

Woody 10-1-15

A discussion of the Woody Home for Services on Oakwood Avenue in Orange, which was referred to by Gordon R in the 4/7/15 Oakwood Avenue interview as 'Woody's Funeral Home,' probably after a "Woody" Woody who may have been the father of Pete "Colson" Woody. [The Metropolitan YMCA of the Oranges website mentions "T. Colson Woody" among the "stalwarts" who made a large contribution to the community through service to the Oakwood Avenue YMCA. <<http://www.metroymcas.org/main/our-history/>>]

Discussants include people who worked at the parlor and/or were members of the Woody and White families that owned it. [Someone's brother owned and operated it and sold it in the 1950s, according to (Ida??) who is speaking when the recording begins.]

Pete Colson Woody brought in Clifford White as an employee ~1949 and later made him part owner when the business was sold off and "incorporated" in 1965. Because he was part owner, discussants refer to him as a 'partner,' although the business seems not to have been a partnership. It is not clear if the addition made in the 1970s (to accommodate funerals) took place before or after Woody's death in 1974, after which Clifford operated the home until his own death in 1987.

Participants emphasize that the home was an important community resource and a unifying factor for the people who lived near Oakwood Avenue before Route 280 tore things up. The Woodys and Whites were generous and kindly people who "are responsible for giving a lot of people help." "They helped lift us when we were at our lowest point." They "took care of" those who needed care: "It's the place where you get what you need when you need it most." The directors were ready to employ local people who needed jobs, and who learned the business there (John Lee, Sheila Myers, Russell Jackson) are still working at the home.

As a result of the general humanity of the owners, the parlor became an important community resource: People would drop by just to chat, and will still call long after a funeral to obtain genealogical information. Thus, now that 280 has come through and ripped up the area, the home remains a resource that helps people keep in touch.

Before 280, this part of Orange was entirely segregated, and Oakwood Avenue was a street of black entrepreneurs, starting with Dr. Longshore and other doctors, most of them mentioned in the Oakwood Avenue interview. (Dr. Colman (or Colson), four feet high, used to 'grunt,' or clear his throat, and give out envelopes of medication.) The neighborhood is different now. "Those were the days of great Orange...when Orange was really a city of love, a different kind of people, people who cared about each other, everyone was your family." [Becky?]

Because the owners, like other business owners in the neighborhood, lived upstairs, some of the group reminisce about their childhood experiences visiting their friend Mary Anne Woody, who was perfectly comfortable sitting down next to a coffin to practice piano, and did not find the dark stairway to her bedroom on the third floor at all creepy.

The group interviewed may include: [Please correct from more accurate notes. Some of those listed may not have been present.]

- ☐ Mrs. Clifford White, whose husband worked at the parlor and was given a "partnership" after some years due to his faithful employment at the place where he had learned the business. Her daughter Patricia was eleven months old in 1949.
- ☐ Sharon, who is apparently one of the oldest or most informed participants. Is she Mrs. White? Or could she be an extremely elderly widow of a Woody?
- ☐ Mary Anne Woody, daughter of Pete "Colson" Woody and older sister to Ida and Irma. She had a great cowboy outfit, and was generous about sharing her gun with Becky. She was also bowlegged "in them years." [Comment preserved not to show lack of education—all these people seem well educated—but to indicate that discussants felt comfortable in the interview.
- ☐ Ida Woody, sister of Mary Anne Woody. Ida was two in 1949, may be ~68 now.
- ☐ Irma Woody, now 66. She [or Ida] "fell into the business" after completing her higher education.
- ☐ Teddy [probably a brother of Mary Anne et al.], who was more possessive about his toy gun than his sister was.
- ☐ Becky. Is she the person who started ~1985, or is that someone else? Is she the same person who worked the front desk and the phones?
- ☐ John Lee, the current manager, started in 1956, so knew both owners.
- ☐ Mildred, a childhood friend of Mary Anne.
- ☐ Sheila Myers, started at the home ~1969, started just hanging around until Mr. White gave her Christmas cards to address. Eventually John and Russell let her watch an embalming. Her own father was dead, and Mr. White acted like a father to her, even watching out for her reputation.

