

INTERVIEW

WITH

MRS. GEORGE (CARRIE BURTON) OVERTON

Made by: Philip P. Mason
May 22, 1969 at the home of
Mrs. Overton: 449 W. 153rd St.
New York, N.Y.

Mr. Mason: Since the last few minutes of the tape seem to be defective, would you tell me again about your experience when you discovered that you were black.

Mrs. Overton: Well, I was five years old at the time, and one day while I was playing with a friend, he said to me, "what makes you so black?" I told him I didn't know and that I would ask my mother. Then he said, "why don't you take some soap and wash your face?"

Well, anyhow, I asked my mother and she said, "God made me black and made him white." That was the end of it.

Mr. Mason: Generally, though, in the community there was little evidence of prejudice as you grew older, is this noticeable in your relations with your school chums?'

Mrs. Overton: Well, those people do things outright. They just called me "black" ; they'd call me "nigger" - some of those kids - and I'd call them any name that I could find to call them and we'd be friends. I don't know in that vicinity it started, but they used to say to me, "nigger, nigger, never die - black face and shiny eyes, crooked nose and crooked toes - that's the way the nigger goes." And we got used to it that it wasn't anything - we didn't mind, except that we knew they were calling us nigger and we would call them names. We'd remain friends; nothing made you fall out with your buddies.

Did I tell you about the boy with the geography book?

Mr. Mason; No.

Mrs. Overton: Geographies were about 15" - no, I'll say 10 - big books you know, the biggest book we've had in this school room - and a white boy sat in the row in front of me. He opened his geography book one day and there was this picture of an African with a ring in his nose. You've never seen such an ugly picture in your life. So, he pointed to this African and pointed to me. Oh, I've never had anything to make me so mad. I was really angry with him, but I couldn't do anything because class was in session, you know, and by the time class was out I had cooled off. I never said anything to him about it. But he got the biggest kick out of it - Oh, he got the biggest kick. But they tease you that way.

You know one thing? You never saw any real prejudice - no.

I didn't tell you about the man that my brother drew a gun on did I?

Mr. Mason: No.

Mrs. Overton: Must I tell you? May I tell you?

Mr. Mason: Yes, by all means.

Mrs. Overton: Brother and I were at home - my mother was at work. This was in the morning. A white man came up on the porch. We kept our kitchen door open all the time. Open - not unlocked - but open. He walked in and said, "hello children, where's your mother?" We said, "she's at work." And so he said, "would you like to have your fortune told?" And both of us - Oh, we were so anxious - said, "yes." So he told brother to step into the next room while he told my fortune. And brother stepped into the next room and he sat down in the kitchen. I told you this was a white man. And I was so small that sitting on a man's lap wouldn't matter. He took me on his lap but I didn't think anything of that.

Mr. Mason: How old were you then?

Mrs. Overton: I'm trying to think how old I was, but I wasn't old enough to be offended until his hands strayed and before I had a chance to say anything, my brother burst in from the next room with a gun in his hand and said, "you let my sister alone." Well, I have often thought of that, when I was signing the papers recently, not to have guns. That gun saved me that day. We always kept the family gun. At night when we would go to bed we'd say "where's the gun?", and it would be in some drawer, sideboard or be under my stepfather's pillow or somewhere, but we'd know where that gun was. So my brother knew the gun was in that room where he had gone and he bluffed the man with this gun. The man got up - of course he shoved me off his lap - he got up and backed out and so, my brother went to where my mother was working - both of us went. We told my mother. To show you the people of that town, what they were like - they got right into that case - right away - the best lawyers. Well, the Downeys were lawyers, you know Senator Downey of California? Well, I think there's a town down there in California that must have been named for some of our Downeys, because we had a big family of Downeys. And they went to the lawyer; they sent and got that man. He had gotten into Nebraska from Wyoming. They got him. His wife came up and saw my mother and asked my mother if she would compromise. I had never heard the word "compromise", I didn't know what it meant. And she said he was running away from smallpox. They had it in this little Nebraska town where he was and rather than be quarantined he ran away. She said he was a good husband; she had the loveliest child with her - a beautiful child. Well, anyhow, they arrested that man and sent him to jail for six months and I remember Mr. Downey, the lawyer, questioning me and he said, "did he put his hand on your person?"

