When integration must have first started, it must have been about sixty-five [1965].

FB: Sixty-five [1965].

FW: I'd say back as far as that, about sixty-five [1965]. Well, by that time we had a new director, too, of the whole department, and a lot of changes took place, because they took down all the signs of "black" and "white." There were no signs in the health department at all then, "black" and "white." Because it was just one body of people.

FB: Okay.

FW: And then the nurses became integrated, because the white nurses didn't sit separately up in one department and black nurses in another department. Everybody sat together, and everybody could chose his own desk. This was after sixty-five [1965]. Mr. Hammond had a whole lot to do with this situation.

FB: Are you talking about Mr. James Hammond?

FW: Mr. James Hammond had a whole lot to do with this situation, the rearranging of all of this, because he was a public relations man, I think, at that time. And he had quite a bit to do with this whole public change in Hillsborough County Health Department. And he made many visits up there in the health department before these changes took place. And as he began to come in regularly, then he saw that these changes were taking place, you know? Because the nurses could go into the coffee room and drink coffee—black nurses—and the black nurses then could mingle around with the white nurses without thinking, "Oh, they don't want me there," or, "I shouldn't go in there, because that's for white folks," you know. But—go ahead.

FB: Okay, prior to this time, the black nurses couldn't take breaks or anything?

FW: They weren't particular might to taking a break. If you took a break, you went to the lavatory, and you went to the colored lavatory downstairs; you didn't go to the white lavatory where everybody went to upstairs.

FB: Oh.

FW: Right. If you took a break, you just took your break and you sat at the desk quietly without doing anything, or you went downstairs and you went to the restroom, or if those girls that smoked went outside and got a smoke or whatever they wanted to do, you know. And that was fifteen minutes, and then you were back at your desk.

But through all of this, so many years—or for several years—I really was—I was the oldest nurse there. I was still there, and none of the things that they did, or none of the things that they ever said, or how they ever treated me, did I object to it. I didn't have anything to say about—I didn't like a lot of things. And being the oldest black nurse there, I just thought it was a good thing at that time to keep them around, build up for the younger black nurses that were to come, and I had an idea that they were coming. And so, I sort of paved the way. When they came in there was no problems at all—after integration took place, you understand.

But through the years of all of it, I know that we were told that we weren't supposed to use the restroom with the white nurses, because it was white. We were told that. I'm not calling any names who told us that, but we were actually told that. During those years I didn't object. They said, "Don't use it," and I didn't stand up and fuss and argue and have a whole lot to say about it, because I just felt within myself that, "Well, just wait; all of this will come to pass." I just had that belief, myself—and it did, and very quiet and very peacefully. No problems, no arguments.

FB: There were no jealousies?

FW: No jealousies, no acting ugly or anything. And I think that after I left there, after thirty-one and a half years, I don't think the whole—nobody could have ever been more liked by the whole bunch of them than I was. And I go back there now and everybody just crowds around me, I'm telling you, and it is something that I enjoy. And I think back, I say just look what they do now and what they did years ago. They stood off, they wouldn't touch you, they didn't want to sit next to you, and you know.

Then, too, during those years, before 1965, a lot of them—or several of them—got chances to go get scholarships and go off to school. Well, we applied for scholarships, but we never got any, understand? Because they were only available to such and such a one, to those that they were available to, they got 'em. See?

FB: How would you view the black nurse as opposed to the white nurse? Because we have interviewed several people, several whites, that said there were no comparisons. But how do you view it?

FW: We were just nurses to me, nurses, without any color barrier at all. They were just all nurses, to me.

FB: As far as experience, experience was gained through your day to day work?

FW: Right, right. That's right. And of course, when you first go to a place you're orientated, you know.

FB: Right.

FW: And you have to go through a period of orientation of several weeks or several months, or whatever. At that time, orientation was only three months; now it's—I think it's—then later, it was six months. How much it is now, I do not know. But I thoroughly enjoyed the work, enjoyed the experience, and everything. It was just good work to me. I enjoyed all of it.

FB: Okay. Is there one particular incident that stuck in your mind that was—that you really feel that you was really fulfilled by your work?

FW: (long pause) Well, yes. I think through our teaching and our visiting and our clinics, I think that we did a lot of things, because we educated the public a whole lot to the fact that health was really important. And health really is one of the most important factors in life, because you can't do anything if you're sick and feeling bad.

FB: That's right.

