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From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Prudence Hawkins by Joseph Conforti

Prudence Hawkins

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Rhode Island College
ETHNIC STUDIES PROJECT

Oral History Interview # 18

with

Prudence Hawkins

May 3, 1976

By Joseph Conforti

Tape 1 Side 1

- 7 Family from Florida. Grandfather was probably slave for Powell family. Mother raised on tobacco farm and her mother died when she was 12. She moved to Apalachicola, Florida--very small town.
- 19 Mother had 7 children, 4 girls, 3 boys.
- 31 Father had his own boat--fished in Gulf of Mexico, took fishing parties up river.
- 43 Very pleasant childhood, strict upbringing, church attendance required.
- 46 Mother raised the family, father supported the family. Mother raised garden and sold produce, sewed, made all their clothes. She didn't feel poor or lacking in anything.
- 54 Few blacks in white neighborhood but her family lived in a black neighborhood where everybody owned their homes.
- 59 Everyone friendly, nice community to live in.
- 63 She got married at 16 and they moved to Miami--neither had any skills.
- 68 When they married her husband was making \$16. a week working in a sawmill. They did domestic work in Miami, were part of a staff of 7.
- 80 She was waitress for the family--had to learn everything about formal table settings, bought etiquette book.
- 92 Husband was chauffeur. Stayed 3 years and had small house nearby.

Prudence Hawkins

- 99 She had good social life. Had summers free while family was in Connecticut. They joined clubs in Miami.
- 111 Contrast between domestic worker in North and in South. In North she wasn't as respected by blacks because she did domestic work.
- 138 Worked for another family who spent summers in Illinois and they went also, worked for them about 3 years.
- 147 When they went back to Florida, got job with family from Providence. Stayed for 20 years, built their own home and left that job.
- 183 She saw her family often, they were close. Went home at least every other year.
- 199 All in Florida except herself. One brother is a college teacher, another worked for government. Sisters married, housewives.
- 213 Wasn't difficult for her to move from Florida--she liked to travel.
- 232 Impressed with family she worked for in Providence. To Edgartown every summer with family--mutual respect.
- 275 Differences between North and South--she had no real problems adjusting. Just as much stereotyping in North as in South.
- 300 Lived above family she worked for and was very happy in her work.
- 378 Church not very important to her here. Went to church infrequently because of her work.
- 396 Friendship--met others who did same kind of work, met some at church, some at parties.
- 415 She felt there was nowhere to go and nothing to do in Providence after coming from Miami.
- 440 She had only a few friends who were domestics.
- 480 Joined Urban League and NAACP when she came here. Now she's a member of Urban League guild--they raise money for scholarships. Both groups were working for the betterment of the black community.

Prudence Hawkins

Tape 1 Side 2

- 3 She was also involved in John Hope center, neighborhood recreation for children, for elderly, collected clothing for sales.
- 21 Groups gave her a sense of belonging to the community-- she felt she was able to help others in that way.
- 33 Women's Intergroup Committee, an inter-racial group she was active in after World War II. Had demonstration at State House in 1950's, lobbied for fair housing bill. Group disbanded eventually.
- 69 She thinks everyone is prejudiced to some extent. Being raised in South has made her cautious, often she will just listen rather than give her views.
- 102 Her employer was unaware of her fair housing activities.
- 111 From the beginning, her goal was to have her own home and give her son as many advantages as possible--best schools were in New England.
- 122 Her son was good student but couldn't get into Brown. She feels it was because they were domestics. He attended PC and URI.
- 149 Began to look for lots to build home--had some difficulties because they were black. One white friend offered to buy a lot for them. They decided not to get into a neighborhood that way.
- 166 Started looking in black neighborhoods, bought lot, built.
- 179 Are happy in that section, have lived there 20 years.
- 187 Moved into new home and both quit jobs as domestics. Husband worked at RISD and she stayed at home.
- 216 She only belongs to Urban League now, tired of many clubs.
- 233 Still sees her family quite often.
- 256 Feels her parents were fairly cultured and that rubbed off on her as did some of the tastes of her former employers.
- 274 All she wants now is comfort and good health.
- 306 She feels progress has been made in opportunities available for blacks. Her son is a mechanical engineer for Polaroid. She sees him as an example of more opportunities for blacks.
- 337 She came from Florida when her son was 9 and she thinks he's done well. She's happy with her life here.