

Oral Memoirs
of
Gwendolyn Stroud Booker
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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Table of Contents

General Policy and Purposes	iv
Oral History Procedure	iv
Legal Status.....	iv
Interview History	v
Collection/Project Detail	v
Interview Transcript, 7/24/2019	1

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 The transcribed historical document, which the finished memoir becomes, is the raw material used by historians and professional scholars.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

Gwendolyn Stroud Booker, 75, was born in 1944 to Jesse and Otelia Stroud, who were Baptist. Gwendolyn was one of seven children, who also included Alvin, Wilford, Marilyn, Lawrence, Elise, Vernetha Stroud. Gwendolyn and her sister Vernetha attended St. Peter Claver School and wanted to become Catholic. Her parents allowed them to convert, but they were still required to the Baptist churches with their parents. Their brother, Lawrence, later became Catholic as well while in college. Gwendolyn married William Booker and became stepmother to Elbert.

After earning a Master's degree, Gwendolyn became a teacher in the Bibb County Public School System. She worked in several schools in the area, including Northeast High School, where she was also a coach for cheerleading, track, and basketball. Gwendolyn retired from education after 34, but continues to be active in the church community. Along with her activity in the church, Mrs. Booker is a member of the Council of Catholic Women and the Knights of Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary.

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

KLockard Okay, so to start out, do you want to tell us your full name —

GBooker Okay —

KLockard — and spell it for us, please?

GBooker Okay, and spell it?

KLockard Yes, ma'am.

GBooker Okay, it's Gwendolyn Stroud Booker. G-W-E-N-D-O-L-Y-N, Stroud, S-T-R-O-U-D, Booker, B-O-O-K-E-R.

KLockard Thank you.

BMiddlebrooks Okay, Gwen, thank you for agreeing to interview. We want you to go back in history and try to tell us what you remember about your early days here at St. Peter Claver Church and School?

GBooker Okay. All right, I'll start with when I first came here. I used to go to the kindergarten in the neighborhood, and every morning, about lunchtime, or naptime, I would slip away. Just get out of the lady's [00:01:00] kindergarten, walk home to get into my own bed. And then the lady would eventually call and ask "Did Gwendolyn come home?" She [Mrs. Booker's mother] would say "Yeah, she's here. So, I thought school was out." So my mother decided that she didn't want to have to look for me every day, and she decided she was going to bring me over here to St. Peter Claver. I was about 4 years old and we came over to St. Peter Claver. And I couldn't walk home because I was [lived] across the river. So, that's how I first got to St. Peter Claver. That was in January, and I was here from then on.

BMiddlebrooks Okay, so when did you come into the church?

GBooker I joined the church in — I was about [00:02:00] seven, eight, nine — about nine years old, but I'm not sure what year that was. But I used to practice church every day. And so, my mother said "Why are you always practicing church?" I would always repeat what had gone on in church. And I said "Because I like it and it sounds good." And so, she said, "Well, if you join that church, you're still going to have to go to church with me every Sunday." So I said, "Okay." So then, she agreed to let us join — me and my sister.

BMiddlebrooks So you and your sister were the first ones in your family?

GBooker To be Catholic—

BMiddlebrooks Are you the only ones in your family?

GBooker No, I have a brother that's Catholic.

BMiddlebrooks So the three of you all became Catholics without your parents.

GBooker Yes, raised in a Baptist [home].

BMiddlebrooks Okay. What kind of activities do you remember having at St. Peter Claver School?

GBooker Okay. First thing, we had a nun¹ [00:03:00]. Her name of Sister Louis Marie.² And we had a CYO organization, which was called Catholic Youth Organization.³ And she [Sister Louis Marie] was sort of like over it, not really over if, but she was always the one that would come to give us some kind of activity. Our— whatever you call it, advisor, I guess— was David Hill. And we would always— The nun [Sister Louis Marie] was mainly— I guess she was Irish, and she decided that she wanted to teach us how to do an Irish jig. So we learned how to do this little Irish jig. And then Mr. Hill would always have some other activities. So it was really sort of like an activity that we had on Sundays for the teenagers or for the— well, I wouldn't say teenagers — [00:04:00] preteens because I think it was probably from ten years old to maybe seventeen [years old]. And we would do this on Sunday and then the priest would always ask us if there was anything else we wanted to do. And he would finance whatever we wanted to do. So that was one of the activities. And then, I remember one time, they organized a drum and bugle corps. And I guess at that time, I was probably in the fourth grade. And I was listening to some other folks say they had one here before then, but it didn't include the girls. And so then the girls blew the trumpets—not trumpets, I'm sorry— it was the bugle. We had a bugle and the boys mostly did the drumming. And the funnest thing about it was that we would wear white [00:05:00] skirts with pleats, and we had a cape that was blue, and the inside of the cape was gold. So half of the cape would turn back, and so you could see the gold. And over here [indicating where on the cape] we had "SPC." And we had a funny-looking hat.