And I didn't know what that meant exactly, you know. It could have been anywhere, so I told him he had to explain it to me. Later, this very Downey gave me a ticket to Truman's inauguration. He said that "500 people would love to have this ticket in California and I'm giving it to you because you're from my home and that's the kind of people I'm used to." They'll hold you up. Well, anyhow, I'm sorry the man had to serve time. There were some bluffers - colored men - well, laborers you know - we heard they had a rope. And they said now we're going to lynch him because they would lynch a colored man if he had done the same thing. But that was just window dressing. But that was one episode in my life I just can't forget. The detectives came to the house; they shut themselves in that room; they looked through the keyhole to see if my brother was telling the truth - to see if you could see anybody through that keyhole and they could and so that was that. Of course, there was no law that you couldn't have a gun. Everybody had a gun. I don't know how to shoot, I couldn't shoot today. I handled guns all my life, but I'm afraid of a gun.

Mr. Mason: When we were talking before you were saying about your work in school. In case we missed it on that part of the first tape, you did say that you maintained excellent averages in school?

Mrs. Overton: Oh, yes.

Mr. Mason: Even though sometimes you were mischievous?

Mrs. Overton: We had what you call a blue report card and I guess the ordinary black ink, but when you came home with a blue card there was a slogan at home, he gets blue cards just like saying you have a high I.Q., you know, and I generally brought home a blue card. They weren't just being good to me.

There's one thing that happened that I wondered if there had been discrimination. We were in the upper grades then in the grade school. There was a contest to write something for a \$5 prize - for \$5 then was a fortune. My teacher told me to write and I wanted to write an autobiography of a pumpkin pie. So we settled on a piece of pumpkin pie; that would come through more episodes than a whole pie. So I wrote that, and the rest of us got ours in. The first prize - they made a prize - see, there was only one prize. I often wondered if they made a prize in order to give me because I'm colored. I don't know, but that's what we all thought. They gave me the second prize. They said my autobiography of a piece of pumpkin pie was good. I don't know where I had this fire going and all sorts of adventures, but the young man who got the first prize really was worth it. He was a good writer, but I lived to see something of mine published by the school. A little sketch that I wrote after I got into the university high school. The teacher just put it in the magazine, I didn't know it was going to be there. But I could always write. I learned to write.

Mr. Mason: What courses did you specialize in when you were in school?

Mrs. Overton: Well, of course, in the grades you take just what they have. Then I went to the university. Now let me explain this university business. It's really high school level. They didn't have above the eighth grade or ninth grade, and you got a diploma. Then you went into the university. It was called "going to the university." But what you took was really finishing up high school. Now those who were going on with college were in the same classes. If they wanted the subject that you had, you would all be in the same classes and it would be college level. That's how Thurman Arnold came

to be in the class with me. And another boy, his name was Harold Merriam, a Rhodes scholar. I remember when they had announced it - that one boy had won a Rhodes scholarship. I've talked to him recently. He's out in Oregon I think. He taught for many years. He told me all about Oxford, how they let you alone. Those colleges are not conducted as our American colleges are.

Oh, I was telling about discrimination. I felt there might have been some discrimination there, making another prize in order for me to get a prize. It could have been because prejudice - I was going to write an article and I still may write it - "prejudice is people." That's going to be the title. Some person - we can't help what a person thinks, an individual person, and that person has been taught - just as I had been taught - that all white people hated me, all southerners hated me. And that sticks in, it remains with you. And some people, individually, are not going to see the black man get but so far. That's the cause of a great deal of trouble today. And they may have had someone on the committee that couldn't see me get first prize. Maybe my paper wasn't good enough - that could be.

