INTERVIEW OF CATHERINE CARTER BLACKWELL

Oral History Project of the WestSiders

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Interview Conducted by: Louis Jones

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Q Miss Blackwell, first of all, thank you very much for taking time out of your schedule to speak with us. As you know, this is about the West Side, and just to begin where are your parents from?

A My parents were both from Pennsylvania. My father, Burrell Sheldon Carter, was born in Newville, Pennsylvania and my mother, Beulah Louise Draper was born in Bradford, Pennsylvania. They both attended St. Matthews Episcopal Church in Detroit where they first met. They married and two boys and a girl came along.

Q What brought them to Detroit?

A My father was a barber, having been taught the trade by is father, Warren Carter in Newville where he was born and grew up. His mother's brother, Charles Sheldon, was also a barber and brought my father here from Philadelphia where he was working, and got him a job on the D&C boat barbering in the summer and working with him in his shop on St. Aubin in the winter. After several years, my father decided to open his own shop on St. Antoine and Watson in Detroit. It was the first black-owned four-chair barber shop on St. Antoine and Watson. My mother was a school

teacher, but she went into social work and she came here. That was how they started out. She was one of the first black social workers for the department of public welfare, as it was called then.

Q What brought them to the West Side as opposed to some place else in the city?

A Well, my father found a house on McKinley between Kirby and Hudson. It was a two-family house. He bought that and thought this would be a good investment because we would live on the second floor and they would rent out the first floor. He had been looking for sometime for a place that he could afford to buy. They lived first on Gatson in a rooming house. After about eight years, I believe, they built a home on 25th Street. Mr. Pennick was a construction engineer and the house he built for his family is still on Scotten. He built our house. I can remember going from McKinley over to 25th Street and watching as the different stages of the house were being built, and the room that was to be mine. My two brothers had their room, of course; my parents had their room. There were four bedrooms, and so I remember that quite well.

Q Was it unusual for a family to build their own house as opposed to going to a structure that is already built?

A I think so. I can't remember any of my friends whose families built their own homes. But Mr. Pennick, of course, was an African American. My parents had a contractor, and he was not very good. And so they turned to Mr. Brummel Pennick, and he met them. There weren't any new homes in the block that we lived in, but I am sure there were some in other parts of the West Side.

Q Tell me about the block that you lived on, what do you remember most about it?

A Well, the family next door to our ome on 25th Street was German. Three doors from us the family was Polish. And across the street there was a two-family house, and the families there were African Americans. On the corner of 25th and Kirby there was an apartment building, the Latonia Apartments. And then across the street from that was a four-family building. Now some of the people who lived there became well known: Mr. Millender lived on 25th at one time. Mary Agnes Davis and her sisters lived across the street at one time. There are still members of The Group. Do you know about The Group?

Q No.

A Well, we were WestSiders.

Porter Dillard and my brother, Richard, and others were tired of meeting each other at funerals and they said, “oh, let's have a party where we can all meet rather than coming to the sad occasions.” So they formed what was called “The Group.” They started having a party every other year. This year they had it, and it is sad to say the numbers are diminishing; but it is still a wonderful thing to see your friends that you have not seen in a long time and reminisce about the days of the West Side.

Q When was the Group formed?

A When was it formed?

Q Was it formed when you guys were growing up or more recently?

A No. It was more recent than that. We were grown and had moved away and had come back and all of that. I guess it has been in existence about eighteen years, maybe longer.

Q What was it about that group that allowed you to maintain the bonds over the years? What was it about growing up on the West Side that --

A Growing up on the West Side was quite different than the East Side. People that come to Detroit don't understand this division that Woodward has between the West and the East Side of Detroit.

Now, on Milford, that was a very busy street. We had black owned restaurants, gasoline stations, and the Thompson Brothers built their shoe repair shop. We had the dime store, pharmacy, the Nacirema Club. And then it sort of broke up when the expressway came through. That is what happened to our house on 25th Street; the expressway came through and our house was taken away. Of course, we were all very disgusted about that.

