

Steelton Oral History Project

Dickinson College Archives

Ms. Lamergene Stovall

Professor Rogers

Final Project

David Kates

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The experience of interviewing Ms. Stovall was just as interesting and important as analyzing her story. We developed quite a good relationship between us because of the laid back atmosphere of our sessions and the similarities in our personalities. Another aspect that linked us together was our mutual excitement for her story. We wanted to get this narrative as accurate and as proseful as possible. She has had a very important and complex life. Starting from a high position, she has experienced serious illness and natural disaster, but has always bounced back. I will look at her life (with a focus on the past, present and future), and the journey of interviewing her in both specific and general terms. This will enable me to come to a consensus on Iamergene and the interview itself.

At the end of the second interview, after I turned off the tape, we talked about oral history's importance for getting one's story out. She told me that her grandparents never talked about being slaves. Ms. Stovall felt this was a shame because family members and historians will never fully understand their story now. Unlike her grandparents, she wanted to get her story on tape and paper for her relatives to enjoy after she dies. I think she also wanted to remember her past to make sense of her life. She thought of me as both a grandson and a friend. She wanted to make sure I got the information I needed, but also she desired to tell her story in her own way.

This commitment is exemplified in the letter she sent to me the Sunday after our second interview. Iamergene corrected some of my spellings of family names, and filled me in on some more details of places she has lived and birth dates of family members. She was still trying to recall things that she couldn't remember during the interview and included intricate details that

I might find interesting. The process was obviously very important to her. The letter was very beneficial to me because I knew I was representing her more accurately and that we could still have an active dialogue after the taping was over. Her kindness and humor were also shown in the message. Ms. Stovall ended it, "(Smile) Remember I am 91 yrs. old-- an old lady." Her perseverance is also shown after our first interview when she spent about forty-five minutes explaining the contexts of all the pictures on top of her piano. Our mutual commitment to excellence amplified our good relationship.

Surprisingly, we have many things in common. She has a good sense of humor and likes to laugh at life, as do I. We both didn't go to our high school proms. I, like her, was spoiled as a child and was treated as very special by my parents (because I am an only child). We both like to work hard and have done things that people have said we couldn't or wouldn't be able to do. We don't like to waste time and act lazily often, and we don't like to see other people do so. The mood of the interview was another factor which contributed to the profitable interaction.

A contrast between my two interviews with her was the amount of control I had upon the direction and flow of the discourse. For the first half-hour of the first interview, I asked most of the questions and her responses were usually not more than a few sentences. This seems to be the case at the beginning of many interviews because the interviewer often starts it with a question. Thus he controls the subject matter. A narrator's responses tend to get longer as they start to connect one story to another. In Ms. Stovall's case, she had very little recollection of her childhood before the flood in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The flood was a disaster which erased her memory. Most of what she remembered of Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee was told

to her by family members afterward. When we began to talk about Steelton and her adult life, her stories became much more intricate and rich.

Consequently, my questions and interjections became spaced between long narratives.

I was a bit nervous coming into the interview, but we soon adopted a very conversational and informal style. She quickly took control of the stories that she told. I was a bit worried about this at the time because her narrative tended to be out of chronological order. In hind sight, this was very effective in the interview because she enjoyed selecting the subject matter and the stories. I only had to clarify certain details and ask follow-up questions occasionally. The conversation was not as effective if I asked questions which were not related to a topic that she selected, especially about her childhood.

Iamergene was very at ease being interviewed. She was not bothered by talking into a microphone as some narrators are. One of my last questions in the second interview was if she has been interviewed before. Ms. Stovall said that she had not. She was also very comfortable talking to me as a White male. When talking with some older Blacks, sometimes I can sense a little resentment of Whites in general, particularly in a discussion of racism and other forms of discrimination. She talked about these issues in a very matter-of-fact way, though. This may have been because I was very eager to talk about them. She also said that during her childhood her family and she accepted discrimination as a part of life. Iamergene has had a lot of interaction with Whites at Steelton High, and in the hospitals and schools in which she worked, too. Also, one of her best friends is White. She met her working at the nursing home in Michigan, and they still write to each other.