FW: The kids can't even go to school. They go to school, but they can't motivate. They just can't apply themselves. And, you know, if you get up feeling bad in the mornings, you just can't get about—it's just impossible for you to get about and do your day's work. And we were just able to teach the public the importance of health.

FB: Okay. Were there any types of workshops that was geared particularly to the black nurses to (inaudible) their knowledge of different phases of health care?

FW: Well, those workshops were given to everybody, because the workshops were always together.

FB: Oh, okay.

FW: The seminars were always together. Yeah, everybody attended. The conferences were always together, and the conventions were always together.

FB: Okay, now, when you went to these conventions, et cetera, were they still in a segregated atmosphere, like all the blacks on one side and the whites all on one side, or was it mixed?

FW: Well, it was really mixed if you—it was mixed. It was mixed. But during the earlier years when we attended conferences, et cetera, et cetera, blacks as a whole, you just—you were ostracized, so you felt that way. You went into a place and you saw blacks sitting there; blacks went to sit with blacks. Whites, they never would sit where blacks were. They would always find where whites were and try to sit separately anyway. That's something that they actually did. But blacks being ostracized all the years, actually, it was just a part of them to sit there. I don't think that they necessarily wanted it to be that way, but whites were just not particular about mingling with you. Well, you know that, yourself.

FB: That's right.

FW: If you are twenty years old, you knew that as a little kid, see. All right.

FB: How about—you said y'all made home visits?

FW: Yes.

FB: (inaudible)

FW: Yes. Now, we made home visits. See, during the earlier years, before 1965, blacks only made home visits to blacks; whites made home visits to whites. After then, everybody made home visits to everybody, because the districts were all—every nurse had a district. The whole county was divided into districts, and every nurse working at the health department had a district that was on staff. That was excluding the supervisors; the supervisors only had the nurses in groups themselves, who they would teach and supervise and—well, kept under their supervision, anyway.

And each nurse made home visits, a certain amount of home visits each and every day, five days a week, and she made those—if she wasn't in a clinic. The day she was in a clinic, she couldn't get out and make a whole lot of visits, but if she was in a clinic in the morning, she made visits in the afternoon. If she was in the clinic in the afternoon, she made visits in the morning, unless she had a lot of desk work to do. And desk work to do is, I mean, catching up on, say, records and filing and so on and so forth, like that.

But the nurses after sixty-five [1965], all the nurses made visits on everybody. And it was a sort of delightful thing, because it was new, it was different, and we sort of enjoyed it. And then we all became what you call a VNA [Visiting Nursing Association] nursing, visiting nursing, as well as public health nursing.

FB: I was wondering about that.

FW: So we had a combined thing there.

FB: How did promotions go?

FW: Promotions were done under the merit system. The merit system—a lot of people didn't like it. And how they are done now, I don't know, but they were done under the merit system then. You wrote into the merit system, I think, and took a certain examination where you could go up to I. The nurses were allowed to go up to (thumps table) I, II, III. And then after the III, it was supervisory. Yeah. Well, those in the supervisory capacity were actually nurses that had gone and gotten degrees, and perhaps had taken the public health nursing course, too.

Pause in recording

After you'd gotten the job and orientated, then let me see, you served on a period of probation. After your probation was over, your supervisor would write you up. She would write you up and it was sent up to the state, and then that's how you would get your promotion, through them. And a few days after that, then you got your promotion as a Public Health Nurse I. And then if you wanted a II, after you stayed two more years, you applied for the II. And if she wrote you up, then you got—sent it up to the state, they sent it back, they thought you okay for the examination or the test or whatever they gave and you passed it, then you were up for the two. And so on down the line.

FB: Were there any black supervisors?

FW: Yes. Before 1965 there were none, but after then there were some. There was—let's see. Mrs. Daisy Sweeting, she's a supervisor there, and Mrs.— Now, whether these other nurses are in a supervisory capacity, I can't say, but I do know Mrs. Daisy Sweeting. And then, there are other nurses that have other higher positions, like in health education. Mrs. Malsby and Miss Shirley—I don't know what Miss Shirley's name is, her last name.

FB: Okay, now, are the ones in the higher positions, are these people, say with diplomas and things?

