

Geraldine Berry

Hillsborough Remembers

Geraldine Berry is a former elementary school teacher. She lives in Bealsville, a historically African American community in rural eastern Hillsborough County. After the start of World War II, Mrs. Berry and her husband worked in the phosphate mines in Polk County. She relates her experiences from the perspective of a woman working to fill a job vacated by a man gone off to war. She talks about her life following World War II and later, as a teacher, during the 60's.

WWII
At Home & Abroad

Stephanie Huffstutter: My name is Stephanie Huffstutter (**SH**) and I will be interviewing Geraldine Berry (**GB**) on November 29, 1999 in Plant City, Florida, at Bealsville Historical Site.

Geraldine Berry, What year were you born in?

Geraldine Berry: Polk County-

SH: What was the date?

GB: Bartow, 1921.

SH: When you started teaching, how old were you?

GB: 40 years old.

SH: What made you want to go into teaching?

GB: It was a dream I had had for many years. The opportunity came that I was able to attend Junior College in St. Petersburg, and I took advantage of it.

SH: Yeah that's great. And, you started teaching at what school?

GB: Glover Elementary School.

SH: And you said it was fifth grade that you started teaching.

GB: Fifth grade reading [pause]

SH: In World War II, do you remember where you were when you found out about the bombing at Pearl Harbor?

GB: I was at home, I think it was on a Sunday morning.

SH: What was your reaction to that, and your family's reaction?

GB: It was scary.

SH: Yeah, and what job did you have during World War II?

GB: I worked for a company called Ninety-one, in Polk County, a phosphate company.

SH: Did you start working there before the war started or after the war started?

GB: After the war started.

SH: What were you doing before the war started?

GB: Housewife, and farm a little, with my husband.

SH: Did you notice a big change in just the community as a whole after the war started?

GB: The community had a little growth, there were some opportunities for people to get jobs.

SH: Is that how you started working at the Phosphate mines?

GB: Yes, the phosphate mines.

SH: Right. Do you have any stories of people you knew that were in World War II-[pause]-your husband wasn't, was he?

GB: Not really.

SH: Your father was in World War II, right? (Geraldine Berry agrees) Did you have any children of your own?

GB: No, no children.

SH: You were married, and your husband was he involved with the war at all, like was he . . .

GB: He was working in the phosphate mines also.

SH: Was your home life effected by the war, you guys got different jobs obviously.

GB: Not really.

[Pause]

SH: What did you do for leisure time? Like, before or after working at the phosphate mines?

GB: Church was one of my major outlets, and then we would attend movies and other activities, like football games and basketball games.

SH: Right. When you found out about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, were you for or against the United States going into the war?

GB: I don't really remember my reactions, but I am almost positive I was in accord with the United States getting involved.

SH: Do you have any particular memories of how the war effected Plant City, or Florida? [Pause] Besides, well, there were more opportunities to get jobs.

GB: Yeah there were better chances of getting jobs at that particular time, cause the men were gone, and the women had to, you know, replace them.

SH: Was there like a higher salary during the war?

GB: They were a little better, salaries were better than they were prior to the war.

SH: Yeah, oh, can you tell me about ration coupons and how they were used?

GB: They were, not too bad, once you learned the procedure . . .

SH: I have no idea . . . [they share laughter] . . . what was the procedure?

GB: Well at that time you, if I remember well, you had to have, according to the number of members in your family, you would get a certain number of stamps, if you had children you would get more than a family with no children.

[Interruption-someone enters room]

SH: Okay, so you would get them according to your family size and you would get them-

GB: Where there were two people in your family you would not get as many stamps as the people with maybe . . . five in family.

SH: So did that effect you and your husband with only having two . . .

GB: We were able to survive.

SH: Well that's good! [Laughter from both]

GB: We were able to survive.

SH: Did the prices of everyday things like food, go up during the war? [Muffled voice]

GB: I really don't remember . . . I think you could do a lot more with the few dollars you had than you can really do with money today-the prices were a little higher during the war, but not to the extent that it placed a burden on you.

SH: Right. [Small pause] How long did you work in the phosphate mines?

GB: Two and a half years.

SH: So, you stopped during the war?

GB: After the war was over. They just . . . men were coming back home and then they began to hire more men, and women were dismissed.

SH: When you worked there, what did you do?

GB: I operated a motor in what you call a pit, and it pumped the phosphate to a certain plant and you had to monitor that machinery.

SH: Wow . . . did you like it, necessarily?

