

Oral Memoirs
of
Barbara Clowers
St. Peter Claver, Macon

An Interview

Conducted by

Bettye Middlebrooks &

Katy Lockard

on

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Community Elders, Black Catholic Oral History Project

Archives & Records Management Department,

Catholic Diocese of Savannah

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General Policies and Procedures

A member of the Oral History Association, the Archives & Records Management Department of the Catholic Diocese of Savannah (A&R) supports and embodies the goals, guidelines, and standards of archival quality prescribed by the national professional association to ensure long-term preservation of memoirs. It is the practice of A&R to select narrators whose recollections, as participants or eyewitnesses, are relevant to the department's chosen research topics. Their recorded memoirs provide links between the immediate past and the present in a very human way. A scholarly but relaxed and conversational atmosphere exists during the interview. To encourage completely candid recollections, the narrator is asked to regard the oral history memoir as a highly personal journal. The transcribed historical document, which the finished memoir becomes, is the raw material used by historians and professional scholars.

In the interest of preserving these memories for future use, the narrator and interviewer must sign a deed of gift agreement. Generally, this releases their portions of the interview to the oral history archives of Catholic Diocese of Savannah for historical and academic research and public dissemination. The narrator may also choose to restrict the memoir by limiting access or by sealing the memoir until a specified date.

Memoir Procedure

1. Initial contact with the narrator.
2. Arrangements made for interview(s).
3. Recording of interview(s).
4. Transcribing of recording(s) in the A&R office.
5. Audit-checking and editing of transcript(s) in the A&R office. Abstract(s) created.
6. Review of transcript(s) by interviewer.
7. Review of transcript(s) by narrator. Due to edits requested, transcript(s) may not match audio recording(s) exactly.
8. Upload of draft transcript(s) and recording(s) to A&R's web portal.
9. Presentation of bound copy of completed memoir to the interviewee.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) with Barbara Clowers is unrestricted. The deed of gift agreement was signed on November 5, 2020.

Interview History

The recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) were processed in the offices of the Archives & Records Management Department, Catholic Diocese of Savannah, Savannah, Georgia.

Interviewer: Bettye Middlebrooks

Transcriber: James C. Wright

Editor: Stephanie Braddy

Collection/Project Detail

The Diocese of Savannah is collecting oral histories from members of the Black Catholic community to fill in gaps in the documentation.

Barbara Clowers (née Brooks), 88, was born in Macon, GA in 1931 to Julia Bell Brown of Albany, GA and Harold Sheffield Brooks of Macon, GA. Her mother worked as a teacher and her father was an agent with Atlanta Life Insurance in Macon, as well as a musician. Sadly, Julia died in childbirth with her youngest child, Essie. Barbara was only five years old. Following the death of her mother, Barbara and two of her siblings, Marilyn and Harold Jr., were raised with their grandmother. The baby, Essie, was sent to live with the niece of her grandmother in Philadelphia, where she met Mother Katharine Drexel (canonized a saint in 2000) and served her whenever Mother Katharine visited the school Essie attended.

Barbara worked as a teacher for 5 years in Bibb County Schools and was a social worker for 20 years in Bibb County, DFACS. In 1956, Barbara married Frank Clowers, a mechanical engineer. Frank received his degree from West Virginia State College (now a University). He worked for Robins Air Force Base and Travis Air Force Base in graphic and design. He also taught at Macon Technical College. After 53 years of marriage, Frank died in 2009. They had two children, Michael who also died in 2018 and Francine lives in South Carolina.

Barbara and Frank were not born Catholic. They converted later in life. Frank's sister was Catholic. After Marilyn (Barbara's sister) married, she and her husband became catholic and shortly after that Frank and Barbara became Catholic as well and fully immersed themselves in the St. Peter Claver community. Barbara served as the first Director of Evangelization and organized the Vacation Bible School summer programs. She also volunteered with St. Peter Claver's food pantry.

