

Interview
with
Mrs. Phoenix
by
Beth Hearst

Beth: My name is Beth Hearst and I am sitting here with Mrs. Lucille Phoenix, and it is April the 2nd, 1997. We are doing Mrs. Phoenix's oral history for my Oral History class with Prof. Rogers. And I just wanted to ask you Mrs. Phoenix if I have your permission to do this interview.

Mrs. Phoenix: Um, Yes.

Beth: OK. I have a consent form here just about the material, if you don't mind signing it. It is stating that this interview will be put into the Dickinson College archives for further research on life histories. (Long pause as she signs form). Thank you Mrs. Phoenix. Well, um, why don't we just start out the interview by my asking you where you were born?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well, um, I was born in Steelton. Well, it was in a hospital. The hospital is in Harrisburg. Penns---- Hospital,

Beth: What year was that?

Mrs. Phoenix: 1927.

Beth: How old were your parents when you were born?

Mrs. Phoenix: Let me see.....I guess they were in their thirties. I think my mother thirty, thirty something, and my father was in his late thirties.

Beth: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Mrs. Phoenix: I have a sister that's living.

Beth: Is she older or younger than you?

Mrs. Phoenix: Older, and one sister that. Well, I had a brother that's deceased and a older sister.

Beth: Were you close with your siblings?

Mrs. Phoenix: With the one that is living now, we grew up together. And yes, we are close, fairly close. And with the sister that passed away, we were not as close. In fact, I didn't know her until I became almost an adult because she had

infantile paralysis, and she was born in Virginia, and they didn't know a whole lot about taking care of children that had this, and uh apparently Catholic nuns raised her. So they cared for her. After this developed, I don't remember what age it was, but that was before I was born. But in hearing my mother talk about it, it seems that it might have been before she was in school. So she might have been five years old or younger.

Beth: Do you think it was a tough decision for your parents?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well, I'm sure it was. They lived like on a farm and I assume my mother was fairly young at the time and didn't have the means to pay for the medical expenses. It was probably made available and they could give more care than my parents could. I knew she wore leg braces on both her legs. I didn't get to see her that much, so we weren't close. Until as an adult, I got to know her more. She lived in Philadelphia and I lived in Steelton. We got to know each other then. In fact, I was probably the person who cared for her the most until she died.

Beth: Well, what did your parents do for a living?

Mrs. Phoenix: They were both born in Virginia, and then they traveled here. My father to work on the steel mill, which a lot of people came from the south to do that. Uh, my mother worked in private homes. Did some cleaning and stuff like that.

Beth: How old do you think they were when they came here from the south?

Mrs. Phoenix: They must have been fairly young adults. Twenties.

Beth: And they came here because of the steel mill?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes, I'm sure that's how they got here. To work. Because they worked on farms. Yes, I'm sure they came here to work on the steel mill because they were going down getting people as I understand it. Jobs were booming.

Beth: What was it like for you growing up?

Mrs. Phoenix: What was it like? Well it was a fun time. I assume we were poor. I never really thought about it much because we had clothes, we ate. Uh, we went to church. We didn't have an abundance of clothes. If I had to make a comparison now to then, we didn't have an abundance of clothes. We had clothes that you would wear and call your Sunday clothes, clothes that you played in, that you didn't wear your better things except on Sundays. You had things that you wore to school that they washed a lot. But it was fun. We played outside a lot. Played in the neighborhood. Everybody knew everybody in the neighborhood, in fact, I'm sure you've heard this a lot, but it's like everybody in the neighborhood is your parent. It was a protective thing too. So it was, uh, I would say it was a good childhood.

Beth: Did you like that sense of community in the neighborhood?

Mrs. Phoenix: Oh Yes. Oh Yes. You would go out in the yard and everybody would be out in their yards and you would talk across the fences or the parents would be there and you would be out in the alley, or out in the back and all the kid would be out there playing. We would all have to go in at the same time. You would hear your mother calling "It's time to eat, come'on". So a lot that does not go on now. It was very protective. A very protective lifestyle.

Beth: More then so?