But let me tell you another racial thing; one day - this is in that university high school - Adolph Merz, a son of one of the professors, professor of German as a matter of fact, sat in front of me. When the teacher went out of the room, he got hold of some colored crayons and simply mutilated his face. He had everything - red, green, yellow - on his face and he looked sort of monkeyish, anyhow, and the class just laughed. He let me have them; in fact, I asked for them - the crayons - and I decorated my face. I must have looked like something because they laughed at me. And the teacher came in. I told you that he sat in front of me, so she saw him first. While she was looking at him, I was ducking my head down, hiding my face. She grabbed him out of

the seat and took him out of the room and punished him, and while that was going on I was erasing this crayon off my face. Now talking about loyalty, there wasn't one member of that class that told what happened. She never knew I had the crayon on my face, and Adolph didn't tell her that I asked for the crayons. Now if that isn't sticking by your friends, I don't know.

Mr. Mason: During your schooling in Laramie, did you make many close friendships that have lasted through the years?

Mrs. Overton: Yes - this Marian Cornell - whose family wanted to take/^{me}to Yellowstone Park - I talked with her just last week long distance - Laramie, Wyoming.

Mr. Mason: Do you still keep in touch with your friends?

Mrs. Overton: Oh, yes, and when we went out to Homecoming at the University of Wyoming, I was her guest - my husband and I - and she had some of the top citizens there. And her house is a - they don't want to tear it down - these things to preserve a house?

Mr. Mason: Restore it?

Mrs. Overton: Yes. Because Congressman Mondell was married there. She showed us at the fireplace just where he was standing and her house has a history to it. It did have - she sold it since and she's bought another house. They're wealthy. They have have cattle and sheep and all that sort of thing. But she's one of my lasting friends, but my best friend was Ida Moen. She's a secretary to all the presidents of the University of Wyoming. We were in class together. You see my course was, I majored in the School of Commerce - that's what your diploma says and your grades are on your diploma. Lord help you if you messed up - and I'd call Ida up, oh, so often after she got sick. She had a heart condition. She's

dead now. But she gave dinner for George and me when we went out in 1960. She was in the Ivansen home. The only reason she was there she couldn't take care of herself keeping her own apartment.

But I haven't told you about the Ivansens. The Ivansens have the finest mansion, about the only mansion in the town, pink stone - granite, maybe its granite, a beautiful home. It's the kind of thing that you would just stand away from and look at. But, let me tell you my experience. One day I met Mrs. Ivansen. We met each other on the street. She said, "Carrie, I understand you're learning how to write." I said "yes, I typewrite." And she said, "can you write by hand?" And I said "yes." And she said, "is your writing good?" I said, "yes." I would have said yes to anything Mrs. Ivansen asked me. So she said "come and see me" - she told me when, and I went. She wanted me to write her letters. Therefore, I became her private secretary. There was no such term used, I was just writing Mrs. Ivansen's letters. My dear sir, I compared notes with people from Laramie and I have found that I got further in Mrs. Ivansen's home than many of the most of any them. They just didn't get into that home, but I got into her lovely place - with its beautiful ink wells, beautiful pens and she paid me money. She paid me in gold. We handled gold then, you know. I didn't handle greenbacks, I didn't know how to handle dollar bills. But I could tell you how to handle \$5 or a \$20 gold piece if I were lucky enough for it to come my way.

Well, anyhow, I had worked for Mrs. Ivansen before picking vegetables in her massive garden. She had so much garden she had a gardener and she had me pick these things. She was so - the citizens called it "mean" - but she wasn't mean but she wouldn't want me - she came to the garden one day and I scratched my head and she said, "oh, don't scratch your head, you're picking those things" -