Bettye Middlebrooks is a longtime member of St. Peter Claver Parish in Macon, GA and a member of the Black Catholic History Advisory Board to the Archives.

Katy Lockard is the Director of Archives & Records Management for the Catholic Diocese of Savannah.

Interview Transcript

BMiddlebrooks Okay, my name is Betty Middlebrooks and this is September 19, 2019. I am interviewing Barbara Clowers for the first time, and this interview is taking place at the Diocesan office, Pastoral Center in Savannah. This interview is sponsored by St. Peter Claver Catholic Church and School. It is a part of the Black Catholic History interviews. Okay Barbara, first let me thank you for agreeing to this interview. I want you to think back, go back in time, and tell us what you remember about your earliest days at St. Peter Claver and school.

BClowers Well, as a child, I would go to St. Peter Claver [00:01:00] to mass sometimes with Mrs. Essie Hutchings who was the organist at that time, and a dear friend of my late mother's. In the early sixties, I was not Catholic, but Mother Cleophas,¹ who was sort of a person who wanted her way, and had her way. She was not the type of person to just say "yes, yes" to everything Father Galvin had asked. And Father Galvin² was an Irish priest and very accustomed to running a very lean school. I think tuition was about ten dollars per month at that time. But anyway, Mother Cleophas said that she was not going to collect [00:02:00] students' fees and try to teach a class too. That she wanted a certified teacher to come in and teach her eighth grade classes. My sister, at that time, was Catholic, and still is. She said [to Mother Cleophas] "Well, my sister is a teacher and she's not working, she's staying home with her children." So she [Mother Cleophas] said "Well, will she come?" and she [my sister] said, "I'll ask." And I did, I went. And the first time I went, was to the kindergarten classroom. That was Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Mary Davis,³ who was about four feet tall. Everybody loved Mrs. Davis. And everybody wanted their children to be in her [00:03:00] kindergarten class, especially the teachers in Macon and Bibb County. But Mrs. Davis's mother died the second—about the second day into school, and Mother Cleophas called me and asked me if I would come and teach this class. Well, the children had not gotten acclimated to school. They had not, um, they talked with their fingers in their mouths. They were just sort of very shy. And uh, it was sort of hard—it's the hardest work

¹ Sr. M. Cleophas Hubby, S.B.S. was born Grace Kathleen Hubby on February 11, 1923 in New York to Edward J and Elsie A. Hubby. She had two brother, Robert and Martin. She became a Sister of the Blessed Sacrament, and served as the superior of the Macon convent from August 1966 to August 1968. She was succeeded by Mother M. Joseph Damien. At some point, likely following Vatican II in 1965, she changed her name back to her baptismal name and was referred to as Sr. Grace Kathleen Hubby, S.B.S. Sr. Grace died on July 20, 2003 at the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Motherhouse in Bensalem, PA and is buried in the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Cemetery in the same city.

² Rev. John J. Galvin, S.M.A. was born in Athlone, Ireland. He was ordained to the priesthood in the order of the Society of African Missionary Fathers (S.M.A.) in 1934 and spent ten years in Nigeria before coming to the United States. He served as pastor at St. Peter Claver Parish from 1955 to 1970, when he retired. Fr. Galvin's retirement ended the S.M.A.'s administration of St. Peter Claver Parish, which began in 1917. Following his retirement, Fr. Galvin remained in residence at St. Peter Claver until his death in July 1980 in Tenafly, NJ.

³ Mrs. Mary Davis was a kindergarten teacher at St. Peter Claver School for many years during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, however her exact arrival and retirement dates are unknown. She was small in stature but had a big heart and a way with children. She was well known throughout the community because of her reputation at the school. Mrs. Davis was married to Dan Davis who died young due to complications from surgery. While the couple had no children of their own, Mrs. Davis raised her niece and nephew, Mildred and Carl Henderson.

