

**Mildred Hicks Harris 11-9-2015, b. 1936**

Mildred was born at 207 Central Place in Orange; she was delivered by Dr. Walter G. Alexander (7' tall and heavy), the pediatrician for the area, and his midwife, Miss Bessie, who favored a certain type of "Miss Bessie" hat, wore cotton stockings, and used to keep a bottle of spirits in her pocket to calm her nerves from time to time. She would also resort to snuff.

Still large today, Mildred was a big baby, over ten pounds, and the doctor joked that she was a grown woman, ready to be put to work. She is the oldest of four, including a sister, Anna Hicks Barlow, and boy/girl twins, Herman and Harriet. Her siblings were all born in the 1940s at 177 Central Place, in a house then belonging to Mrs. Mary Colson Woody. The rent was \$15/month. Herman's wife and children still live there; he died a year ago. There are three bedrooms and a bath upstairs, another bath downstairs.

Herman and Harriet were born at St. Mary's rather than at home because twins were considered so unusual, and the neighbors considered their mother "some kind of freak —she got no help." However Miss Greenberg, a white woman living next door, would sneak over milk to help feed the two babies. The street was very mixed at the time; another family on the street was named O'Hara.

**Parents:**

Mother: Satarrah Holmes Hicks, from Cedar Springs, Georgia. She was 6'1", a teacher, trained at Paine College, but could not find employment at Oakwood School, and therefore went to work in a laundry next to Woodys. She would leave Mildred with a sitter across the street from the laundry where the little girl could sit at the fence and look over to her mother's workplace.

Mr. and Mrs. Gill, who owned the laundry where Mildred's mother washed items like sheets and men's shirts, died together in an auto accident. The Knapp Funeral home on Harrison Street, a white establishment where the viewing took place, used to "lay out" their clients by posing them sitting on couches or chairs: Mr. Gill sat there in a red smoking jacket with his legs crossed, while his wife wore a pink dress.

Father: Herman Hicks from South Hills, Virginia. He worked at Swift's Meat Company, then went to Purolator, in Newark, riding the trolley from Orange.

Both parent migrated north as adults. They met in Newark, and rented in Orange, first renting an apartment, then the two-story detached house at 177 Central Place.

**Childhood friends and activities:**

The kids played in the back yard or on the big front porch. Encouraged by their mother, they also went around collecting copies of Life Magazine and National Geographic put outside for collection. Back at home, they would cut out pictures and, using homemade flour paste, paste them into scrapbooks purchased for 25 cents each from the Kress five

and dime on Central Avenue. The kids were not allowed to go over to Harrison St. in East Orange, where the mostly white inhabitants had "black, uh, maids; they wore white uniforms, the men wore black suits," but they would sneak over there anyway because those people put out a lot of magazines. "There were some blacks [living] there but they were hidden."

Mildred's mother told her books are "the greatest thing in the world" and that she'd "never know what [looking at these magazines] will do for you."

With Ralph and Kenneth Curtis, close neighbors, Mildred would make mud cookies and cakes in an old pot. To make platters for their mud creations, they would get an empty box from the Father Divine store on the corner. Ralph once encouraged her to get some flour for icing, leading to mud in the flour bin (used by Mildred's mother every night to make bread. Her mother felt "dad blasted" when she saw the mud. Ralph is still alive, living in Maryland, as is his younger sister Betty Anne, who lives in Montclair.

Catherine Jackson (now on High Street, was at 158 Central Place) and Virginia Harper (at 186 Central Place even today) are still friends with Mildred. Catherine takes the other two shopping. They jumped rope, including "French" (two-handed) jumprope, and, although it was a boy's game, they would occasionally buy marbles and play on the narrow curb at the edge of the street. Mildred also recalls a tiny blue and yellow doll carriage, and a spinning toy. Later in the interview she mentions taking making beads out of [horse] chestnuts from the trees on Center Place.