The last part of the second interview was quite emotionally draining. She talked about death in great detail. Ms. Stovall questioned why she is still alive when a lot of her friends and family have died recently. Sometimes she wishes that the doctors had not brought her out of her coma three years ago because she does not see her use for living. These comments affected me greatly because I wanted her to be happy and optimistic about her life. The end of that interview was very bittersweet. We had gone on a journey which was physically and mentally taxing. The interview was very thorough and gratifying. Yet, we have become good friends and we probably will not get to speak in the same setting again.

Another contrast between the two interviews was her dress. Ms. Stovall was dressed casually in a flowered T-shirt for the first interview. She was attired more formally for the next one, though. She wore a multi-colored silk blouse, a green vest and purple pants. She may have felt under-dressed at the first interview because I was wearing a dress shirt and pants. Her appearance changed somewhat, also. When I first met her at the First Baptist Church on March 9th, she looked more elderly to me than on subsequent visits. In my field notes, I wrote, "She is a short woman hunched over a bit on a cane. She has a tooth missing in front and silver fillings throughout her mouth." At that time, I thought she looked in her mid-eighties and not ninety-one, though. I believed that she looked even younger at our first interview. She had her hair pulled back in a bun and was not using her cane. Janergene seemed to be less hunched-over and moved around her house very easily. She did not use her cane for the second interview either.

The Twin Lakes Apartments are a group of about fifty buildings. The main set of apartments face a busy four lane road. Ms. Stovall lives on Superior Dr. which is about a quarter of a mile back from the main road.

Her building is brick, and faces a lake and a basketball court. The apartments and grounds appeared in good condition and the atmosphere was family-oriented. When I first entered her apartment, I came into the family room which contained a long couch, coffee table and cushioned chairs. I interviewed her in the dining room which is attached to the family room and kitchen. The dining room contained encyclopedias, her memory books, paintings and a table with two chairs. In the back of her apartment is her bedroom and bathroom. A TV was playing at a low volume in her bedroom throughout both interviews.

The length of the interviews seemed to affect Ms. Stovall's body language. Towards the middle of our two conversations, her eyes would get blood shot, and she would start resting her head on her right hand and slouching in her chair. I thought she was getting tired and asked her periodically if she wanted to take a break or end the interview. She always said that she wanted to continue, though, which is a testament to her perseverance. Finally, I had to end both interviews because I was getting tired and the time was getting very late. It became apparent in our second talk that she likes to stay up late at night to watch "The Late Show with Jay Leno". She talked about and showed me some of her physical ailments. Iannergene has trouble climbing stairs (this is why she has a first floor apartment). She showed me that she can not make a full fist with her left hand and thus has trouble playing the piano now. For the most part, during the discussions she did not use her hands to express herself and sat comfortably in her chair.

Ms. Stovall's manner of speaking contributed to the length of the narratives. She repeated many stories word-for-word in the second interview that she initially used in the first. She probably didn't remember that she had

already told me of them. Lamergene recounted a few times that she didn't remember what she had just said. It is also obvious that she liked to use selected phrases for describing certain things. She has a habit of repeating an idea a few different ways, too. This seems to be common among some Afro-Americans. I included more of this repetition in the second transcript so the reader can get an idea for her speech tendencies. She may have wanted to be sure I understood what she was saying. Lamergene also uses some slang, but not as much as some inner-city Blacks. She has lived in small cities and towns for most of her life, though. Occasionally, she will mix-up her tenses, make run-on sentences and combine different ideas together. Yet, many people do this. Overall, her memories for details and progression when discussing childhood, young adulthood and adulthood were very good. Her narrative was pretty chronological with stories of later periods and the present mixed-in with her account of childhood.

Ms. Lamergene Stovall was born in Anniston, Alabama on January 2, 1906. Her parents were William Hampton and Mamie Melisa Rowland. Lamergene was the second child. She had one older brother, Lorenzo; one younger brother, James Henry; and two younger sisters, Mary and Ruth. From Alabama, she moved to Georgia, Tennessee and then to Steelton. Lamergene does not remember Alabama or Georgia much, but remembers moving to Chattanooga, Tennessee in about 1911. In Chattanooga, she went to the East Preston School while living with her aunt. Her father was a foreman in a cosmetics factory in there, but had to move to Steelton to do war work at the Bethlehem Steel Company during World War I. The family remained in Tennessee living in a big house on the outskirts of the city. They stayed until 1917 when a flood destroyed their home. The family moved to Steelton that year to live with William and most of her mother's family.

