

Oral Memoirs
of
Alice Marcella Bailey
St. Peter Claver, Macon

An Interview
Conducted by
Bettye Middlebrooks &
Katy Lockard
on
July 24, 2019

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Community Elders, Black Catholic Oral History Project

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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 The transcribed historical document, which the finished memoir becomes, is the raw material used by historians and professional scholars.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.

Oral History 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 oral history to the interviewee.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) with Alice Marcella Bailey is unrestricted. The deed of gift agreement was signed on November 9, 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: Trint.com

Editor: Katy Lockard

Final 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.

Alice Marcella Bailey, 77, was born in Macon, Georgia to Hattie Lorene Costella Oliver Bailey (d. 1962) and Horace Bailey (d. 1965), the middle of three children. She attended St. Peter Claver Catholic School and [Old] Ballard High School (later named Ballard-Hudson Senior High School) in Macon, GA. She went on to Xavier University, where she earned a B.A. in economics and history in 1963. She also holds certificates from Boston College, University of Penn., NYU School of continuing education, Macon State College, and AARP. She is retired from Independence Blue Cross (IBC) of Philadelphia, PA where she served as Communications Director. She also worked in the Philadelphia Family Court, Westinghouse Broadcasting, and as a career development counselor for the City of Macon. She continues to volunteer in the community.

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.

Interview Transcript

KLockard OK so to begin would you please state your name and spell it for us?

ABailey My name is Alice Marcella Bailey. A L I C E and Bailey, B as in boy A I L E Y. The middle name, Marcella, M A R C E L L A, is the result of my mother's relationship with Sister and later Mother Marcella, who was a nun and then the principal of St. Peter Claver. In, I guess, the thirties, the nineteen thirties.

BMiddlebrooks Ok Alice, thank you for agreeing to interview with us and tell us your memories of St. Peter Claver. So, can you go back as far as you can and start?

ABailey Oh yes. Yes, actually I can go back to St. Peter Claver when I was a little girl before [00:01:00] going to kindergarten. Miss Mary Davis was my first teacher here in kindergarten, but we come to Mass here [in the church] and sit in the front. Children sat in the first two rows on either side of the altar which I think is the best place for them to see and to learn and of course practice what they've learned in the Mass. So we would come here every Sunday for--for church and I remember that so well because as a little girl I had a chance to sit in the front and that was important at the time. My mother enrolled us in St. Peter Claver, but even before then we say that my mother and her brothers and sisters all attended St. Peter Claver. When this church was being built at this location, this parish at this location, my grandfather, Dosons Severid de Lopez Oliver, friends knew him as Lope Oliver, as a business man he was always Lope Oliver, L O P E, helped to rebuild this church with their [00:02:00] hands their talents and their funds and their dedication to St. Peter Claver. So this church is a very, very special and indeed a holy place to me and my family. All my mother's brothers and sisters attended school here at St. Peter Claver. My mother was a very young child about six or seven, [when] her mother died in childbirth with her last child and there was a nun here, Sister Marcella, who sort of took her in as her little girl. That's my mother's story and became her mother at school. My mother talked about that with great emotion all the time. So when I came along and it was time to be baptized...thus as Alice Marcella Bailey, something I'm real proud of. You can see it by the big grin on my face. I'm real proud of that.

ABailey I'm especially happy about [00:03:00] the experience afforded me as a child and a student at St. Peter Claver. This is a holy place to many of us. My first teacher, as I said, was Mrs. Mary Davis, kindergarten, and then the illustrious and very dedicated Miss Eva Lunday, first grade. I don't recall my second grade teacher. However, my fourth-grade teacher was Sister Johanna. Now Sister Johanna didn't play at all. You better learn and if you didn't learn she introduced you to her ruler with your hand outstretched upturned. However, she is a very fine teacher, a math teacher. She taught us the appreciation for arithmetic and was steady in that. We had nuns, women who taught us, and made sure that we received a proper education that could be afforded under all circumstances of the times. [00:04:00] One of my fondest memories is our teacher, the teacher who became very dear to me into my adulthood, Sister Louis Marie. She was gonna be out of class for the day and Mother had to come across the hall on the second floor of the school on the east side of the school and manage both her class and ours. She left the doors open so she could hear any disturbance across the hall. She gave us something to learn in a few minutes, The Psalms of Life by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. That was the first poem that I remember having to learn, in something like 10 or 15 minutes. And she came back across the hall eventually and had us all repeat this poem. And she looked us in the eye as we were doing it to make sure that we knew the

poem. It sparked my interest and [00:05:00] appreciation for literature. To this day. The Psalms of Life by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

ABailey "Tell me not, in mournful numbers, Life is but an empty dream! For the soul is dead that slumbers, And things are not what they seem. [Life is] real! [Life is] earnest! And the grave is not its goal..."¹

ABailey He goes on and on and on. A very, very wonderful experience. We learned to respect one another. We learned to achieve. We learned what was important to us: Family; Personal appearance; Doing for others. I learned that you share with others because it's the right thing to do. I learned that you share with others because it makes you feel good about yourself and all in all, what's most important, is to be a good person. You don't have to be pretty. You don't have to be thin, [00:06:00] or be fat, or be rich, but you have to be respected and one way to be respected is to give respect and to share. Now that came out of my household and out of here, St. Peter Claver. This to me is a very special place.