BMiddlebrooks Okay, Gwen, tell us about the restrooms and lunches that you all had.

¹ The term "nuns" is commonly mistaken for "sisters". Nuns are cloistered religious women who physically set themselves apart from the world, and whose "work" for the Church is prayer. A "sister" lives an apostolic life (working and usually living in the community). They are the ones you would see more often at schools and parishes. It is rare to see a nun anywhere but her cloister. It is common, but technically incorrect, among the older generations to refer to all religious women as "nuns." However, those who are living out the vocation of "nun" get really annoyed when an apostolic religious woman is called "nun." Both also use the term "Sister."

² Sr. Louis Marie Stack, S.B.S. was born Bernadette Monica Stack on February 11, 1923 to Bernard J. and Josephine V. Madden Stack in Dundalk, County Louth, Ireland. She served at St. Peter Claver School from 1954-1959 and 1974-1977. At some point, likely following Vatican II in 1965, she changed her name back to her baptismal name and was referred to as Sr. Mary Bernadette Stack, S.B.S. She died on March 30, 2007, aged 84, 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.

³ Catholic Youth Organization is a youth program run at the diocese level to help children and teenagers with their recreational, social, and spiritual needs. The first CYO was founded in 1930 in Chicago.

GBooker Okay, all right we did not have— you had to bring your lunch. We had a lunchroom, but you had to bring your lunch. Everybody would go to the lunchroom to eat their lunch. And we didn't have any chairs; we had to stand up at the table. It wasn't really a table, it was a counter. And I guess they had probably about six or seven candles and you stood at the counter to eat your lunch. On Fridays, that was the day your brought your money. We had hot dogs, or if it was Lent⁴ time, it was [00:06:00] tuna fish sandwich, but it was in a hot dog bun.

BMiddlebrooks and KLockard [Laughs]

GBooker And it cost us 15 cents.⁵

BMiddlebrooks Okay. The equipment on the grounds, at that time, do you remember?

GBooker Uh huh, we had a jungle gym. We had a seesaw. We had a swing. And we played a lot of hopscotch. Uh, ball—any kind of ball, it didn't matter. And you know, if you didn't want to do any of those things, then you did the playground equipment. Now the playground equipment was made out of steel, hard steel, and the jungle gym, if you turned it loose, somebody was bound to get hit in the head. But you knew to duck, you know. And our playground was grass. We didn't have cement or anything, it was dirt and grass. And the [00:07:00] bathroom was outside. We had a bathroom— well, I guess you wouldn't call it a bathroom— a toilet house. One side was for girls; one side was for boys. And I think I can remember, we had five little stalls inside. And you had a faucet to wash your hands, but there was never hot water; it was always cold water.

BMiddlebrooks And your school supplies. You said you got those—

GBooker Okay, yeah. You could get the school supplies at the office, if you didn't bring your own supplies. One day out of the week, they would sell school supplies. I was one of those folks that went from room to room to sell the supplies. And we also, on that same day, you had a little magazine, I can't remember what the magazine was called, but it was some kind of little magazine that if you wanted one of those, you could get those on Fridays also. And they cost a quarter.

BMiddlebrooks Now, religious classes. Now [00:08:00] we have religion every day, but during that time, you all had religion classes once a—

GBooker Unh-uh. We had ours everyday.

BMiddlebrooks Everyday. And it was taught by a priest?

⁴ During Lent (the period between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday), Catholics abstain from eating meat from land animals on Fridays. Fish is acceptable.

⁵ The minimum wage during that time was about \$1.20 per hour. A McDonald's hamburger cost 15 cents and a restaurant meal cost an average of 30 cents.

GBooker No, it was taught by the nun. The priest came once per week. And on that day was his day to teach, but we had religion every day.

BMiddlebrooks Okay. Tell us about the theater you were in.