Iamergene first lived in a brick rowhouse with an outside toilet. Her father was one of the first foremen at Bethlehem Steel, but was demoted at the end of the war partly because of racism. He opened a restaurant in Harrisburg with liberty bonds soon afterward. The family had to move out of the rowhouse owned by the Steel Company. They moved into a house on Lincoln St. Ms. Stovall says, "But right after the War we moved on Lincoln St., at the top of the hill on Lincoln St. We were the first Black family on the top of the hill. I would always cry whenever dad would look at a house that wasn't on a hill. That's the impression the flood had on me."¹ She played with her White neighbors, however, and did not experience much discrimination on the street. Iamergene did remember one mean woman neighbor who did not let any of the children (White or Black) play on the sidewalk in front of her house. She also did not know where the Whites went to school, though, because she went to the segregated Hygenic School. One of her aunts lived with the family on Lincoln St. Her mother's sisters bought a row of homes close-by on Adams St. near the First Baptist Church.

The family always lived more than comfortably because her father had good jobs. He opened a grocery store and then a hotel after he was forced to close the restaurant. When their house was destroyed by flood in Tennessee, they were able to buy a new house, car and piano in Steelton. Ms. Stovall says that the family was very economically stable. "I can't even remember the Depression. People standing in the bread line-- I have never seen anyone

¹ Iamergene Stovall, Interview by David Kates, April 1, 1997, Steelton, PA, transcript, pp. 12.

standing in the bread line. And our first automobile was one of those seven-passenger Buicks. Like I said, my father was a, he always worked for his family."² Her mother never worked, too, except to raise the five children.

Ms. Stovall was especially spoiled by her father because she was the first born daughter. Her father would give her literally whatever she wanted, but her mother would not. The whole family, however, lived quite well. She especially respected her father because she could see that he worked very hard, with little education, to support his wife and children. He developed health problems from working at the restaurant so much. Her parents paid for higher education for most of her brothers and sisters, too. (Iamergene put herself through school, though.) Her family and the community of Steelton were very close-knit.

Ms. Stovall's parents gave her brothers and sisters a lot of freedoms, but also watched them carefully. They could socialize with the opposite sex as long as it was in the home where their parents could keep an eye on them. Her siblings brought a lot of friends to house and they would dance. This was convenient because they had many mutual friends. As she got older, she would go to dances and parties outside the home with her brothers. They sometimes would bring her home and go out again, though. When Iamergene was a teenager, she had to take Mary out with her. She resented this because her sister was five years younger. On the other hand, Ms. Stovall enjoyed spending time with Ruth (who was eight years younger) because her sister was like a baby. Her parents were very caring, she remembers being hit only

² Stovall interview by Kates, op. lit., transcript, pp. 13-14.

once by them. Ms. Stovall was talking with a boy outside when she was sixteen and she made a rude comment to her dad, so he hit her.

Church was extremely important to the family. Her uncle was the Pastor of the First Baptist Church and her father was the Superintendent of the Sunday School there. Going to church on Sunday was a main family gathering. Her father would clean the car and her mother would prepare the meal the night before. After church the whole family would eat together and then her siblings and she went to the Baptist Young People's Union.

The first school she went to in Steelton was the Hygenic School. She did not realize that Hygenic was a segregated school at the time. There was one incident there that she still resents. She comments, "The only time any man ever whipped me would be in Hygenic. It was a teacher. I never forgave this one student for making the teacher come back and whip me." ³ She entered Steelton High School in 1921. While there, she majored in home economics, and excelled in math and Latin. At the High School, there was a race riot because a White girl and a Black boy were caught dating each other. Whites students beat-up Blacks students. Her older brother, along with several other Black males, dropped out of school because they feared getting hurt. Lamergene graduated in 1925 with five other Blacks in her class. She was the first of her siblings to graduate from high school. Even though her father always used to tell her that the boys needed to be educated and the girls did not, her parents offered to send her to college. She did not know what she wanted to do, though. About a year after graduation, she started working as a seamstress, cleaner and window dresser at a specialty dress shop in

³ Ibid. pp. 17.