Mrs. Phoenix: More than I see children now, who are more or less on their own now to a great extent. So we had a lot more structure in our lives. At dinner time, it was a specific time, everybody sat down at the table and ate. And everybody was expected to be there, and now the refrigerator is there. You can get what you want. The microwave is there and whoever, whenever.

Beth: So, did you consider your parents strict?

Mrs. Phoenix: No, I don't think so. I didn't think they were strict, but there were certain

things you knew you had to do, and it was without question. Usually we were to be seen and not heard. So, if the parents said something you knew that's what you had to do. I didn't consider them strict. They were fun. They played with us. We played games together, my father taught me how to play dominoes. We played dominoes and checkers. He was one of the few people that had a car, as I remember, and he would take the neighborhood kids and he would take us for a ride, or to the movies. So he played with us.

Beth: It sounds like the neighborhood was as important to your parents as it was to you.

Mrs. Phoenix: It was. Well, parents would sit out on the steps out in front. We called it our steps, some people had porches but most row homes had steps out and we would come out and sit on the steps and the neighbors would be out on their steps and we would talk back and forth. Holidays, we used to have things called street dances. They roped off the streets, neighbors would come out and everybody would be dancing and partying in the street. Things like 4th of July, you'd get your firecrackers. Everybody would get their little set and come out in front of their house, and when it got dark you'd have your sparklers and shoot off and go up and down the street. It would be just one big celebration together.

Beth: It sounds like a lot of fun. It sounds like a great sense of community, that I do agree with you, I think a lot of people are lacking now.

Mrs. Phoenix: That is lacking now. We'd go on group picnics with our churches and different churches. People would get together and go to a park. Everyone would pack your basket and go to the park and spread out your food on the tables. Everyone would go from table to table if you wanted to and sample stuff. And the kids would be on rides. And you knew..... It felt safe. You didn't worry about anything. It was a free childhood. Freedom of spirit because you just felt

that protection of everyone around you and you really didn't have any fear. And I can recall, I guess they have what you call latch key children now, but I guess I was one of those too cause like my mother would work a couple of days a week and my sister and I would come home from school cause the doors weren't locked. They didn't lock our doors. And we would come home at lunch and go in and eat lunch and go back to school. By the time I came home, she was there though.

Beth: Was it common for mothers in your neighborhood to work?

Mrs. Phoenix: Some did and some didn't. Most did not. So even though your mother might not be there, the mother next door would be there. But most of them stayed home. Some mothers went out, like I said, to do days work a couple of days a week. And maybe they left after we went to school and would be back around 2.

Beth: Did you have certain responsibilities in your household?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes, we had to do our chores and clean our rooms. We had to wash the dishes and help around the house. Yes, we definitely had our chores to do. And that way what little allowance we earned was enough to go to the Saturday movies.

Beth: How did your family get along? Would you consider yourself a close family?

Mrs. Phoenix: I would say.

Beth: Tell me a little bit about your mom, what kind of influence she had on you growing up.

Mrs. Phoenix: Well, I like to sing and I think I got that from her. She used to sing in the house a lot. Um, and we talked a lot. In fact, she would talk about things that would happened in her childhood. Which was different than it was for us. They lived on a farm and they walked a long distance to wherever they went. To a

store, to church, to school. And she wouldn't go to school until almost 5th or 6th grade. Her childhood was somewhat different in that respect cause in the summers they would be working on the farms and helping cook. A lot of things that we didn't have to do. But she was a fun person. She liked to sing. She would take us shopping.

Beth: Did you consider yourself close with her?

Mrs. Phoenix: Close, oh yes. In fact she lived with me after my father died. She lived with me until she died. There she took care of me, and then I took care of her.

Beth: Part of the family life cycle.

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes.

Beth: What was your father like?

Mrs. Phoenix: Um, he was, I mean he was a fun guy too. He was a little more standoffish than she was in that.....For instance he wouldn't go in the kitchen and fix anything for himself, that was her job. He would sit in the living room smoking on his pipe. But he liked to play with the kids. And, as I said, he would pile all of us in his car and take us places. He liked, um, we played softball a lot growing up. And he would play and watch.