### **School:**

Mildred attended Oakwood Avenue School (OAS), where all the teachers were white except for Mrs. Chennault. The childless Mrs. Chennault also lived on Central Avenue and became a sort of godmother to Mildred, who would go over there on Saturdays to help clean. The students were mixed, more white than black; Ruthie Panis, who lived on the corner of Berman and Oakwood, was a white friend.

Mildred attended Central [Middle] School on Cleveland and Main, and Orange High School (OAS). Central was heavily Italian. Her early school experiences were not happy ones because she hated leaving her mother and suffered from a lot of bullying over her weight, but she found a mentor in in high school, Russell Monica, a big man, the football coach, and her history teacher. He took a liking to her and years later, having lost track of her, went to Ida at Woodys Home for Services, a neighborhood resource for this type of information, to get back in touch. After that, right up until his death about a year ago, he would call her, even when she was living in California.

Mildred also liked the high school because there was a choice of subjects, including art and world history, and a cafeteria where she worked, stacking milk cartons, etc., to get a small salary and the points that students were expected to earn. Miss Blackman, the cook, made an especially delicious chicken pot pie, and would even bring a piece of chicken from home for Mildred, who would save out some of the good food she got from her cafeteria job for her sister, who only had a sandwich from home.

After she graduated, Mr. Woody sent Mildred to Metropolitan Nursing School in NY, and she commuted via trolley and subway, but occasionally had to stay over at the school. She was not heavily committed to the program, and after a time came home to help her mother, as her father was drinking heavily.

### **The neighborhood**

At that time you could take a yellow and white electric trolley with brown writing which went down Central Avenue. The double-track route ran from a turnaround near Scotland Road to Broad Street, or sometimes Market, in Newark, where trains ("subways") to NY were available. The tracks were pulled up in the fifties or sixties. There were trolleys on Main Street too. The fare to Newark was five cents.

There were two black "Ys" on Oakwood, both across from Woodys, but closer to to where the highway is now. The boys' "Y" was right where the highway is; the girls' "Y" was closer to Woodys. The men's facility was a handsome red brick building with black shutters; the other was half brick, half wood construction.

Harry Whitlock's Luncheonette and Sweet shop was across the street from the girls' "Y" on the corner of Oakwood and Parrow, going toward the school. He sold hamburgers, fries, onions, etc. Mildred has a photo of Harry in or on her desk. She has other photos, but will have to look around for them. She also thinks she may also ask Teddie Grey/Grey if she has some old photos through her mother.

Clyde Golden's General Store in the middle of the block on Hickory and South sold coal and oil as well as food and dry goods. People preferred to shop there rather than at the A&P, which gave black people a hard time. Golden and his wife Vi[olet], who were black, raised their three kids in the store: Clyde, Jr.; Pumpkin, and Carol.

Shreiber's Tavern was next door to Golden's; Shreiber had a very large dog, a Great Dane, that he brought from Germany. .

At this point, Mildred examines a historical map and agrees that South, Collins, and Orchard, part of her old neighborhood, are now gone. [South and Hill, which now lies across the highway, ran parallel to Parrow, with Collins and Orchard running between them.] She also mentions Wilson, still extant, running from Oakwood to Central Place (where she lived), and Hurlbut. [On Hurlbut, see note in the Woodys interview.]

Clyde Golden's store (and Shreibers) were on Hickory in the middle of the block between South and Parrow along with Shorty Thomas' barber shop where Mildred's brother had his hair cut, and Rolls' (?) junkyard. There was also a hotdog stand, Brownie's, in front of Clyde's, and an Italian market, Carol's. [On a map this block of Hickory, now gone, was a very short one.] There is still a junkyard on Hickory, but it is not the same as the one that was near Clyde's.

The A&P, which gave blacks some kind of "slow" treatment, was right at the corner of

Main and Day Streets, across from [on the other side from?] Chapman.\* A white "horseshoe man," or blacksmith, who also kept horses, was located on Chapman. The milk cart man, Mr Beckman, who came out of Rosalind and kept ice on his wagon to cool the milk, would have his horses shoed there after finishing his deliveries.