I think it was peas or something. If they weren't going through their 47th bath before they got to the table. But, anyhow, she paid me 25¢ a week for that. Now my salary has gone up when I got to be her secretary I had got money - I can't tell you just how much but it was in gold, maybe a little \$5 gold piece, or something like that. Furthermore, Mrs. Ivansen gave a dinner for the pioneers - the women pioneers. They were to wait on table and the men would be seated. She had an interview with me. She asked me to play for this party-dinner. She had me play the piano; she had the housekeeper to dust it and I played. After I got through playing, she had the housekeeper dust it again and my mother said "because you were black." She thought some of the black would "rub off." Well, I said, "anyhow, I played for that dinner," and ate my dinner in the butler's pantry - the butler standing over me when he wanted to. He poured me something in a water glass. I thought it was mineral water and he had roast duck and all such as that. He hunted all the time - Mr. Ivansen did. He was president of the First National Bank and the butler kept filling my glass. "Would you have some more?", and I would have some more. It was champagne. I didn't know champagne from anything, but I didn't know that it wasn't mineral water. So, the next morning I couldn't go to school. Mama tried to get me up and I couldn't get up. She said, "what did you have to eat?". I told her. She said, "what did you have to drink?" I told her "I don't know," but the bottle was there and it said Mum's extra dry. Well, anyhow, that was an experience - the women waited on the table and the men sat, and I was to play at their first glass of wine, "Should Old Acquaintance be Forgotten." She told me some little general things to play. She didn't want me to play anything that she didn't approve of. But no girl at my home had that experience - white or colored.

Mr. Mason: You must have been quite accomplished then as far as music was concerned at that age?

Mrs. Overton: Oh, I'm what you call a whiz at the piano. I played the piano so well that I played everything that got to be popular. I played rag time. I played so well the people in the town begged my mother to give me lessons. She said she couldn't afford to give me lessons. They said they'd make a way. So, they put me to Mrs. Oliver and Mama did Mrs. Oliver's washing. Mrs. Oliver was from the Royal College of Music in England. You see the nice things that came my way? And I appreciated them, but I didn't know how fine they were. She was a teacher.

Mr. Mason: So, in return she gave you lessons?

Mrs. Overton: Yes, yes. And then I got Mrs. Mary Slavens Clark from Chicago, daughter of a minister, who taught me at the University of Wyoming. And every recital I would be taught. I worked up to a Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody, if you please, and all sorts of things. But playing this popular music would bring to my house people who shouldn't have been there. That is, men of the town - you know - laborers who had come there to work and they knew this music and they knew that music and they would come to sing it to me so I could play it. That's the sort of ear I had. There was no sheet music. I wouldn't have had the money to buy any sheet music anyhow. And they'd hum me something and they would sing it over and over again until I'd play it. Now I told you about this Shownot piano, but one man of the town - wealthy white man - gave me a piano. A real honest to goodness piano - square, great big legs - you know - four great big legs and no matter how small a house we would live in, that piano would go. The last house we lived - not the last one - but the best house we

lived in was right across the street from the University of Wyoming. I don't know how we got that house. The man that owned it said he wanted to rent it to us. They later made it into a frat house, but it's right across the street from the university. And when Theodore Roosevelt came there, we were sitting on the porch. We could see everything that happened. They came there on horses and all that sort of thing and Mr. Roosevelt stood outside and made a speech. I remember that. I don't know how I was living in that house but I was. Yes, I don't know. You know, I can't find my log house; I looked for it. Of course, they did away with it ages ago.

Mr. Mason: One subject that I would like to talk to you about - one that I forgot to ask you about earlier and we can place it back into the sequence when you are talking about your early life and that was the episode that you told me about before - of running away from home. Would you tell me that now?

Mrs. Overton: Well, there was a colored girl at home named Mattie Jones. She was in school at the same time I was. We went to the same Sunday School and one Sunday she wanted me to run away from home, and I told her I had nothing to run away from home about. She said well she had and she wanted me to go with her, but I wouldn't go. Well, the next Sunday I went. Because things had happened in between. My mother would help the janitor of the church -----

(TAPE DEFECTIVE - WE WILL HAVE TO RETAPE THIS.)

Mr. Mason: Tell me, we were talking about evidences of prejudice and your relations with your students in the lower grades - did you find any different situation as you were dealing with children that were older at the University of Wyoming? Were there other Negro students in your class, for example; were the teachers as tolerant or less tolerant than they were earlier?