Harrisburg. She could not work as a clerk because she is Black. Ms. Stovall worked there for six years, but hated it because of the low pay and discrimination.

In 1932, she decided to leave Steelton. This decision was a very hard one, but she felt that she could make much more money as a nurse. There were no training hospitals for Blacks in Harrisburg. The closest such hospital was the Provident Hospital in Baltimore, so she moved there. Iamergene worked twelve hour shifts as a bedside nurse and additionally took classes. She earned her diploma in nursing three years later. Her brother next got her a job as Assistant to the Nurse on the campus of West Virginia State University. She worked and took general education classes there. The Colored Nurses Association encouraged her to get a public health education degree because they wanted more public health nurses in West Virginia. She went to the University of Michigan in 1937 and earned a degree in public health education three and a half years later.

Iamergene's first job out of school was to desegregate the public health department in Detroit. She did a lot of home nursing and quarantined residences with patients who had tuberculosis, pneumonia and gonorrhea. She had a life time teachers' certificate from the University of Michigan, so she next became a kindergarten and third grade teacher. Ms. Stovall found the kindergarten children to be cute, but felt the third grade had behavioral problems. This was one of the reasons that she left the school after five years there. Another reason was that two hospitals wanted her to work on desegregating them in the early 1940s. She explains, "They (hospital officials) were trying to get a medical center in Detroit and there was two hospitals in that area that were segregated. They wouldn't even put a White and a Black even in a room together. And they were trying to get rid of that

segregation. So they wanted to put a nurse into the hospital to work on the situation."⁴ The federal government would not let the city of Detroit build the medical center if it were segregated. She stayed there for two or three years in which time she made a start in desegregation.

Ms. Stovall was always homesick when away from Steelton. She saw the opportunity to transfer from a Veteren's' Administration hospital in Detroit to a VA hospital in Philadelphia. At the VA hospital in Detroit, though, she met her second husband and could not transfer. In the late 1960s, Iamergene began working at the Medical College of Toledo. There, she trained nurses' aides and ward clerks through the government-sponsored WEEPI Program. Ms. Stovall worked at the College until her retirement in 1978. During her retirement, she worked at two nursing homes in Michigan through 1984, when she moved back to the Steelton area.

She has had so many jobs during her life because employers couldn't find anyone else who was qualified for jobs except her. Iamergene comments, "I had made up my mind when I decided to go to school that no one would tell me that I wasn't qualified."⁵ She is referring to her job in the specialty shop where she could not be a clerk. That experience compelled her to keep advancing in her career.

Undoubtedly, she has experienced a lot of discrimination in her life. Her father was demoted and she could not be a clerk because of racism. Ms. Stovall could not train to be a nurse in Harrisburg nor try on clothes in Baltimore stores because of institutional racism, as well. Also, Iamergene's

⁴ Ibid. April 17, 1997. pp. 12.

⁵ Ibid. op. lit. pp. 13.

supervisor at her first public health nursing job in Detroit would not let Black nurses service patients in White homes because of the woman's own bigotry. At most of her jobs, Blacks had to be better qualified than Whites. Much of this racism has been institutional and not directed specifically at her, though. Yet, she does not feel that she has faced much discrimination in her life. This may be because racism was accepted as a part of life when she was growing up. Also, she has always been just as wealthy as middle class Whites. Ms. Stovall had more education than most White nurses, too.

Iamergene's various illnesses throughout her life have slowed her down, but she has always bounced back stronger and more determined. She was sick in a hospital bed with pneumonia for seventy days while training in Baltimore. She graduated about six months later than her classmates as a result. During World War II, she was infected with peritonitis. She may have died if she didn't get special permission from the army to take penicillin. Ms. Stovall hated bedside nursing, I think, because she was contracting illnesses from her patients. These sicknesses, however, may have made her more compassionate towards her patients because she knew how they felt.