[\*sbh: In the Oakwood Avenue interview, Walter locates an A&P at the corner of Oakwood and Parrow, some blocks from Main and Day. The Oakwood Avenue store, gone by Puryear's time, is characterized in that interview as a "focal point." Neither location (Oakwood Avenue, Main & Day) is contiguous with the corner of Hickory and Chapman, a one-block street running between Hickory and Centre Street north of Central Avenue, according to the historical map at <[http://mapmaker.rutgers.edu/ESSEX\\_COUNTY/TheOranges\\_1912.jpg](http://mapmaker.rutgers.edu/ESSEX_COUNTY/TheOranges_1912.jpg)>. It is not clear if there were several A&Ps, or a succession of stores, or if the conflicting information results from trying to reconcile mental maps derived from experience with the bird's eye map presented for review to Mildred and a drop-in visitor, audible in the background.]

When asked about an Italian deli on the corner of Hickory and Chapman, Mildred recalls a big building where a Harry Knight and Miss Trudge/Drudge(?), the seamstress, lived. It had an opening, still there today, leading to the blacksmith's place at the back. The building is now nearly 100 years old; the anonymous visitor states that "we" got it and refurbished it ~14 years ago. When his group took over the building, there were such structural problems that a refrigerator had fallen from the second floor into the basement. The group also refurbished the blacksmith's space, which is very small, at least now.

### **Neighborhood activities and outings**

In the summer, kids could go to Orange Park, to the playground section past Seven Oaks, and participate in day camp type activities like arts and crafts. The teachers were all white, and the kids would go home for lunch. Any Fourth of July celebrations were also held in the park.

There were church affairs, and the church would organize bus trips to Jones Beach. The kids had to work and save money to go; Mildred, as mentioned above, could earn some money or a ticket by cleaning for Mrs. Chennault, or by babysitting. Local swimming was not a frequent activity for Mildred, as the "Y" pool, in the boy's "Y," was not open to girls every day. Mildred's aunt paid for her to have a "Y" membership, however.

Mildred would come home from school, wash and peel the potatoes, and put them on the stove, so her mother could fix dinner efficiently when she got home. She was expected to do such chores and obey rules, e.g., about keeping her home, including the porch, clean and neat; otherwise she would be grounded.

### **The local police**

An old white Orange police officer, Mr. Mason, "did the park," and rode an "English racer" bike there "24/7." People were scared of him. When Mildred was in primary school, Mr. Farley, a black officer, who lived by the park and walked by Oakwood

Avenue School, was always saying "Please be kind."

### **Mildred's adult life**

In her twenties and thirties, Mildred 'hung out.' She worked as a barmaid at Urban Club on Amherst Street in East Orange ("down now"), drank some and partied, living off and on with her parents. (Her brother was still at home.) She also worked at the Theresa Grotta nursing home in West Orange, formerly Redwood Manor, "right up the mountain," and in the kitchen at Orange Memorial. She moved out of Orange in 1973, and went to California, where she had a business.

Her husband was a contractor with her brother-in-law, Billy Barlow, and also worked with some of the Italians in West Orange, e.g., Spinelli; one of them, Mike, still comes by from time to time.

### **Residential buildings impacted by 280**

Mildred herself was not fazed by the construction of the highway. "I wasn't caring: Let's knock it down!" She does recall that Herbie Reid, who worked with her, lived in an apartment building on Hickory up the street from Clyde Golden's called the Metropolitan Building; he had to move farther up the street with his mother and sister. Some of Mildred's "mother's people" lived in the same building: her honorary "Aunt A(nne)," "Uncle Jay W" and "Russell" Stapleton, who were actually cousins. The Stapletons were "old fashioned, they came out of the country." Uncle Jay was seven feet tall and worked in a factory, wearing a white shirt, a vest, black pants, a hat and "big old shoes." The building had eight apartments, but she recalls only the people mentioned above plus Bobby Bryant(?) and Herbie.