Mrs. Overton: Well, there were no Negroes in my class. I was the only Negro. The pupils in the grades were open. As I said, they openly called me "nigger" in the streets and on the grounds. But I was at liberty to call them what I wanted and I did, and we would remain friends. As we got older we got more friendly, and we were buddies most of us were! I had no enemies really, and there was not anybody that I disliked. There was one Irish girl, Mary McCullough, who was quite mean to me. She would say mean things to me, but I would say mean things to her, and it got to be gossip that Mary McCullough and Carrie Burton didn't get along. But that was just one of those things, you know. No, I had no real prejudice at all.

Mr. Mason: Did you maintain your mischievous streak after you went into college at Wyoming?

Mrs. Overton: I didn't have time to. Dean Hunten was in my class - my shorthand class - taking a commercial course. Dean Hunten after that finished Yale and Harvard, came back to Wyoming and taught. He owned a lot of property - he was a millionaire. His wife, Ena Eggleston, was so friendly to me; we lived two houses apart - there's your intergrated housing! When we lived on the corner across from the university, there was another house and then her house. And I used to go to her house and play her piano and she'd come to my house once in a while but I don't think her mother would let her very much, but we saw each other in school. Well, after I was out there for Homecoming, I couldn't see Ena when I was there. So she came here to New York; called me up one day and asked me could she come to see me. I said "could you come?" I said take a taxi and come and she said no, she was taking the bus. She took the bus - George met the bus - right out here on St. Nicholas Avenue. She came here and we had the most delightful session. Well, after that, I talked with

this Mrs. Moreland. Mrs. Moreland said Ena should have had quite a bit of money. She said yes, she was a millionaire. Now here sat a millionaire in this chair I'm sitting in. Just talking, "you remember this, you remember that", and she wasn't saying she had money. Although, if I had wanted some she probably would have seen to it that I had some. She's that sort of person.

Mr. Mason: Since you left Laramie, then, you still maintain a close association with the university there?

Mrs. Overton: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

Mr. Mason: I noticed in the alumni magazines that your name appears often and you have got back to Homecomings at least on one occasion.

Mrs. Overton: Yes. Oh, they would put the red carpet out. Did they - I should say. They took George through Telephone Canyon and the rocks - the great big rocks - a rock as big as this house looked as if it were falling - just perched up there you know. It frightened me. He'd never seen the Rocky Mountain country. I'm so glad that we were there.

Mr. Mason: Well tell me then, why don't we end the interview by having you tell me just how and what events led up to your leaving Laramie; how did you decide and what were your attitudes and feelings as you went to a different part of the country?

Mrs. Overton: Well, I took two courses, right there in the business department. I signed up for the shorthand course which was two years, strictly because I didn't have money to take any more. I was a student from the state and it was a state university and you don't pay much money, but our family didn't handle any

money and so I took the two-year course and graduated from it. I have two diplomas from there. Then I went into the bookkeeping course. With each of these courses you had your English. That's why I'm strong in English and you had other things that you wished to take; I took German and business arithmetic and, oh, different things. At any rate, this year when I was finishing up the bookkeeping, I had had my shorthand course, I was finishing bookkeeping and two people approached me. One Professor Quaintence. He said Carrie, "what are you going to do next year?" "I don't know." He said, "well, we ought to be doing something. We'll figure what you shall do." Professor McGregor was another one. He said, "What are you doing next year?" I didn't know. He said, "we must get you off to some school, maybe you can teach in exchange for some studies." He said, "did you ever hear of Booker Washington?" And I said, "no." "Well, did you ever hear of Kelly Miller?" I said, "no." He was a little surprised because these are two famous colored men, you know. And he said, "well, you should know about them. Did you ever hear of Howard University?" I said, "no." So he said, "We'll try to get you to Howard." So, Mr. Quaintence wrote a letter to Miss Childers, head of the Music School at Howard University, saying they had a Negro girl there that would like to make her future teaching something and getting some music in return. Miss Childers replied at once and said that President Surciold (sp) was interested. Well, they had a correspondence about me with the result that it was decided that I should go to Howard. They would pay me 15¢ an hour to be secretary to the Deans, and I didn't know how many Deans there were. There were five, and in exchange, I could have music. I had so much nice music at the University of Wyoming. Well, anyhow, it was arranged that I should go to Howard University. Now there wasn't any money to send me to Howard. They asked me could I raise some money. I said no, but I'll try. I went to Mrs. Ivansen, asked her, foolishly, if she would lend me the money and she said "You wouldn't want me to lend you money because you couldn't pay me back. She