Beth: OK. You were talking about your father playing softball games with you?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well, not so much with me. There were teams where we lived. And all the guys participated on teams. He did some of that, but as he got older right across from where we lived there was a ball field, and we would go out. He would say "Come on" let's go out and watch the teams play ball. He was a fun guy too. As we got older and moved into our own homes he would always come and visit us. Sort of just coming in and making sure everything was OK. We had a thing on New Year's Day, and I don't know where it got started, but a man had to be the first person in your house to give you good luck for the year. So

he would make sure he got up early in the morning and come visit us so that there was a man in the house first, to give us good luck for the year.

Beth: Was he a very protective father?

Mrs. Phoenix: I think so. He watched out for us. He saw that we went to church.

Church played a big part in our lives. We knew we were going to church. If it was serviced 3 times on Sunday, we were there. Whether it was once, or twice we were there. We didn't even think about it. Saturday we'd get ready for church on Sunday, and then we would go to church. We had a morning service. He was very active in church, and so was my mother. She sang in the choir. And then I sang in the choir. He was a trustee and a deacon. So church was a very big part of our lives. I can remember deacons, which is different than it is today. You see in the church, they used to come and visit in people's homes. And sit in the homes and see how you were doing. They did a lot of that. If you saw a deacon out on the street, you knew it. You know, if you were playing or doing something you would really straighten up. The boys would, "Here comes Deacon, you better stop that, or watch what you are doing".

Which is something you just don't hear anymore.

Beth: Well, why do you think church was so important to your family?

Mrs. Phoenix: I think it was just our background and the way we were taught and grew up. That God is very important in our lives as part of your life. Worshiping is just something we always did.

Beth: Is it still as important to you now?

Mrs. Phoenix: It still is, yes.

Beth: Well, it sounds like you really got a good sense of community through your church and through your neighborhood also. What other kinds of things did you do in the community?

Mrs.Phoenix: One of the other things that people used to do, and I'm not sure if it was for raising funds, or if it was for entertainment. I think it was for entertainment. But they used to have things called "Entertainment". I mean that's what they called them. And they would have food in their home. They would fry chicken, bake cakes, make homemade ice cream, pies, potato salad, and they would have all this food and people would come in and share it. And I do believe that at sometimes it was for fund raising because I think they would sell tickets. And maybe it was for the church and maybe they belonged to a club. And this club was going to have an "Entertainment". In other words, like we go to restaurants. It would be in someone home and people would come and sit at your dining room table and eat dinner.

Beth: How often would you have those?

Mrs.Phoenix: Somebody would had them in their houses almost every Saturday.

Beth: Oh, really. Were there many families there?

Mrs.Phoenix: Oh yes.

Beth: So you got to play with the kids?

Mrs. Phoenix: Oh, yes. Play outside. Someone was always making homemade ice cream and sodas. And school was certainly important. Everybody went to school. You didn't play hookie. And our teachers were a very important part of our lives. We really respected them. And they took care of us too.

Beth: Did everybody in the community go to the same school?

Mrs. Phoenix: Where we lived, we lived in a small community called the West Side of Steelton. Well, all the blacks went to one school and all the whites went to a different school. But, just about everyone we knew, African-Americans, all went to the same school.

Beth: What did you think of that? Going to 2 different schools?

Mrs. Phoenix: I liked it. And now, even looking back on it, the strangeness of it, and I really didn't think anything of it at the time, there was a school closer to us. Where white children went to, and we had to walk a longer distance. But, it was fine. I mean now, it was segregation. But when you are a child and you are doing it, it's what you do. And the school was certainly a good place to be. And the teachers were our friends.

Beth: So, did you go to school with the same kids in your neighborhood and the same kids you went to church with?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yeah, we would walk back and forth to school together, go to church together, and play together.

Beth: Do you have any friends that really stand out in your mind as being the most influential?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well, a lot of friends after high school, we are still together. Most of them. My best friend that I grew up with and she and I remained friends until she died a few years ago. We had our children at the same time, we went around together as young adults and older adults. She was like my closest friend. We've been together through a lot.