I have ever done in my life. Especially, there was no air conditioning, there was no fans, no screens at the windows. [00:04:00] And these children sat at these cute little tables, and um, there was no lunch room. Everybody, all the parents made lunches for their children. So every child had a cute little Shirley Temple lunchbox with a thermos inside. And inside those boxes was Kool-Aid, inside those thermoses was Kool-Aid. Well, there were about sixty plus children every day. In fact, Mrs. Davis's classroom is now two classrooms. They made it into two classrooms when St. Peter Claver was redesigned—well, yes, redesigned—on that floor. By the time I would go around and get all these thermoses open, the children would eat [00:05:00] their little lunch and then they would try to start putting the tops back onto the thermoses. And the thermoses—they couldn't get them on straight and they were spilling Kool-Aid on the table where they had to work. Flies were everywhere. The tables were sticky. It was hot. So, I told Mother Cleophas I just *had* to have some help to at least get those thermoses back on because it took a long time for me to go to sixty children and put thermoses back—to screw the tops back on. But anyway, it was, like on Friday evening, the floors were so sticky, that I mopped. Every Friday, I would mop. The two Fridays I was there, I would mop the floors. And uh, [00:06:00] maybe change the water three times. That was the hardest work I've ever done in my life. But, it was so enjoyable.

BMiddlebrooks Talk to me about Fr. William Coleman.⁴

BClowers Father Coleman came to Macon, I think, to integrate the schools and the churches. And uh, it was said that uh—this is ugly to say on tape especially—that the people at St. Joseph told him “this is *our* school and *our* church.” But, Father Coleman did things to bring the schools—to right interactions between the parishioners at Holy Spirit, St. Peter Claver, and St. Joseph.⁵ We had [00:07:00] picnics. We had various outings. I think the beautiful thing, and I don't know whether they do it now or not, was Confirmation. Parents had to attend Confirmation classes. And it was held at St. Peter Claver. So, the people from St. Joseph had to come to lowly St. Peter Claver for Confirmation. But the actual Confirmation ceremony was held at St. Joseph, in their basement, and it was beautiful. I remember candles being around some of the posts and the candles were down in sand. It was just beautiful. But it brought us together and we got a chance to interact with one another. But I don't know whether any of that is going on now or not.

BMiddlebrooks So when he [Father Coleman] came, he came to work with all [00:08:00] three parishes? Not just—

⁴ Rev. William “Bill” Coleman was born in Waterbury, CT in 1932. After attending seminary and being ordained a priest of the Diocese of Savannah in Hartford, CT in 1957, Rev. Coleman served in various Diocesan Administrative positions. These include Rector of St. John Vianney Minor Seminary (SAV), Vocations Director, Permanent Diaconate Director, Administrative Coordinator of St. Pius X High School (SAV), a marriage tribunal official, and Director of the Department of Christian Formation. On January 31, 1970 Rev. Coleman was appointed pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Macon and Vicar Forane (Dean) of the Macon Deanery. In his capacity as Dean, Rev. Coleman served the local authority to parishes in the area, including St. Peter Claver. He served in Macon until about 1973 when he took an extended leave of absence from the priesthood. William Coleman died in 2004 in Wilmington, NC.

⁵ Parishes in Macon, Georgia.

BClowers No, he was with St. Joseph. He was the priest at St. Joseph. But, the goal was to integrate St. Joseph, St. Peter Claver, and Holy Spirit and try to bring about a good Christian relationship between the three.

BMiddlebrooks Okay, Sam Hall Construction Company, you remember you all had a relationship with him?

BClowers Mr. Willie S—William—I think his name was Willie Smith, he worked for Sam Hall. And he—this was when the men would go over and do the playground once a year. During the summer, while the children were out of school, the men would go over and take care of the playground. Get the equipment [00:09:00] painted, refurbished, whatever needed repairing. And Mr. Smith, working for Sam Hall who was in construction, he would bring his—the big machinery over there and whatever was needed, level off things. It was just a beautiful relationship because we [the school] didn't pay anybody to do anything then. Absolutely nobody. Nobody was paid.