said, "but I'll arrange it; I'll see what can be done." Well, he met the society women who decided to let me send myself to Washington by giving a recital. They sponsored that recital. It was a Society affair, so much a head - something like \$2.00 a ticket which was exorbitant then. We sent to Cheyenne for Madame Landor, a colored woman, soprano, to sing for me. The University orchestra volunteered their services and a program was made out that I should play. I think that was all that was on the program, that singer and orchestra, and that came off and they got enough money to send me to Washington. They put me on the train, everybody contributed to my lunch. I had a great big lunch basket. "This one would give me a chicken; that one a pie." My stepfather wouldn't hear of my taking pullman because girls always got seduced on pullman, and he knew the railroad porters and he knew they were no good. He was telling the truth. Well, I would stay up in the chair car, in the regular car. It would take me three days to get to Washington and I went to Washington, took a taxi, which cost me lots of money, I didn't know any better - from Union Station went directly to the president's house - president of the university. The taxi man took me there, he didn't know the buildings. The president's daughter was very wise.

(DEFECTIVE TAPE)

Mr. Mason: Mrs. Overton, I wonder whether we might start the interview by talking something about your early recollections in Laramie, Wyoming. Perhaps you would like to start by telling me something about your mother and your father and your early family life in the area in which you lived.

Mrs. Overton: Well, I'd like to start with my mother because she is all I remember. My father wasn't living with the family. I didn't know what it was to live in the

house with a father, until I had a stepfather. I was told that my father was dead. My mother was a wonderful woman and she knew how to bring me up. What she didn't know she was told by the people of the town. Since I have been away from there, I have found that there is no place like Laramie for good people. Everybody helped. Recently I called Warren Dove, whose father was postmaster there and he was postmaster afterwards, and I said, "Warren, I hesitated calling you"; and he knew why; because he's white and I'm colored. He said, "Carrie, don't hesitate." You are family." That's a beautiful, beautiful statement to make. Everybody in the town felt that we were family. Now, one of my choicest memories is one day, about three young white women came to our house and brought me some clothes. They belonged to a sewing circle and they had embroidered little petticoats -- a red flannel petticoat and a white outing petticoat and other items for me, just because they loved me, and they came and put them on me. That's the earliest memory I have of someone doing something for somebody.

Now, the earliest house I remember is a log house - four rooms - it could have been three, but I can't picture just exactly how it was. It was the only house on the lot and you could look way back and see the chicken house and there was a shed half way. We used to get on top of the shed - my brother and his playmates - we'd get on top of the shed and jump down and it was the jumping down that made me sick one time. I knocked something out of place - one of my inner organs. When I jumped down I didn't get up. I lay on the ground and the boys picked me up and brought me in the house and when I say the boys - all of them were white except my brother. Now my brother was light skinned, but he couldn't pass for white; he had brown hair and brown eyes and I didn't think he was any different from me.

Mr. Mason: He was your stepbrother, was he?