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Details about individuals involved in the business:

**Mary Colson Woody** (probably the wife of Woody Woody, and mother of Pete Colson Woody). She was grandmother to Irma and Ida.

Becky: Becky's family lived on Wilson Place, just around the corner from the home, behind where Woody's parking lot is now; remembers the home as a notable place to go, and that Mary Woody would sit on the porch and talk to anyone who came by, encourage them; people thought it was "a great thing" to be able to say you knew Mrs. Woody. When she was ~6-7, and a good friend of Irma's, Mrs Woody would take her along on expeditions to NY, to the Natural History Museum, then via subway to visit Mary's ill sister in (probably) Brooklyn.

Mary Anne: They (a group of 5-6 kids, even 12, "not just Becky and Leonora") and Grandma Woody would take the bus to Newark, the Path to Jersey City, and "the subway to Radio City and stand on line for an hour." Mary Woody was "a very staunch" NAACP supporter, founded the Orange branch, attended every national convention, and would stubbornly sit right behind the driver even in the South. Loved Roy Walters (sic, perhaps conflating several names?).

Mildred(?): Mary Woody used to collect the rent from her mother by coming to their

house and eating rice and gravy [with meat when available] with her two remaining teeth, taking some away for Eldridge (Colson's brother) and Dave. When they had meat (chicken, salt pork), it would come from the Father Divine store on the corner.

Irma or Ida: Grandma Woody arranged for Ben Jones, who used to staple the interior trimming into the caskets, to go to college.

A niece, probably a daughter of Mary's brother: Mary Woody used to visit them in PA. She was particular about not doing work like shopping on Sundays, but pretended not to notice her little nephew sneaking out to buy ice cream for the family dessert. She was a mainstay of the family, was instrumental in the family's move to NJ and in helping others generally. She took her niece places "where others didn't go," like the World's Fair, boat rides.

John: Mrs Woody, strict but fair, would check out all the employees before a funeral started: shoes, pant creases, shirt cuffs, hands. Mr. Woody sometimes played little tricks, but was strict about making people do what they had to do, and John appreciates that now.

### **Clifford White** (eventual part owner)

His wife says he originally worked in a bank, but was not getting promoted.

A Woody daughter says Clifford was invaluable, could organize anything, was completely capable of taking care of everything when the Woodys went away. He was very "meticulous," had beautiful handwriting.

Clifford (6'1" or 6'2"), was stern, "would take no stuff," would come down the steps "all debonaire with his black suit on" to confront a drunk friend and send him home.

Both Cliff and Colson (below) functioned as father figures to some of the younger people.

**Colson:** A soft-spoken person, a gentleman, never raised his voice: "Unassuming." "Involved."

Mrs. White: Pete "Colson" Woody, father of Mary Anne and Ida, was "a community person," who gave her husband Clifford the opportunity in 1949 to learn funeral work. He had worked in that area while in high school, and wanted to become a funeral director, but had had to take a bank job where he was not being promoted. Colson and Clifford "got like brothers" and Colson gave Clifford "a partnership" without his having to buy it. Her youngest daughter started there after college.

Colson and Clifford used to do income tax for people, sitting on the porch that was there at the time. Colson also took the oldest White daughter, along with his own daughters, to Jamaica (by plane).

Colson was on the Board of Education (first black person), the Planning Board, the board of the "Black" Y (taken by 280, along with the YWCA).

**Eldridge**, Colson's brother, took photos, always had time for kids.

**Mrs. Garrison**, a next door neighbor, would sit on her porch, and advised a fearful child: "Don't worry about those [dead] people in the cold, worry about the people walking around in the streets!"