We had our own individual churches. There were about seven churches within that West Side community: Hartford, St. Stephens, Tabernacle, St. Cyprian's, and there was a Catholic church. And there were a lot of businesses, and it just brought us automatically together. Some of us went to the same school. I lived across the Boulevard. That was the delineation between where we went to church. We lived across the Boulevard. We would ask, “where are you going?” “I am going across the Boulevard.” I went to Columbian Elementary School. And the friends on the other side of the Boulevard went to Sampson. Many of them went to Sampson. And we met after graduating from Sampson

and Columbian, and we went to McMichael and Northwestern. So we came together again on the West Side. It was a good life.

Q It sounds like it. You talk about across the Boulevard, how were the communities different, on both sides? I sense there were some differences between the two.

A Well, of course, church was the one thing that made them a little different. Hartford at that time, with the minister who was very popular.

Q Charles Hill?

A Charles Hill, yes. He was a firebrand, and many people came over to, across the Boulevard to Hartford Church. It is still there. It is another church. Hartford brought a big building out on the Expressway. So we had many, many things to bring us together, rather than separate us.

We would have parties in each other's homes and would go to the YWCA: The Lucy Thurman YWCA. There was a YMCA on the Boulevard across from the Northwestern High School but my brothers couldn't go. And so they went to the St. Antoine Branch of the YMCA, which was just down the street from the Lucy Thurman Branch of the YWCA. Sometimes, usually on Sunday, we would meet out on the corner of Adams and St. Antoine and plan what we were going to do for a day. This meant our friends coming from Plymouth and Bethel and other East Side churches; we all had quite a family of friends.

There was one thing I couldn't participate in and that was going to the movies on Sundays. My father made that very clear, that we could not go to the movies on Sundays. I

remember that clearly as if it was yesterday, the day I slipped into the movies on a Sunday. I couldn't tell you one thing that was in that movie, because I was so afraid that something drastic was going to happen. Some of the parents, didn't allow their children to go either and I never went again after that.

There were many things on both sides of the Boulevard that attracted us back and forth. There was a theater on Warren Avenue, and we could go on Saturdays and see the cowboy movies. The cowboy would ride a horse and all of the sudden he was going to go over a cliff and it was the end. So you had to come back the next Saturday to see if he fell over that cliff or mountain or whatever it was. So that was one of the attractions.

On the corner of Woodrow and Milford--there is a church there now -- at one time it was the Bernie Theater. Bernie Watkins was an only child. Her father was a physician. He asked her one day what did she want for her birthday. She said she wanted a movie theater. Her father said, “a movie theater?” Well, he built it right there on that corner; and he invited all of Bernie's friends to see the movies. We would not go every week, but occasionally they would have movies. Now it is a church.

Q That was a black-owned theater; is that right?

A Yes, Yes, it was. But it wasn't open to the public. He built it for his daughter. So it wasn't like a movie theater where you would go and buy a ticket and go in. It was for her friends and we had a great time.

Q That is different.

A That was very different.

Q Tell me something about Columbian, the elementary school, anything in particular stick out in your mind?

A Well, yes. In those days it was predominately white, and of course, I didn't have an African-American teacher from kindergarten to the 12th grade. So we didn't have that. But the auditorium teacher's name was Mrs. Trombley. I don't know if that is why I became an auditorium teacher, but I loved Miss Trombley; she was a wonderful person. I do remember Carter Woodson coming to speak to this class and I was very excited about it. I found that very few of my friends knew who Carter G. Woodson was. My parents had become members of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History that he founded. I knew all about him, and I was very proud when he came to our school.

Geraldine Porter and I were very good friends and got in more trouble than anyone could imagine. We got into this trouble because we talked so much in class.

Q What kind of trouble did you get in to?

A Just talking in class. You were not to talk in class and the teacher would reprimand us. We had roll down closets for our coats. And I remember one teacher put me on the floor of the closet, didn't close the closet on me. But I came home and told my mother that “oh, that they put me in this closet.” I told her the worst story you ever heard. Of course, mother was not a person who would say, well, I am going up there to tell that teacher. She would say, “oh really, what did you do?” “I wasn't doing anything, just talking to Geraldine.” That was my big problem. You see I am talking now, and I talked then; I have talked all of my life.

I remember one incident. Have you ever heard of ***Little***

Black Sambo?