Beth: What was her name?

Mrs. Phoenix: Ethel. And then she moved to Virginia, but we drive down to visit. She'd come here to visit. Our kids are still real close together.

Beth: What about your teachers. Did you have any influential teachers growing up?

Mrs. Phoenix: My 7th grade teacher. He really taught us black history and telling us stories about life. One of the things I remember hearing about was vicarious experience. That always stood out in my mind that you don't have to experience everything. You can hear about someone else's experiences and avoid the pitfalls in life. That always stood out in my mind and I always tried to

tell my children to learn from other peoples' experiences then you won't have to go through some of that.

Beth: Did your parents play an active role in your education?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes, because you had to come in and do your homework. They might not have been able to help you, but they made sure you did it. And they were on a friendly basis with the teachers.

Beth: Well, How long did you go to this School?

Mrs. Phoenix: Until 8th grade.

Beth: Did you go to High School?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes, that was an integrated high school.

Beth: What was that like, after having been in a segregated school?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well, you know we played with the same kids all the time. We just went to different schools.

Beth: Where there a lot of white kids in your neighborhood?

Mrs. Phoenix: Right, there were white kids in our neighborhood. In fact, the neighbors that lived right next door to us were white. So, we were in each others homes, we played. But we went to different churches and we went to different schools. So, we saw the same kids, we just all came together in high school. So it was the same kids. You knew them.

Beth: Did you think that was strange growing up?

Mrs. Phoenix: Actually, I didn't think too much about it. That's just the way it was. It sounds weird right now looking back on it. One thing that did bother us in high school was we were in the same classes together but there were certain things you couldn't do. Certain x-tra curricular clubs that black kids couldn't join. I can remember my girlfriend going into the office, you know we were good students, and we wanted to join a certain club. Ant the only answer there was, was that

was just the way it was, or it was all filled up. Or whatever it was. And the high school Prom is really the one thing that stands out in my mind the most. The white went to Prom and the black kids couldn't go. In fact, we were in class together. Whites girls and blacks and we considered ourselves friends, as much as friends we could be. And they we whispering, and we asked each other what they were talking about. I said I have no idea, and they were passing around tickets, and we just had no idea what was going on, until later we found out they were all going to Prom that night.

Beth: That night?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes. It was all very hush, hush. I really still don't know how they pulled it off. But, no we did not go to a high school Prom. There was an association in Steelton called the Douglas Association, and they had a celebration of sorts for the black kids.

Beth: How did you feel about that?

Mrs. Phoenix: That was upsetting. That is when reality really started to kick in. It is like we were ready to graduate and suddenly you realize they are over there, and we are over here. And that was not a good feeling.

Beth: How do you think your white friends felt about that?

Mrs. Phoenix: I don't know. To talk to them now, they act as though they didn't really realize it. How could you not realize it? You're there.

Beth: Did that hurt also?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes, it did. But now when we have class reunions and we all come together it is like they try to over compensate. But it was a very unhappy time.

Beth: Well, what was graduation like then?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well graduation was integrated.

Beth: You said the whole Prom incident kind of made reality hit. What do you mean by

that?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well, it made you look back on the years and realize that right we've been segregated all our lives. We played together in the streets and we talked, but suddenly when you got older the separation started. And when you look back on it, it all just kind of hit you. So then after graduation when you go for a job, you expected it.

Beth: So what did you do after graduation?

Mrs. Phoenix: The war was on, so we as black graduates got jobs that we would not normally have gotten. For instance in private industry I came out as commercial student with shorthand and typing. I knew that in private industry I was not going to get hired as a secretary or typist, but now could go over to the naval depo, because of the war effort, and get that. And that's where we all went.

Beth: You said you realized what the segregation was around the time of Prom and all those incidents, and then it was to be expected later in the job force. Did you run into those types of incidents then?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes. Even though I knew I could get the job, promotions were something different. You could be doing the same job better, and everyone knows it, and then promotions come up and you don't get selected. Most of the supervisors were white. Which is not uncommon still today.