Mrs. Overton: No, he was by my mother's first husband and he was much older. He was about three years older than I, and he took the best of care of me. My mother worked all the time but not out, particularly, she worked in. She washed and ironed. In those days we said "you took in washing." And we would know the people sometimes from the washing. My mother would say I have Mrs. so and so's washing today. Now my brother carried clothes back and forth as best he could. Now I was talking about the house, wasn't I? Well, this house was the only house on that lot which was in a corner. One morning we woke up and there was a tepee on that vacant lot. People would come there and park. There were Indians in the tepee and they stayed for three days. They would send a girl to our house to borrow things -- sugar, flour -- a beautiful girl she was, and she would say, "just a little more flour." She'd be back in 15 minutes for another cup of flour, but that was alright. And that's where I could have gotten the lovely moccasins that I found I had; I don't know exactly where they came from, but they'd give us presents -- beads and things -- and we'd give them food. And one day we found on that lot -- Gypsies. Real Gypsies. They had met with an accident and they had stopped there to rest. They had a very ill woman. I remember a song that they sang but I can't remember it now, but I did put it down when I got where I could write music, and they were charming people, the Gypsies. So, you see, we had a sort of accommodations for everybody. There wasn't a fence around the place at all. It was just on a big lot. It was a log house and there was an out-house.

Well, now, my mother influenced me so much by going to church every Sunday. Church was just a matter of life. We weren't ultra religious. My mother believed in God and praying, and taught us to pray and to believe, and I didn't

know what I was believing, because one day in Sunday school I asked if God was colored. Professor Nelson was my Sunday school superintendent at the time - Professor Avid Nelson - a professor in the University of Wyoming - but on Sundays he would serve as superintendent of Sunday school. Of course, he found a diplomatic answer for me. But I liked the Sunday school because it put me in touch with people. Anything that would bring people to me I loved. And that's why I didn't mind going to church - to church services, but my feet always hurt. My mother bought shoes that were too short for me and I always had hurting feet. To this day I have to break shoes.

Mr. Mason: Well, tell me about Laramie at this time - how big is it?

Mrs. Overton: Very small. It's a university town - it is yet. It had one public school; there are four or five now. I remember going to that school with Miriam Corvell. She reminded me - when I went back there in 1960 for the Homecoming - she said, "Carrie, do you remember the third grade when we used to sit together?" I did remember. She said "the boys back of her would pull her hair" and we'd fight them as best we could and the teacher would take us out the seat and shake us. Now, Miriam Corvell is now Mrs. Hugh Moreland. Her family is one of the big families in Laramie. There are streets named for them. She's a wealthy woman. They all own cattle and sheep. When I say they all, most of the people that I knew then. There was nothing fancy about them - they were just people. The Corvells were going to Yellowstone Park one summer and asked me to go and I said, "No!" I got indignant. I wasn't going to any Yellowstone Park, staying there all night. It wouldn't cost me a penny because they were driving, you know. Well, anyhow, my home was in a small town. It was dominated by the University of Wyoming.

There was the rolling mill, belonging to the Union Pacific Railroad that gave jobs to the ordinary people as well as the bookkeepers and all that sort of thing. I used to go into the rolling mill sometimes and see them making those rails and that's the first time I saw white heat. They'd be just as white until they put them off to cool. My stepfather worked in the rolling mill after my mother married. For a long time, my mother, my brother and I lived in this log house by ourselves. But one day she announced to us that she was going to marry and we cried because we didn't like the man. He used to come around and he was just an ordinary person, but he would tell us children, "Don't you think it's time you were in bed?" We didn't want anybody to send us to bed. We were all just as loving as we could be. When I say all - my brother, my mother and I. Now there wasn't anything else in the town much, except the stockyards. The cattle that we would send to Omaha and Chicago and all those places was quite a cattle country.

Mr. Mason: We are talking about the 1890's now, aren't we?

Mrs. Overton: Yes, we are. And not so many stores - two jewelry stores. Now, Jessie Converse, for whom buildings are named and streets, was quite a solid citizen. He had a jewelry store. One day my mother took me there to get my ears pierced. She loved jewelry and she wanted me to wear earrings and so he, Mr. Converse himself, pierced my ears. He put me up on a high stool at the counter where the people bought their jewelry and gave me a big peach, and pierced my ears and then put the gold earrings in right away. I had been told, and I have been told since, that you put a straw in your ears first until they are ready for the gold earrings, but he put the earrings right in. I can still remember those beautiful earrings! So, that accounts for the town. That's about all that happened.