Iamergene married her first husband the summer before she started classes at the University of Michigan in 1937. His name was Raymond Harrison. He worked for the city of Detroit and on the Cadillac assembly line in order to put her through school. She only had to ask her parents for two-hundred and fifty dollars to fund her education. Ms. Stovall divorced Raymond in 1966 because he would not forget the affairs she had while he was in the Army in India. She met her next husband as a patient in the VA hospital. His name was Frank Stovall. He had mental problems because of his back surgeries. Frank was always paranoid that she was having affairs. They divorced in 1978, the year that she retired.

While Ms. Stovall was still with Raymond, Ruth (her sister) was dying and asked Iamergene if she would take care of her kids. She adopted Rowland and Ginger (who are ten months apart) in 1959. Patty Jo, the oldest daughter, came to live with her about a year later. Rowland and Ginger live in Pennsylvania now, and Patty Jo lives in Indiana. Ms. Stovall has asked Ginger to see that she is buried and the will is divided properly when the time comes.

Iamergene talked very frankly about her death in the second interview. She has faced death a couple of times in her life. Three years ago, she collapsed in a chair and was in a coma for five days. She very nearly died and she realizes one day soon she may not be so lucky. Very recently, many of her friends and family have died, and Ms. Stovall is beginning to wonder why she is still living. She feels that she has done everything that she has wanted to do. I think Iamergene is depressed from constantly sitting at home because she is used to being so busy. She feels that in certain ways she is waiting to die. Something that she fears is helplessness because she has always been so strong and dignified. Ms. Stovall elaborates, "I just don't want to be here sick--lying around and can't do nothing, can't go where I want to go. I'd have to depend on people to come and get me if they so desire." ⁶ She is happy with what she has done in her life, however, and does not wish to die.

The church has become very important to her at the present. Few people from Steelton visit her because she lives in Harrisburg. When she is not in church on a Sunday, many people call her to make sure that her health

⁶ Ibid. pp. 17.

is still good. The senior citizen group which she attends every Tuesday also gets her involved in the community. She has something to look forward to every week, and she can get out of her house and drive. Her cousin, Precious, is also very important to her. Precious has called Iamergene nightly since her coma to check-up on her.

Ms. Stovall has regarded Steelton as her home beginning in 1917 when she first moved there. This was the case even when she was away for fifty years. Iamergene lived in Detroit for twenty-nine years, almost double the time that she was in Steelton during childhood. A large reason is that she has always had family in Steelton. Her family has been very active in the community starting with Reverend Goodwin, her father as a Deacon and Superintendent of the Sunday School, and her adopted son, Rowland, as director of the YMCA in Harrisburg. She had memories of no other place she lived before moving there. Steelton was where the family went after disaster (the floods), and where she and her siblings joined BYPU and made friends. Ms. Stovall has memories of the parades, lakes, street cars, cemeteries and parks in Steelton. She has always had vivid memories of her childhood there, and felt that it was someplace to which she could come back.

Ms. Stovall did not return to Steelton when she was homesick because of obligations. She had to make sure that she had a job in Harrisburg or Philadelphia before she moved with her adopted children in order to support them. Also, her marriages prevented her from leaving. Another factor was that she did not wish to be a public health nurse in Pennsylvania. Here, she could be fired for her political affiliation.

Steelton is still a very quiet and safe borough. Houses that look like they may be abandoned are torn down. One thing that has changed in the

fifty years that she has been away, though, are the deacons. Her father and a few other relatives were deacons during her childhood. The deacons now, she feels, do whatever Reverend Cooley wants. The two million dollar renovation that Reverend Cooley is promoting would have never been approved by the deacons when her relatives had the positions. Most residents of Steelton today have been there all their lives and are dying out. No one is moving to Steelton since the Bethlehem Steel Company closed. The younger members of the Church are from Harrisburg. Also, the plans for the renovation allow for six classrooms for Sunday School, but there are not enough children to fill them.