Beth: Were you very aware of this?

Mrs. Phoenix: Very aware.

Beth: So you worked as a secretary during the war?

Mrs. Phoenix: As a clerk. I did a lot of office work.

Beth: You mentioned something about an East and a West side of Steelton.

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes, there were different sections of town and we lived on the West.

Beth: What were the attitudes of the two sides toward each other?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well, there was a attitudial difference. On the east side, they thought they were a little better than the people on the west side. I thought that was strange. I have no idea how that got started. But one thing, there was more mixture of black and whites on the west side.

Beth: Well, when did you get married?

Mrs. Phoenix: 1949. I was 21.

Beth: How did you two meet?

Mrs. Phoenix: I guess we always knew each other. He was born on the west side of Steelton also. I always knew him. I always kind of liked him too. Then he went into the service and it was when he came back that we got together.

Beth: Did the war play a large part in your life?

Mrs. Phoenix: I didn't think too much about it.

Beth: So when you got married, did you continue to work?

Mrs. Phoenix: I did, with periods off. Both of us used to work at the Naval supply Depo. My mother used to come in and stay with my children and even cooked dinner. I worked most of my married life, with periods off.

Beth: Was your work important to you?

Mrs. Phoenix: The important thing was the money. It helped you to afford a different way life with two incomes.

Beth: You said you have 6 children. Can you tell me a little about them?

Mrs. Phoenix: 4 girls and 2 boys. They all live in Harrisburg. 1 daughter has six children. we have 10 grandchildren, 1 great-grandchild. All of my children went to college, they all work. We all come together on holidays, in fact they are in and out of here all the time. We're still close. I have a son in City Council.

Beth: Do you think you ran a strict household.

Mrs. Phoenix: Not as strict as my parents, but we had rules.

Beth: what were some of the things that were important to you to have in your own household that your parents had when you were growing up.

Mrs. Phoenix: I talked to my girls a lot. We would talk about life. I made sure they knew how to cook. They knew they had better not embarrass us. They were well behaved. Thank God they never did drugs, to my knowledge.

Beth: Do you have any special traditions?

Mrs. Phoenix: Just holidays and birthdays. We expected them to attend church.

Beth: Were you strict with school with them?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes, they had to do their homework, and we were both active.

Beth: How do you feel their childhood differed from yours?

Mrs. Phoenix: They had more material things, and were in more x-tra curricular activities.

Beth: How do you think racial relations were for your children compared to how they were for you?

Mrs. Phoenix: That's a hard one. They knew it. They grew up knowing even though they were not in segregated school. They knew that wherever you go, race was a factor.

Beth: What about their educational experiences compared to yours?

Mrs. Phoenix: They all went to college, but they grew up knowing they were going to college.

Beth: Do you think they were taught more about black history in school?

Mrs. Phoenix: No, less.

Beth: Why do you think that?

Mrs. Phoenix: Because they were in an integrated school. It wasn't part of their curriculum. But we did talk about it in our home.

Beth: How has the community of Steelton changed in your lifetime?

Mrs. Phoenix: (Talking about race relations) People talk to each other more.

Restaurants are open to everybody, when they weren't before. People still go to separate churches. Even though people consider themselves friends or close, they know they live separate lives.

Beth: In terms of your children, I know you said the neighborhood was very close and protective for you growing up. How were those things different for your children?

Mrs. Phoenix: Now that's different. We might not see our neighbors. We don't go into each other's houses like we used to. So that sense of community and belonging does not exist.

Beth: Now that you live in Harrisburg, do you still feel a tie to Steelton?

Mrs. Phoenix: Yes, I do. It still feels like home.

Beth: What kind of a role does the steel plant play now?

Mrs. Phoenix: Practically none. It used to be the social hub.

Beth: What are some of the things that you miss from how the Steelton community used to be?

Mrs. Phoenix: I think the closeness of people, knowing each other. Talking to your neighbors. That doesn't exist. I'm friendly with my neighbors now, but we never see each other.