Q Yes.

A All right. I came home and told my mother that I did not want to go to the library any more at Columbian. She said, “what?” I loved to read, but I said “I am not going to go to the library anymore. The teacher always gives me this one book to read.” And so she asked, “oh really, what is it?” I told her. She didn't say, “well, I am just going up there, you know, and get at it.” But the next day, she did. She went to the school and she asked the librarian to let her see the book that she would always give me. The librarian was pleased. She thought that my mother was pleased about this; and she did. She gave her ***Little Black Sambo***. Mother said, “thank you.” I am taking this to the principal, Miss McKenny. There were seven principals that were really strict and very hard on the students throughout the school system and there were just these seven, and Mrs. McKenny was one of them. My mother said, “I am taking this book, and if there are any more I suggest that you remove them, because this is certainly not making my daughter happy, and it doesn't make me happy, and this doesn't really give her anything of any consequence. She is not learning anything from this.” So I credit my mother with taking the first book out of the public school library.

There were teachers who were very strict. I loved jewelry and my parents gave me jewelry to wear, but not to school. My father made a jewelry box for me. One day I slipped out with all of these bracelets on my arm. When the teacher would ask a question, I would raise my hand and these bracelets would go jingle, jangle. So, finally, the teacher, Miss Oven, came back and took all of these bracelets off my arm and said, “I am bringing them home to your parents this

evening." Well, that was the worst thing in the world; and she did. And I didn't see that jewelry box or jewelry for over a year. They hid it away from me because I wasn't supposed to do things like that. But we had many fun times, too.

Q Now, why don't you talk about some of the fun times. Does anything in particular stand out in your mind?

A Funny how?

Q In the school, in the classes?

A Oh well, I don't remember the school going on trips like we do now. I don't remember anything like that. At Northwestern I was in the a cappela choir, and we would go to the Bach Chorale in Ypsilanti every year. Choirs from all over the state would come and perform the Bach Chorale. That was fun. One year my mother let me go up to Ann Arbor to visit Margaret Matthews. Margaret Matthews lived in the next block from us, and we were very close friends. And she went to the University of Michigan. She was a very talented musician. So after the Chorale my mother had given me permission and Margaret's mother met me and we went to Ann Arbor. Oh, That was a thrill.

I also was involved in badminton and archery. And, of course, there were some unpleasant things that you remember now that you really did overcome these things. Such as my father: he made an archery target and taught me how to make the arrow with the feathers on it and all of that. When I went to Northwestern I wanted to join the Archery Club and "oh, no, archery, no indeed." So, I said, "well, let me try out." I was very persistent and finally I took the arrow; I had my own bow and arrows. And I shot the

arrow and right into the bullseye. They couldn't get over that. I was on that team and on the badminton team.

Q What was your perception of the resistance?

A There was a parent who would come up to the school and shake her fist and whoop and holler and all of that. My mother wasn't that way. She was a very quiet kind of person, but she got things changed. There is a picture here of people at the Girls YWCA camp. We could only go the last two weeks. When I say “we”, I mean African-American girls could only go the last two weeks of camp. I don't remember being really angry about this. I was upset about some things. But my parents both had different ways of approaching the fact that we were discriminated against.

My mother did not allow discrimination to make us ugly and upset. She took a stand. It was a quiet stand. But the one thing I remember her about school, with McMichael. There is a McMichael, but it isn't in the same location. It was right there on Grand River where Northwestern used to be. This was my first semester there. Well, the counselors would give you an outline of what your classes would be. So when I went to McMichael, I got my outline and schedule, and I came home and gave it to my mother. And it was cooking and sewing and child care. My mother said, “well, what is this?” I said, “well, these are my classes.” She didn't say anything. The next day she went up to school and she told the counselor that they would have to change my schedule, because I was going to go to college and so they had an entirely different schedule. The counselor said, “oh no, this is the schedule that they setup for… (she didn't say African Americans or Black or Negro girls). Mother said, “well, she can learn how to be a maid from our maid.” I had learned not to say anything, when my mother said things. So they

put me in the language classes. So we got outside and I said “mother, you called Grandma Harris, our maid. You know we don't have a maid.” She said “just, hush up.” She was really quite something. So I did make it through that and then college prep in high school.