GBooker Okay. Now when I was in the fifth grade, we all went to Atlanta. We had to wear our uniforms, which in my days, we wore blue skirts—navy blue skirts with pleats, and a blue blouse that had a Peter Pan collar.⁶ And we also had a beanie. That’s what they called it, a little beanie. And the nuns decided we were going to Atlanta, and I think we were supposed to be going to the zoo. We had a train in Macon called the [00:09:00] Nancy Hank⁷. So we got on the train. I don’t know how we got to the station, but we got on the train and we went to Atlanta. Okay, if you forgot— some of us forgot to go to the bathroom on the train. So when we got to the station, thinking that maybe you can go to the bathroom at the station, you could not go. They didn’t even have a sign that says “Whites Only” or “Colored Only.” It was just that that group— or the group of us could not go to the bathroom. So one of the nuns called over to Blessed Sacrament⁸ and asked them if there was any way that they could bring the children over there to use the bathroom. So they had a bus. They came and got us on the bus, we went to the bathroom, and then we went on to where we were supposed to be going. Everybody thought that was kind of [00:10:00] ba— well, you know, back in the day, young folks didn’t know what was going on. But the old folks knew what was going on. So we really didn’t know we couldn’t use the bathroom, as such, because she said, the nun said “Okay, y’all we got to wait on the bus, y’all just have to hold it a minute.” So we waiting on the bus to come get us. But they never told us that we couldn’t use the bathroom. I assumed that’s what happened. At least, I knew that’s what happened.

BMiddlebrooks Okay. Now tell me about your first memories of coming into the church, once you joined. [Unintelligible]

GBooker Um-hm. No, I started coming before then [before joining the church].

BMiddlebrooks Okay, you started coming before that time.

GBooker Yes, my mother would bring us to church at— we came on Sundays at seven thirty. That’s what time mass was on Sunday. Uh, they had a seven thirty and ten o’clock [00:11:00] mass, but we had to come at seven thirty because my mother was a pianist and she played at a lot of churches. So, she would bring us here, then come back and pick us up. Then we had to go

⁶ Named after Maude Adam’s role as Peter Pan in 1905, the collar is a flat fold that circles the neck and lies flat on the torso.

⁷ The Nancy Hanks II passenger train, one of Georgia Central Railroad’s trains, ran from Savannah to Atlanta from 1947 to 1971 when Georgia’s intercity passenger rails miles became part of the Amtrak system. For more information see <https://www.statesboroherald.com/local/two-trains-they-called-nancy-hanks/>

⁸ Construction on Most Blessed Sacrament started in 1957, and the School opened in 1965. See <http://mostblessedsacrament.com/ParishHistory.htm> for more information.

to the other churches. And we would stay in church from seven thirty in the morning until about six o'clock at night. And during that time too, when I became older, we wanted to get home by seven o'clock because if you were dating, the boy couldn't come to see you after seven o'clock. So we [Mrs. Booker and her siblings] would just be there watching to see what time it was so we could make sure we get out and get home in time to have company. Ain't it funny! [Laughs.] But that was the life.

BMiddlebrooks [Laughs] Basically.

GBooker Ok, but let me tell you about my—after I got into church. I could not—the Bishop [00:12:00] only came at certain times. I think that's the same way it is now. But we joined at a time where in order to be confirmed, it was too late for confirmation⁹. We didn't have to do all those different classes, like they do now. What actually happened, I think we probably had to learn something because they had told us that the Bishop would question you when you get ready to become confirmed. So Father—I believe it was Father Galvin¹⁰—made arrangements for us to go to Warner Robins to be confirmed. We got confirmed at Sacred Heart¹¹ because we were too late for the confirmation here [at St. Peter Claver].

BMiddlebrooks You were still confirmed in the eighth grade though, is that correct?

GBooker Um-hm.

BMiddlebrooks And you took your first communion around that time?

GBooker No, I think it was about seventh grade, sixth grade, or something [00:13:00] like that.

BMiddlebrooks Okay, when did you make first communion? Because I know they changed that—

GBooker As soon as we got baptized.¹²

BMiddlebrooks Okay.

⁹ For more information on Catholic Confirmation see <https://diosav.org/resources/sacraments-of-initiation/confirmation/confirmation-the-sacrament-of-the-holy-spirit>

¹⁰ Rev. John Gavin served as pastor at St. Peter Claver Parish from 1957 to 1970, when he retired. Following his retirement, he remained in residence at St. Peter Claver until his death in July 1980.

¹¹ The first mass held at Sacred Heart was in 1945; today it serves over 4,000 people and over 1,500 families. See <https://www.sacredheartwr.org/65> for more information.

¹² First communion was allowed around age 14 during the nineteenth century. However, in 1910 Pope Pius X decreed the age be lowered to seven. Thus, children over seven can immediately receive communion after baptism. Youth from ages seven to seventeen may be encouraged to receive confirmation first, and adult converts may be required to conduct confession before their first communion. See <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10quam.htm> for more information.

GBooker Uh huh, we did our first communion then.

BMiddlebooks Okay, because I know they've changed that [unintelligible].

GBooker Uh-huh, yeah because if you were very, very small, like six or seven years old, they had the big thing with the white veils and everything. But if you were a little older, you didn't necessarily have to go through that First Communion [ceremony]. You just got your first communion after your baptism.

BMiddlebrooks Okay. Thank you so much for interviewing with us today.

[End of interview]