BMiddlebrooks Okay. Now, when Fr. Liam Collins⁶ came, he gave you—well, he asked you to serve on a special ministry—the Evangelization Ministry. You were the first to work in that ministry. You were the chair of that ministry. Want to talk to us little bit about that and how that got started?

BClowers Well, Father [Collins] was concerned. I called him the “Little Leprechaun.” He was concerned that St. Peter Claver was [00:010:00] in the midst of a Black community and that the church was getting more, quote “pale.” And he wanted us to keep the relationship within the community as much as possible. So, we did some neat things. We were funded by the Koch Foundation⁷, whose daughter [the founder's daughter] happened to be a pilot. She flew up to Macon to interview us because they funded us several years to do the work that we did. And we involved the children across the street—there was a cul-de-sac across the street with a lot of children. We also involved children from the Booker T. Washington Community Center⁸. And we would take them. [00:11:00] But we also had our own [school] children. So, we wanted to bring—we wanted to try to bring people together to show God's love. To not proselytize, but to just show God's love in the community and that St. Peter Claver is here if you need us. And I can remember the Sisters giving out bread to people in that cul-de-sac. But those children came over and they—we took them to CNN [in Atlanta]. We chartered a bus to CNN. We took them to Perry, Georgia, to the Agricenter [State Fairgrounds] in Perry [00:12:00].

⁶ Fr. Liam Collins was born in 1946 in County Tipperary, Ireland. He was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Savannah in June 1971 at St. Patrick's College in Thurles, Ireland. Prior to his appointment at St. Peter Claver, Fr. Collins was pastor at Most Pure Heart of Mary Church in Savannah for 13 years. He served as pastor at St. Peter Claver from January 1988 to August 1994, before taking an extended leave of absence.

⁷ The Koch Foundation is one of the largest charity foundations in the United States. It has given millions of dollars to arts, science, research, educational, and cancer institutions.

⁸ The Booker T. Washington Community Center in Macon is permanently closed, but was recently purchased by the Macon Bibb County Parks Department in 2019 and may open again soon.

BMiddlebrooks Nutcracker.

BClowers Yeah, forgot about that! Yeah, we took them to the Nutcracker. And this is where the funding came in so good from Koch Foundation, because we could buy these children's tickets. We would take them to the Museum of Arts and Sciences [in Macon], to see the Christmas trees once a year, and we were always praised for how well the children acted. So—

BMiddlebrooks Did part of that funding also go to the vacation bible school?

BClowers Right, vacation bible school was also done. And we—I'm trying to think, I don't want to leave anything out. I've mentioned CNN, oh, the Air Museum. We took them down [00:13:00] to the Air Museum also. We wanted to give these children enrichment because any child can learn what's in a book. But they didn't have the enrichment that they needed. And I knew how important that was, and so we tried to take them out to places where they ordinarily would not have gone. It was a wonderful time and I miss it, but I'm too old to do it now [laughs].

BMiddlebrooks Okay, when did you actually become—I know you were there all the time—but when did you *actually* become Catholic?

BClowers I think it was in 1970, maybe it was 1970, and it was a *large* class. I don't think there has been a [00:14:00] larger class in RCIA⁹. Father O'Sullivan¹⁰ was the priest then. He really rushed us through, and we—it was just a beautiful time. And I think we had maybe had our first communion—I'm trying to think, was it—I don't remember if it was at Christmas or during the spring, like when they normally do it.¹¹ Maybe it was in the spring. As I said, Father O'Sullivan was the priest at the time.

BMiddlebrooks Okay. And then you had two children that went to St. Peter Claver and graduated from Mount de Sales, correct?¹²

BClowers One son. The son graduated from Mount de Sales. The daughter went to South Carolina and graduated from a school over there.