As you can see, I talk a lot. I talked a lot then, and I was told by the counselor in high school that there wasn't a college or university in the country that would admit me, not because of my scholarship, but because of my citizenship. It is quite obvious that I love to talk.

We graduated in January. You don't have that system here any more. So my parents thought I shouldn't just go off to college for one semester. There was a Mr. William Hall who was a member of our church; he was the only black supervisor at J. L. Hudson's. He was in charge of the maids, the elevator operators, and the janitors and the doormen. So I said, “well, Mr. Hall, I have until September, and I would like very much to get a job at Hudson's.” He said, “well, I will see what I can do.” So he got me a job as an elevator operator from February until September.

Q Mrs. Blackwell you were telling us about working at Hudson's?

A The woman who was the counselor at Northwestern got on my elevator one day, and she was so pleased because she was thinking that her prediction had come true. I was not in college or a university and they would not accept me because of my citizenship. So I told her that I had been admitted to St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina and I would start in September.

So that is another story, too, because I wanted to go to

Howard University. My mother went with a friend to pick up her daughter who was at St. Augustine's and she liked St. Augustines, because it was a church school; and it was a very strict. So that was just the place to send her wild child.

Q Going back to St. Cyprian's, I am skipping here a little bit.

Tell us about your family's initial involvement in St. Cyprian's.

A Well, there were five families that founded St. Cyprian's and my parents were among the five founding families. They had gone to St. Matthew's, but that was quite a distance from the West Side. And so these families all got permission from the bishop to start their own little mission church. It was just a little wooden structure. The families had to carry their coal to church on Sunday. Each family would bring some coal to keep the place warm. My oldest brother would have to go behind the organ and do some kind of manipulation to pump the organ so it could be played. That church, of course, grew and grew and then a new building was put up under Father Dade. Father Dade was a very moving force in the church. My parents still were there and an important cog in that wheel. I was the first baby christened or baptized in that church and my father made the christening font.

My father was not just a barber, he was very, very creative. And he could make anything as I told you before. I didn't have a store bought toy until I was 11 years old. He made all of my toys. The kids at Christmas would say, “see what I got for Christmas.” “See what I got, and my Daddy made it,” I told them. And made it ten times better than anybody else's. So my parents were a part of that church until the

day they died. I am still a member of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, located at the corner of 28th and Milford.

Q What type of activities did they have? Did they have many activities?

A We had a lot of activities, yes. And, of course, my father, in fact, was the scout master; and my mother had a Monday night class for older boys. Dr. Adams of Hartford, every time he sees me, he says, “oh here is Miss Beulah.” That was my mother's name. And he said that he remembers so well her gathering the boys in the neighborhood whether they were members of the church or not and keeping them on the straight and narrow path, is how he puts it. So the church was a very important part of the community. Of course, not just St. Cyprian's, but all of those churches that I mentioned earlier were very important in the community. We are not able to keep it up. It is not as strong a membership; it is not as big as it was at one time, but we are working to get it up.

Q Okay. Tell me about the Nacirema Club.

A Well, the Nacirema Club, you know that is American spelled backwards. It was started by a group of businessmen who wanted a place where they could have social gatherings in a place of their own. So these men became members. You had to pay a certain amount of money. Now, my family did not belong to the Nacirema Club. My oldest brother, Richard, after he grew up, became a member of the Nacriema. One week in the summer was Nacirema Week, and that was really the greatest time. They would have a picnic, a boat ride, just all kinds of activities for a week in the summer.

Q Where would they take place?

A In and around Detroit at Belle Isle; the boat would go to Boblo. Then they would have the Boblo boat at night, and oh, that was fun. You danced to a live band and you dressed up to go on the boat ride; it wasn't just like a picnic or anything. We looked forward to Nacirema Week. It is my understanding that they are trying to bring that back. St. Cyprian's did join with them for one short time there in trying to get it going again. But, there are so many other activities now that young people can become involved in.

Q Why didn't your folks join or your father join the Nacirema Club?