Beth: What are some of the things you hope for the community in the future?

Mrs. Phoenix: That neighborhoods become safer. That people would be more courteous to one another, and that people would speak to each other more. Slow down.

Beth: How do you spend your time now?

Mrs. Phoenix: I still work 2 days a week. I'm very much involved in church. I think it plays a big part in both our lives. I help to teach a computer class at church.

Beth: Do you get to see a lot of your family?

Mrs. Phoenix: Oh, yes. They are in and out. My granddaughter comes by after school.

Beth: So in that aspect, a lot of things are the same?

Mrs. Phoenix: Family wise, yes.

Beth: What are some of the things that you may do differently now, than you did before? In this part of your life.

Mrs. Phoenix: I don't cook as much. We don't sit down and eat as a family like we used to.

Beth: Who were some of the important people who really played a role in your adult life? Anyone that influenced you, or that you were especially close to? I know you mentioned your friend Ethel, and that you shared a lot with that. Anyone such as her?

Mrs. Phoenix: Well I have other friends now. I have another girlfriend. We still call each other girls. She and I talk a lot. I know that if I had a problem I could go to her and she knows she could do the same. Her husband and Zane and I do things together. We belong to the same senior citizen group at church. I'm the president of it. We go on trips and vacations together.

Beth: Well, one other thing that I wanted to ask you is, what is your attitude toward your experiences in your life so far? How would you sum up your life experience so far?

Mrs. Phoenix: I think I've lived a good life. I don't recall that I've ever wanted for a lot that I was not able to get. I have a well-rounded education. I love to read. I have started to take piano lessons. We go on vacations. I think I've lived a good life. The lord is very important in my life. I'm very grateful for that. I've tried to impart that to my children, that there is a supreme being. That you do need to be true to your lord and savior. I think morals are very important and I

think that is where religion comes in, you have to have a moral standard that you live by and that is part of your life. I have a lot of love in my life. I care for my family and I think they do the same. If you treat people well and you care about people and you try to help people then your life is rich.

Beth: So, have you learned a lot of lessons in your life?

Mrs. Phoenix: being good to people, and honest with people, and honest with yourself.

Beth: What kind of things do you look forward to in the future?

Mrs. Phoenix: Living a long life, a healthy life. Taking care of yourself. To travel. There are places I would love to go that I have not been to yet.

Beth: What kind of places?

Mrs. Phoenix: Hawaii, overseas. I'd love to go to Africa.

Beth: What kind of things do you hope for your family in the future?

Mrs. Phoenix: All of them happy. I'd like to see the girls married to good men. Raise strong good children. Live a peaceful life and just have a good sense of themselves and enjoy life. That they have a good family life.

Beth: What kind of hopes do you have for yourself?

Mrs. Phoenix: Living a good healthy long life as long as I'm healthy. I don't want to lead a crippled life to the point that I can't function. I'd like to live a long healthy life and be able to help people. And see my grandchildren grow up. Being able to contribute something to society in that respect, I think if you are molding your family and your children you are helping them shape the world.

Beth: How would you like your family and your friends to remember you?

Mrs. Phoenix: Just to remember that I was a fun person, that they liked to be around. And have good memories about my doing things for them and with them. Knowing that they could come to me.

Beth: What do you want your life to stand for?

Mrs. Phoenix: I guess that I walked upright before my God. That he would be pleased with the kind of life that I lead. I guess that's it. If I die and he says "Well done, my good and faithful servant", then that is it.

Beth: Right, I think that's very nice. Well, I want to thank you very much for everything. I really don't have any more questions. I think we kind of summed up everything. Do you have anything else you would like to tell me? Any other stories?

Mrs. Phoenix: Not really. I think we covered most of it pretty good too. Well, it was kind of interesting looking back.

Beth: It was very interesting for me too. Just to learn more about history, and to learn more about your life too. It's very interesting. Thank you very much. And I just wanted to ask you, when going over my material, if I need to contact you and ask you any more questions, if that would be ok?

Mrs. Phoenix: That's fine.

Beth: OK. Thank you.