Mr. Mason: Tell me, were there any other Negro families living in the town?

Mrs. Overton: Yes, about four or five families. No children, except for about four or five children - Negro children.

Mr. Mason: Tell me something about your mother. Where was she born? Where did she come from?

Mrs. Overton: If you'd ask her where she was born, she'd say DeKalb County, Missouri; I understand that's near St. Joseph. She said she was a "baby slave." One day two men came riding by her place and they said, "Kate, get up on this horse." She said she wasn't going to do it. "You know you're free," and she said, "free, what's that?" And they told her that "she had been freed." She'd been a slave but she was free and come on and go with us," and she said, "Miss Sally won't like it." So they said something about Miss Sally and took her away. But while she was there she said she led a very fine life, except Miss Sally was mean. Miss Sally made her wash all of the dishes. And they had several sons and the boys used to tease her. They'd say, "Kate, you run around the house three times and look back and then you'll see two little black calves" - the calves of her legs. But she was born in Missouri. The name of the family was Closby - the family that owned her - and she said she saw her mother sold because her mother was such a problem to the people that owned her. She was a big, tall, strong woman. She could carry a big sack of flour, I guess, she said. At any rate she had harmed some of her owners and they were selling her where the people would be mean to her and she couldn't get away, but she did.

Mr. Mason: But her daughter, who was your mother, stayed there with the Closbys?"

Mrs. Overton: That's right. She was a little girl, but she can remember hanging onto her mother crying. She can remember when she spent as much as a week in the woods right near the house. She just ran away. While she was sitting on a log one day, she heard something and when she looked it was a snake. She ran; she ran into the house and the snake that had been behind her - the snake bumped itself against the door. It was that close to her. I asked her what kind of snake and she said it was a black snake, she thought, but she knew the name of every snake. Of course we had rattlers out at my home. I've never seen a rattle snake in its habitat. But, I saw a black bear. The cutest little old cub you ever saw. We children were playing and the bear was on the hill. Now this was at Jelm, Wyoming. Jelm mountain is so tall - it's majestic. My mother used to take me there every summer, just to rest. We would fish and all that sort of thing. And so we children were playing - these were all white boys and girls - except me and my brother, and we saw this little bear. He was just as cuddly as he could be and he was coming down the hill flying to play with us - we thought, but we weren't sure - so we went into the house. But that's seeing animals in their native place.

Mr. Mason: Tell me, when did your mother come to Laramie?

Mrs. Overton: I don't know that. Her people - her white people - moved to Denver, Colorado. Then went from Denver to Cheyenne. We say Cheyenne today, but the popular way was Cheyanne - spelled a-n-n-e. I don't know what she did in Cheyenne; of course, she would work every place she went.

Mr. Mason: But at the time of your birth you were in Laramie?

Mrs. Overton: Yes, but not in that log house. She told me I was born on another street.

Mr. Mason: Do you know anything about your father?

Mrs. Overton: No. He was supposed to be away; had been away for seven years or more and my mother felt that that divorced you - there is some sort of unwritten law that says seven years divorces you.

Mr. Mason: Was it your father or stepfather that was involved in the federal cavalry, was it?

Mrs. Overton: My stepfather, Thomas Price. He was from Nashville, Tennessee and he was in the Civil War. They decorate his grave every year.

Mr. Mason: With the Union army?

Mrs. Overton: I've been trying to wonder. Probably he would have been. He must have been; it must have been the Union army. I just never knew.

Mr. Mason: I would like to see them sometimes to check and have this as a part of the record. Was he from Laramie, himself? _____

How did he get to Laramie?

Mrs. Overton: Your answer is as good as mine. He migrated after the war. And he was a man of the world - he gambled. Gambling to him was just like getting a meal. He would bring his buddies to the house.

(5 MINUTES OF TAPE DEFECTIVE)