BMiddlebrooks Okay. [00:15:00] What about grandchildren?

⁹ Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults is a required process for adults who hope to convert to Catholicism. It is led by a priest and lay leaders who offer instruction, guidance and support and includes several stages marked by study, prayer and rites at mass.

¹⁰ Reverend Michael O'Sullivan was assigned as pastor to St. Peter Claver School from 1969 to 1971.

¹¹ The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, which mandates the Easter season as the season for accepting converts, was formally approved for use in the United States in 1974. Before then, as with Mrs. Clowers, converts entered the church through the guidance and direction of a priest.

¹² Mount de Sales Academy in Macon, Georgia, founded 1876. See <https://www.mountdesales.net/about/our-history> for more information.

BClowers Grandson went to, my son's son, went to Mount de Sales and was quite a smart young man. Very proud of him. He works with an electrical engineering company in Norcross, Georgia. Mount de Sales prepared him well; of course, he was a very focused young man. So, he was a Georgia Tech graduate.

BMiddlebrooks Okay, Katy, do you have any other questions?

KLockard Well, I was just interested to hear a little bit about your story of why you chose to become Catholic. You know, you sounded like you were part of the community, and maybe you can talk just a little bit about that sort of journey?

BClowers Well, I guess [00:16:00] the journey had started early with Mrs. Essie Hutchings¹³, who was the organist years and years ago. Then when my sister married a Catholic, and my sister-in-law—my husband's sister—married a Catholic—they lived in South Carolina—I guess I was thinking about my children too. If something happen to us, what would happen to my children? And plus, the priest—maybe I shouldn't say this—but he didn't have problems with not having a large family. And that was a concern to me because my mother died when I was five years old. [00:17:00] Childbirth and pneumonia. We were little stair-steps. I was the oldest at five years old and twelve days. So I just had a problem with the Catholic Church's view on contraceptives and things of that sort.¹⁴ But as I say, Father O'Sullivan, he was a different kind of person [laughs]. And he said he came up very, very poor, so maybe that's why he had some of the thoughts that he had about it. It made me feel like, "well, you *can* come to the Catholic Church," you know. So that was, I guess, my motivation. Plus, I was—I was at a church—at the Presbyterian church, [00:18:00] which was my mother's church, and it was—at that time, it was a dying church. It was just a few families and I was playing for church, teaching Sunday school, doing the flowers, you know, and I just felt like I was washed out. And I told my husband, "I am going to leave the Presbyterian church and I'm going to the Catholic church." And he said "I will go too."

BMiddlebrooks Okay. Now, in a lot of the interviews I've done, Mrs. Essie Hutching's name came up a lot.

BClowers Yeah, she—

BMiddlebrooks So she was very well known in the community, wasn't she?

BClowers Yeah, she grew up—she was in a convent at one time.

¹³ Essie Hutchings was born on November 23, 1894 to Ida Bond and Charlie Williams. It is unknown whether Mrs. Hutchings grew up Catholic or converted later in life, but at some point she joined St. Peter Claver as was their musician for many years. Essie was married to William (Willie) Pope Hutchings of Hutchings Funeral Home in Macon while Essie was a homemaker and active in the church community. She died on September 22, 1961 at age 66 and is buried in the Oakridge section of Rose Hill Cemetery on the Hutchings family plot.

¹⁴ This reflects Ms. Clowers' feelings and experience at the time, but does not necessarily reflect her current feelings or the Church's teachings. For up to date information on the Catholic Church and contraceptives, please see: <https://www.usccb.org/committees/pro-life-activities/contraception>

BMiddlebrooks Oh, okay.

BClowers Yeah, in a Catholic school, boarding school. And she married Willie Hutchings, of Hutchings Funeral Home. And she was sort of like, I guess, a mentor to my mother. And a very dear friend of hers, but she was a very devout Catholic. And she played the organ there for years.

BMiddlebrooks Okay. Thank you very much, Barbara.

[End of interview]