The First Baptist Church, however, is still at the heart of the community of Steelton because it provides a gathering place for Blacks to get involved with the senior citizens group, Sunday School, BYPU and the church trips. Thus, Reverend Cooley is one of the major leaders in the community. He needs to be strong and supportive, or all the people will become weaker and resentful of him. This is why Lamergene is now quite disillusioned with the Church.

Another aspect of Steelton and society that Ms. Stovall recognized has not changed is the welfare system. Through her work in public health nursing, she has seen people who have wasted their welfare check and those who have used the money very wisely. She recounts her observations, "They had big parties after they got their check. The children didn't get anything, but they'd have a big party. They had nice automobiles and the children would come to school hungry. They hadn't had breakfast in the morning." 8

She also talks about a single mother on welfare who fed and clothed her ten children very well on a welfare check.

Her hopes for the future are that our government reforms the welfare system and that the church is not renovated. Both in her letter and in the second interview, she advises me to "Keep Smiling". She has seen the crankiness and anger of elderly people in the nursing home in which she worked. Iamergene has decided that she doesn't want to act like that. She wishes to die with a smile on her face. All of her humorous stories certainly put a smile on my face. She talks of people she knows who have had back surgery which has affected their brains. Ms. Stovall also describes the affairs of her father, brother and herself.

Iamergene realizes that she has played a very important part in history. She has been very influential in desegregating the health department, hospitals and schools in Detroit. Ms. Stovall was not only desegregating the institutions, but she was also desegregating the jobs she was taking, as well. She says proudly, "The changes that I made in jobs and things like that, I did them for a reason. It was always to make a pathway for somebody else to get in. Every time I've changed on the job, it has been to make a way for somebody else to get in. I was the one person who could do it." ⁹ Iamergene was the first Black to take many of her various jobs. She has gone much farther in life than her dad and doctor expected. She loves history, too. In the first interview, she talked about her memory books. They are big, black scrapbooks filled with photographs and other memorabilia which she collected while outside of Steelton, and from friends and family who sent her

⁹ Ibid. pp. 22.

things about Steelton while she was away from home. Lamergene is also very interested in her grandparent's slave stories, but she realizes that she will probably never know them.

Lamergene started her life at a high level. She was very spoiled as a child and got literally whatever she wanted because she was the first daughter. Her father was able to buy the family a nice house, a piano, a Buick and good educations. The flood in Chattanooga would be a low point in her life. The family lost their house, car and piano. She was only eleven at the time so this was an especially scary experience. When her family moved up to Steelton, however, William was making enough money to quickly replace all that they had lost. Thus, she really didn't suffer too much. The Great Depression, which was a tragedy in many people's lives who lived through it, was not felt in the least by Ms. Stovall. In fact, she never even saw anyone standing in a bread line or greatly affected by the Depression. The specialty dress shop that she worked at for six years was not very desirable for her, too. She faced racism--she couldn't be a clerk. Also, all Lamergene was doing was altering clothes and cleaning the store. She knew she could get a more dignified and higher paying job if she went to school. Her unhappiness compelled her to attend the training hospital in Baltimore where she contracted pneumonia. This kept her in the hospital for seventy days and didn't allow her to graduate with her class. With hard work, however, she worked in the emergency room and came away with a diploma six months after her classmates. Her next sickness was peritonitis during World War II. She was very close to death when she was given permission by the army to take penicillin. Lamergene started working again soon afterward. Finally, three years ago, she fell into a coma and again almost

elevated. Ms. Stovall gained from her home compassion, humor, competition, perseverance, academic excellence and friendship. She has maintained these qualities all her life. Jamergene says as if stating the obvious, "I came back home because that's where I wanted to be, I wanted to be home. And I want to die at home." ¹⁰ She finally did return to the area and is no longer homesick. Jamergene stands a very dignified and unregretful woman.

The necessity of her committedness is unmistakable. Both she and I had to have good interaction in order for the interview to be successful. For all that she has done, I am indebtedly grateful. As Ms. Stovall has gone on a trip in her life which we tried to record, she and I also went on a trip-- a search for the truth through the interview process. What a very interesting and enriching journey it has been.

¹⁰ Ibid. April 1, 1997. pp.22.