Mildred also recalls the projects behind Woodys, "It was new in 1965, the Alexander Apartments. They were new and they were nice," and her mother moved in there. (By that time, Mildred had rented a room in East Orange.) One of the amenities her mother particularly enjoyed was a real bathtub rather than one of the oval tin washtubs that people used to store by hanging them from big nails on the wall of the houses. [sbh: My memory is that these were made of galvanized tin, as were the round kind more commonly used for laundry.] Satarrah Hicks was also delighted with the running hot water, which saved her from having to heat water on the stove.

### **Changes over the years, especially after 280 (and the riots and the drugs coming in here")**

Mildred says Orange was "a pretty city with the trees, the chestnuts...and everybody helped one another. If you didn't have somethin' to eat, ... the Italians would give you a big bowl of spaghetti, if you made cookies, you made enough for your neighbor," and Mildred still shares with the poor. Her brother Herman used to be like a truant officer with his truck, picking up kids from the street, getting them something to eat, or buying them shoes, and dropping them off at school, even if his kindness made him late for work.

The projects were beautiful at first, in 1955, '56, '57, everyone there took care of the

halls, but in the 60s bad elements apparently came drifting up into Orange, bringing drugs and crime. According to Mildred, this was the result of the Newark riots, but they did not actually take place until 1967. Eventually there were so many drugs in the projects "you couldn't get up the steps," and the subsequent demolition was something that had to be done.

### **Other contacts**

Teddy Gray/Grey, who lived on Oakwood Place. Mildred needs to get her phone number. As mentioned above, Teddy may also have photos from her mother. She lived next to Dr. Alexander's midwife, Miss Bessie. (On Miss Bessie, see above, at opening of interview). Mildred would be willing to participate in a joint interview with

Catherine and Virginia, the friends mentioned earlier are not interested in doing interviews. (Mildred jokes that they are proponents of disestablishmentarianism.)

### **Important people from the neighborhood and a few final details**

- Mr Woody (mentioned by Matthews) was "a great leader."
- Dr. Alexander (mentioned by Matthews, was "more of a doctor" than a notable neighborhood figure.)

Running up Oakwood in her mind, going from the Park all the way over Central Avenue (to Lanky Jones), past the school, then Holy Spirit Church and Main Street:

- Catherine Dunn, a dancer
- Dr. Longshore,
- Dr. Scott
- Dr. Isaac
- Dr. Jones and
- Dr. Sparks, right across from one another
- Dr. Colman, a very small, old man, who used to keep clearing his throat, who was on Oakwood past Main Street

- Monte Irvin: when asked about him, Mildred says he lived down the street from Teddy. She also remembers the Orange Triangles basketball players. Mildred's sister used to work across the street from there, in the Friendship House, where the Triangles would also play. "They were trying to be big time." The Friendship House was built by Miss Henderson, and was on Parrow, she thinks. There were all kinds of free activities there, with room for ball games, card games, etc., and there was no entry fee.

Nootsie, the Italian who sold the best lemonades, and lemon ice for 5¢, had his place right next to the Friendship House, next to a custard place, run by a black man called Brownie; another Brownie's, across from Clyde, sold hot dogs.

Orange also had some factories, down on McChesney and Forest, making hats, books, and staplers, and these provided jobs. [Both streets run east off Valley, on either side of Nassau.] Mildred's brother-in-law Ben worked at the stapler place, which made the only had stapler available at that time. Monroe calculator was closer, on Central Avenue.

Mildred agrees that people once worked in Newark, but later on "Newark carried their own, and we [in Orange] carried our own, to a certain degree."

Mildred is not sure the destruction caused by the highway was a great loss because the buildings were old and shabby, and she likes the newer buildings and amenities like brighter street lights. As an example, she mentions the former condition of the Metropolitan Building, where a refrigerator fell into the basement. On the other hand, she hopes the city can be "brought back."