FW: Yes, they're with degrees. Yes. Well, you see, there are a lot of us. For instance, myself, I got into public health nursing just by being a staff nurse, a member of the staff of Hillsborough County Health Department Nursing Division. I did not have the public health nursing course itself through schooling to get the degree. I only had the orientation into public health through supervisory capacity at the health department. And of course, that's how a lot of other nurses were employed there, too. But then there were other nurses that had the public health nursing course itself, through schooling. And all of the supervisors that became supervisors, they had to have the public health nursing course, because if they had not had it they would not be able to teach it to us, the staff.

FB: The only puzzle that I have there is, how can a degree set you in a job while you have people that have X amount of years of experience?

FW: Well, that does seem bad, but that's what happens. And that's what happens, I think, with any agency.

FB: That's true.

FW: Because in applying for a job, this person over here has had twenty-five years of experience. I walk in and I have a degree in this, a degree in that, and a degree in the other, I get a job quicker than the guy does with the experience. Now, I've had little or no experience, but I could get the job because I have the degrees, and that's the way it is in any agency. Now why the paper means a lot, I don't know. The pieces of paper mean so much. I don't know.

FB: You know, I think that's—in the present day, that situation is reversed.

FW: It's reversed now.

FB: It's reversed, because nowadays, the experience is [worth] more than the degree is.

FW: Well, perhaps so.

FB: Okay, tracing the whole realm of the nursing profession in those days, do you—black nurses made a significant contribution to the health field in Tampa and Hillsborough County. Okay, so as we view this as a whole, would you say that the health care of blacks have increased?

FW: Definitely. And it is much better; it is much, much better. Everybody gets the same health care through Hillsborough County Health Department, everybody. There is no difference at all. And I do think the nurses, the white nurses that work with the black children, enjoy working with them just as much as they do the white children, and I do think the black nurses that work with the white children enjoy working with them just as much as they do with the black children. And to me—at the time that I quit, the service was excellent to me. A lot of people didn't take advantage of the service like they should have, because in years gone by—a few years, say four years ago—all the service was free. Everything that you got was free. You pay for it now.

FB: How was the health care packaged as a whole, monitored to the black communities? How did the people in the black communities know that the health department is here, we're doing this service and that service? Did you have a PR system, a public relations system, whereupon the services of the health department were in a paper and it was distributed in the black community?

FW: Well, through the newspapers, media. We had the [*Florida*] *Sentinel* [*Bulletin*]; that's always been around. And then we used the [*St. Petersburg*] *Times* as well as the [*Tampa*] *Tribune*. And then there were head nurses every once in a while on the tube and on radio. and I spent some on TMP.

FB: (inaudible).

FW: Yeah. I was on TMP, and all the black community listens to TMP. Yeah, as well as

LCY. And then we'd had—we'd put out leaflets, put out flyers, all the time. And of course, when we had the measles campaign and polio campaign, the immunization campaign, all those things many years ago, we put out flyers up, all over the black neighborhoods. This time of year, there are flyers in the schools and in the projects and everywhere, letting the parents know where to go and when to go to get their children immunized against the childhood diseases and to get their physical examinations to begin school.

FB: Okay, all right. The last question for you, (inaudible). Since you have worked since 1938 in the healthcare field, you were working with segregation and integration, okay? All right, having worked in those two different fields, do you think that blacks today are taking advantage of the healthcare facilities and are really concerned about the whole area of healthcare?

FW: Well, they are more so now than formerly, but they are still not doing it, I think, as readily and as much as they should. I think that they can do better, because they have a program going on—what's that program?—Medicaid. A program on Medicaid, which examines through this program all indigent children—up to eighteen years of age, anyway—are examined at least once a year in the clinics, and they get this free of charge. It used to be twenty-one, but if it's still twenty-one or not, I do not know. It may be. Infancy through, I would say, twenty-one years of age gets these physical examinations free of charge. Maybe not a complete physical examination, but it's as much as they would want for the time if they were on Medicaid, see. And, of course, the examination that they give children is very thorough.

FB: Okay. Ms. Williams, are there any closing remarks that you would like to pass on to, say, other youngsters or other people going into the nursing profession? (laughs)

FW: Well, I think the nursing profession is a wonderful profession, and I enjoyed my years of nursing. We need it. We need more nurses. We need good nurses. And I think that any girl or any boy that gets into the profession will thoroughly enjoy it as much as I have. Maybe they won't stay in it as many years as I did, but I think they'll enjoy it if they get into it.

FB: Okay. Thanks, Ms. Williams. This is Fred Beaton, interviewing Ms. Flora Williams, 1905 Cypress Avenue, August 13, 1978.

End of interview