ABailey I come to Mass early, a half hour early, because I must sit in the seat that my grandfather sat, which became my mother's seat and when I was a little girl all the children sat in the first two rows in the front facing the altar which I would really like to see happen again because when you learn the Mass as a child in the school and you come to Mass on Sunday and you're behind these tall adults when all you can see is their back, you don't have a chance to practice what you have been learning five days a week in school. It just seems so terribly unfair to these babies [00:07:00] that they can't see and practice a Mass. So, I sat in the front. A nun would sit on the first two rows at the end, boys side, the girls side and a favorite seventh-grader or eighth-grader would sit directly behind them to manage the second row.

ABailey Now that meant you had prestige and honor if you were that favorite seventh or eighth grader and you worked for that position. You made sure that you qualified for that position which help you establish character in very small way, but a consistent way. That's what you get at St. Peter Claver. That's what we got in St. Peter Claver. No one said, "Oh you must be such and such." They put you in a position that you could see, this is where you want to be. This is the kind of person you want to be. This is the achiever you must be and that is so very very important, especially now with so much that's on television and in the news that's not positive and certainly [00:08:00] not instructive to our children. So way back then that's what St. Peter Claver was establishing for us. Very very important. I'd like to see that happen again.

BMiddlebrooks Some of the other interviews were talking about their experiences with activities through the school time.

ABailey Oh yes. Oh yes.

BMiddlebrooks What do you remember about those activities? Well, what kind of activities were here when you were here?

ABailey May Day. Girl Scouts. Boy Scouts. Standing up reciting poems. Those were important. Those were the ones that made the greatest impact on me. Selling Turkey raffles. Trying to be the one that sold the most so you can win that bicycle. I remember the boys band, the boys being in

¹ *The Psalms of Life* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, for complete poem: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44644/a-psalm-of-life>

the band: Bernard Abrams, Bernard Brown, [00:09:00] Joe Russell. All of these young boys were introduced to music, introduced to being a musician. A couple went on to really stand out at Ballard Hudson High School.² I think they were in the band, they were respectable. They came in understanding the instruments and how to be in a band. And I don't think any other grammar schools in the area offered that experience during the '50s here. But that was very, very important.

We had to because we had to stand up and -- and recite which gave us a lot of confidence. I think that those are the things most I remember. I think we went on a couple of field trips. I seem to think we went to St. Elizabeth's in Atlanta, I think. [00:10:00] I think that's where. But mostly I remember how dedicated our teachers were to making sure that we understood. I don't remember ever being chastised in a demeaning way or seeing others chastised in a demeaning way. Now, Sister Johanna had a ruler, and you didn't want her attention with that ruler. That's one of the things. You had to put your hand out. She would reach way back and come down on your hand with that ruler. But there wasn't meant to be cruel. It was meant to get your attention.

BMiddlebrooks You spoke about Sister Louis Marie. She was here as a teacher.

ABailey Oh yes.

BMiddlebrooks And I remember she came back when I was here. She came back [00:11:00] as the principal.

ABailey Yes.

BMiddlebrooks You were gone then, when she came back as principal, right?

ABailey But let me just tell you something about her and I definitely want you to hear this. When it is time to go to Xavier, go to college, my parents, the marriage at broken up and my mother had been a housewife basically all of her life with my father. And so the funds weren't available. They just weren't there. And she called Xavier University³ down in New Orleans and spoke to another Sister of the Blessed Sacrament, about providing an opportunity for me to go to college. I became assistant to the House Mother of the freshman dormitory which paid my room and board. She got a job for me as the cashier in the cafeteria for dinner which paid for my tuition. And then I had other jobs off campus. I'd been in radio here before as a disc jockey, WIBB for two and a half years prior to going, so I was able to get another job in New Orleans and she arranged [00:12:00] to have them accept that I would leave the campus every day to go to work yet come back [at the end of the day]. Without her, I would not have been able to go to Xavier, would not have had one of the most incredible experiences of my life, learning and social experiences and just all around character building experiences.

ABailey We moved in Philadelphia while I was at Xavier move from Macon to Philadelphia. She introduced Mother to a Mother Raymond at St. Ignatius⁴ so that she would have another connection to the Catholic Church and a nun who was a very fine connection. My mother died when I was in college and Sister Louis Marie had become Sister Bernadette Stack by then I think.