A Well, I really don't know. I know that my father was a bit frugal and he, I guess, felt that it wasn't necessary for him to spend his money on the Nacriema Club. Daddy also was what we call a chiropodist. I don't know where he learned the business of being a chiropodist, but he and an ophthalmologist, Dr. Lawson, had their offices on Gratiot. And I can remember you would go up the steps to Dr. Lawson's office and Mr. Carter's office. Alternating risers would have an eye and a foot repeating all the way up. I loved going up and down the steps. After church he had patients that he would see at their home. I would go with him. I guess he felt that the Nacirema Club just was not something that he needed to belong to.

Q What do you remember about the Depression

A Well, we had just moved into the house on 25th Street then. My mother, being a social worker, had been paid in script. I can remember there were only certain stores that would take script. It is not U.S. dollars...But, they would have

wheat and flour and milk and sometimes mother would bring some home. I would say, “I wouldn't like it.” But she said, “eat it anyhow. Other people would be glad to have it.” So we ate it. But it was a very difficult time, especially for African Americans, because we really were at the bottom of the ladder. The welfare department was not that easy. It wasn't that easy for them to get on to welfare or for men to find jobs and so forth. And then it came along the time when the Depression was over.

And I must tell you about the wine. Have you ever had dandelion wine? Well, we would go out to River Rouge on Sundays and pick the dandelions. We would have big crocks in the basement and my father would make this wine. Now my brother and his good buddy, Henry Talbert, would slip down and take cups of the wine and then they would replace it with water. They would take the bottle or the wine out. My father said, “well, I guess the wine is ready.” He would go to taste the wine and to his surprise it was weak, like water. So he knew who was doing that, so then he put it in the fruit cellar and locked it. Of course, my brother found the key and he and Henry had been in the wine again. They were so funny. This is a whole new chapter, but it was a fun time when you think about it.

Q Since the war stopped the depression from extending further, what do you recall about the war?

A I was in Washington, D.C. and I worked in the rationing board, and my husband was in dental school, and we married when we were both in school at Howard, sixty-three years ago. I still have some ration books around with the stamps and all that you had to get for butter and meat and sugar and flour and those kinds of staples. I don't think any of us starved at all. It wasn't an easy time.

Detroit, of course, was called the arsenal of democracy because we kept the factories moving with the tanks and things like that.

Q What comes to mind when you reflect on Joe Louis?

A Joe Louis' sister, Vunies Barrow, and I were very close friends.

We were at Howard together and she was ahead of me. And when she graduated we were all so excited because Joe came to the graduation and gave her a convertible. Both of us had decided we were going to stay over to take a summer class even though she graduated. She was going into graduate school, but I didn't. I wanted to just stay in Washington. I loved Washington. So my parents agreed that I could. We would ride around and people all recognized the car. And when we would pass, you could hear them say "Joe Louis, Joe Louis." We went to a baseball game and someone came up to Vunies and said, “you are Joe Louis' sister, aren't you?” She said, “no, there she is” and pointed to me. So they came up to me, “oh, you are Joe Louis' sister.” We had a lot of fun. We went to New York for the Braddock fight. He got tickets for us, and we were very excited; he was a nice guy.

Q Last point here a little about what you have done since you left the West Side. How did you come to go to Africa?

A Well, I began teaching in 1955. My family had given me a connection with Africa and African-American history. It had been deeply instilled in me. And of course our text books had nothing at all about our history: no pictures, and no text. The children would call each other, "the old African” in a derogatory sense and I would say this is not right. Of

course, we knew very little about Africa. So I was determined that I was going to go to Africa to find out by myself. So I did in 1960. I took off for Africa, and I visited eight countries. It was a wonderful time because of the independence of many of the countries. I was in Senegal when they gained their independence. They formed a federation and now as I understand it, I guess about four or five weeks later I was in Ghana when Nkrumah became president. Nkrumah had been at Lincoln University with my husband. So I had an almost open sesame to the activities that they had. And I came back, of course. Everyone thought I was crazy for going to Africa by myself in the first place. In 1963 I returned. I have been to Africa a total of 65 times, visiting and studying in 41 countries.

Q You are getting young people here in Detroit to go as well?