² Ballard Hudson High School in Macon, Georgia. For more information: <https://ballardhudson.bcsdk12.net>

³ Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans, Louisiana. For more information: <https://xulastory.com/>

⁴ Our Mother of Sorrows/St. Ignatius of Loyola Catholic School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. For more information: <https://omssiphila.independencemissionschools.org/our-school/history/>

Eventually I moved downtown from West Philadelphia, two blocks from St. Peter Claver [00:13:00] Church⁵ establish there and I would go to church on Sunday there. But one day I went to a different Mass. And lo and behold who's there, Sister Louis Marie. Well this was an incredible experience to be back together. By that time, I was working for a major company in Philadelphia, BlueCross. She would come in from the Mother House (after the school closed down there) to see a doctor. We would always have lunch and there was a Catholic man at Blue Cross, who was [executive] senior staff, Vice President, and he saw us once having lunch and realize that I knew some nuns. Well he started coming to lunch with us. And it was just an incredible experience to have her as my friend that I was introducing into a Vice President of the company I worked for, [00:14:00] so it upped to my status. And she was able to tell him all about me as a child. And that was just a little personal thing. She was such a fantastic influence on our lives. A very special human being.

KLockard Now did you graduate from Xavier, or did you graduate from St. Ignatius?

ABailey St. Ignatius was a grammar school. No, no. A graduate from Xavier and I'm very involved Xavier. In fact, I've been responsible for several of the young people from this parish going to Xavier on scholarships. And I always want to talk to any young person who is interested in going to Xavier. It's a fine, fine, fine university establish Mother Katharine Drexel⁶ from the famous and rich Drexel family of Philadelphia. And she established the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, an order that I have tremendous respect for, tremendous respect. It not that I heard about them, I knew about them, very personally I knew about them from my mother's time [00:15:00] to this time through today.

BMiddlebrooks Tell us a bit about the book you want to publish.

ABailey Oh yes. Oh yes. I'd like permission to do further research and publish a book on Saint Peter Claver⁷ and who he was, what he did, the character image that he's established for us to follow. I think when you come to any institution that's named for a person in history, one should know about that person. I want our children at St. Peter Claver School to know about him. I want those who have chosen St. Peter Claver as their church home, who have come from elsewhere to know where they are and why this church exists, this parish exists.

ABailey Initially, this parish was established for African-American people and it has always been open to anyone who want to come. And now it is very, very integrated. [00:16:00] We're all one big church family here, but there are people who don't know about Peter Claver. I think that should be taught in kindergarten, first grade, and it certainly should be a pamphlet always available for persons, maybe every few Sundays a passage from the book can be taken out put in the Bulletin so for persons passing through or learning gradually without buying the entire book would be able to know about St. Peter Claver, because his life is a pattern for us to follow. And we should have that option, we should have an opportunity to know it.

ABailey I also would like to see the children sit in the front again. They sit behind us and we are all, especially some of the men, the men are so broad I can't see around them! They can't see. They can't see the consecration of the host, one of the most important activities in the Mass. [00:17:00]

⁵ St. Peter Claver Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Church closed in April 2019. For more information: <https://catholicphilly.com/2019/03/news/local-news/long-time-base-for-citys-black-catholics-set-to-close/>

⁶ St. Katharine Drexel (1858-1955). For more information: https://www.katharinedrexel.org/st_katharine_drexel_overview/

⁷ St. Peter Claver (1581-1654). For more information: <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-peter-claver>

I seem to attract little ones, three or four-year olds they come and sit with me. I enjoy that they're busy, but when it's time for the consecration of the Mass I put them on the aisle, and I'll tell the person in front of me, "Please move over a little bit, sir." I guess I'm the Church Patrol Officer – so that the baby can see what's going on at the altar. I think that we must do that as our obligation. I really want them to sit in those front row seats. I really do. I want to see us invite young people to be in the choir. Give them an opportunity to use their voices and let them know this is their church. In Southern language, "This b'longs to them." We should have them very active in every part of it. And in that choir, I'd love to hear some nice young voices in that choir and be able to pat them on the back at the end of Mass and say, "Baby, you did so well today. Thank you. Thank you." We don't have that opportunity [00:18:00] and they don't have that opportunity. We don't have that pleasure and they don't have that opportunity. We have an obligation. Okay. And I'd like to see us stand up to our obligation.

BMiddlebrooks I'll see what we can do.

ABailey Please. Please. And I'll come over. I can't teach them how to sing, nobody wants to hear me sing. I don't even hum to the children, but I'll come over and be whatever I'm needed to be to support this.

BMiddlebrooks Thank you so much for interviewing with us.

ABailey Thank you.

BMiddlebrooks So I hope to have this ready for Black History.

ABailey Thank you for asking me to be a part of this, inviting me to be a part of this. I get very emotional about St. Peter Claver. It has been a major part of my life and my mother's life. And there's a fourth generation of my family here married. That's two generations of marriage into the Baileys. So we are very dedicated to St. Peter Claver.

BMiddlebrooks All right. Thank you so much.

ABailey Thank you.

[End of Interview]