A I have so many students who come back to me and they tell me all of the things they know about Africa, which makes me proud. But I was able to get them to understand what a proud people we are, what a great people we are. That Africa is where mankind began and where all the things that we have today began on that very continent and to dispel many of the myths like Tarzan and Dactori and all of these films that have come out and have just given a wrong view of Africa and Africans. I wanted to change that and I think I have. I have taken many groups to Africa and I have had the opportunity of studying at some of their great universities, and I have met many people. I have had students that my husband and I have put through school. Some have gone back. My Mbutu, the first one from Kenya; he is now a professor at the university; he has his doctorate; he is a professor at the University of Nairobi. The last young lady, Loretta Sieh, from Liberia, she is now in

Minneapolis and doing quite well. She is married and has two children. In fact, my mother went with me twice, and she would often say that her mother sent $10.00 a month.

Now my mother was born in 1888, and her mother belonged to a missionary society in Bradford, Pennsylvania. And they sent $10.00 a month to raise a child in Africa. She wanted to go and see this child. So my mother said that I had fulfilled her mother's dream, and she went with me twice. The first time she went through Europe and then met me in Egypt. The second time she spent six weeks on a study tour with me and she was quite interested in it all.

Q This might be the last question. We will see, but I am curious: What is it about the West Side as you understand it and as you experienced it that resulted in so many people in subsequent years becoming pretty prominent in their own life? What was it about the environment that allowed that to happen?

A That's a hard question. I feel that the East Side of Detroit was not as heavily populated, number one, with African Americans. And the West Side was more populated. Our parents came together in many ways to raise their children. There was always this togetherness and even in school, we had a very close knit group because we had to really fight off so many things that had happened and were happening in those days and still are happening.

Q What did you have to fight off?

A Well, discrimination in every sense of the word. So that's still very much a part of the problem today.

Q There must have been something in the air almost that gave you something to fight that off?

A Sure. I mean our parents came together. Just like St. Cyprian's Church, it started with just five families. But these five families were able to bring in more families. The same thing happened at Hartford with Reverend Hill. He was a very dynamic man and he fought discrimination in every sense of the word. He was the first one to bring Paul Robeson here, and he just fought for the rights of African Americans. Of course they were not called African Americans. We were called Negroes.

Q Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that we have not talked about?

A Well, one thing I have not told you about: I have gone to Africa to bring back to our children here in Detroit an understanding that our children are just like them. However, we have so many. The children make their own toys. This little boy [shows a photo of a boy with a toy] got off the bus and he was standing there and he was rolling this. He took some wire and wrapped some cord around it and made a little push toy. So one of the kids when I took it to school said, “don't they have Toys R Us?” I said, “sure they have Toys R Us. What do you have to have when you go to Toys R Us? What? Money. Thank you.” The children do not have the money that our children have to buy things. So they use their own devices and they make their toys. I have just a whole bag of toys that I take around to the schools and the children here are very delighted. One little boy, he did make a toy. He said, “I am going to make one, Miss Blackwell with a tambourine out of pop bottle tops.” And he came and he brought that. It was right over here at Fitzgerald School. He made it. I am glad that I instilled something in them, too, to know that you can do. As I said, my toys were wonderful in all of my years. My father made them as I was growing up. And I wish that more children

and more parents would become involved in doing things like that: using your own skills, creative and inventive skills.

Q Okay. There is a term, it takes a village.

A Yes.

Q Does that term apply?

A Definitely.

Q How so?

A Well, the West Side flourished at one time and then when other things came in to the scene, naturally it disappeared. When you think of the churches… Look at Tabernacle; they put up this big beautiful church there on West Grand Boulevard and the village put that together. The churches were very important in the community, in helping to make this village a viable one. And the schools… Now there is a Catherine C. Blackwell Institute of International Studies, Commerce and Technology. I had to get that in.

Q Absolutely.

A I am so proud of it. Those children are wonderful, and are Pre-K through 8. We have a very strong administration and teachers and I am very proud of them having the school named in my honor. Of course I didn't accomplish that; Detroit Public Schools decided that because of crediting me with being the first to bring African-American history in to the public schools.

Q I think that is a good way to end it. Thank you very much again. It has been a treat.

A You are welcome..