GB: I enjoyed it very much.

SH: Did your husband do the same thing as you?

GB: He was in a different company, and his job was different from mine.

SH: When the war was over, did he continue working in the phosphate mines?

GB: (agreeing sound) Until he retired.

SH: Were there like any restrictions on social life during the war, cause I know things were a lot different back then than they are now. [Pause] Socially, just like, going out and stuff.

GB: Hmm, I don't recall. [Pause] Working procedures made it different, cause you know you were making hours that you might have been doing other things.

SH: Were there things that your husband could do socially that you

couldn't do just because you were a women, back then?

GB: I am almost positive it was, I don't recall.

SH: Right. So, your husband wasn't affected by the war as, say in other families?

GB: Not really.

SH: Right, do you know of any-like what was the one way that sticks out in your mind as affecting you the most, like was it the ration coupons or-

GB: Well, I guess the hours spent working away from home when I had been used to being home at all times.

SH: Did you see it necessary to get a job or was it something you wanted to do?

GB: It was a new experience [muffled comments] and I just liked the idea of being involved in different . . . and then the finance was kinda healthy.

SH: Yeah, [laughter] When you got into teaching, did the education system change, before the war to after the war-was it harder or easier for you to get into teaching?

GB: I, it was quite a few years after the war when I went into education, so I really don't know what went on earlier.

SH: So, did you know, have any friends or anything that were involved with the war at all?

GB: I had some relatives . . . nephews, cousins that went to the service during that time . . . but it was, you know, no immediate effect on us, because we didn't have anyone

out of our home, but we were very sympathetic to people who had children going to and from the service.

SH: Was there any reason your husband wasn't involved with the war at all?

GB: He was drafted but, at the time, I think the recruiting was [muffled words] and he didn't have to serve, he went to camp.

SH: When he went to camp, did you think he was going to have to go to war? Was that a scary experience for you?

GB: Yeah, I am real thankful that he didn't have to go.

SH: How long was he away at camp?

GB: Oh, just like a week or so.

SH: What was it like for him?

GB: It was, the experience was not the best cause I think they were anticipating coming home earlier and some of them were beginning to run out of money [small laughter] So it wasn't the best experience but they made it back home safely.

SH: Was your husband scared of having to go into the war?

GB: No, he made himself contend, that whatever would happen would happen.

SH: So, if he had been drafted into the war, he would have been okay with that?

GB: He had made up in his mind that if he had to go he would just go.

SH: I bet you were happy he didn't have to go.

GB: Yes, I was. **SH:** When you started teaching, were your students too young to know about the war, or how did you go about explaining it to them?

GB: I don't remember them being too concerned about the war, fifth graders didn't care too much about the war I guess.

SH: When you traveled a lot, you traveled after the war or before the war?

GB: It was after, matter of fact, after I retired from teaching I did most of my traveling.

SH: So it was too far away for you to, when you go to different regions, like, were they affected any differently than Florida?

GB: I don't think war was anything in the back of your mind when I traveled.

SH: What places did you travel to?

GB: Oh, I had the opportunity to visit over into Canada, and out west, and Salt Lake City, out in Kentucky and the Amish country, Yellow Stone Park . . . quite a few places I had the opportunity to visit. And then on the East Coast, I went into New York, New Jersey, places of that sort.

SH: What was your fondest memory of that?

GB: I really enjoyed going to Yellowstone Park, cause we had read about it in Social Studies-

SH: Oh, when you were teaching.

GB: And, it was a place I thought I would never have the opportunity to visit, it was quite interesting . . . and also Mt. Rushmore. But we did have a

scary experience at Mt. Rushmore, cause when we arrived there, there was a huge fire nearby and immediately they started rushing people out to get out of the area. So we had to rush to the hotel and get out of danger. And, catch the bus, and we rode for I guess three hours or more until we were out of the danger area.

SH: Wow! So, did you get to go back and see Mt. Rushmore?

GB: No we didn't go back! But we had enough time to see some of the attraction, the faces of the presidents . . . and I really didn't want to go back!

[Laughter]

SH: Yeah, I wouldn't either! So the war started in 1939 and you graduated in what year?

GB: 1939.

SH: Right as the war was starting?

GB: Well it was the 1940's when they bombed Pearl Harbor, and I had just married that year.

SH: You got married in 1940?

GB: 1940.

SH: So, do you remember what your husband . . . did you and your husband talk about the bombing at Pearl Harbor?

GB: Oh, we were all excited about it. You know, we didn't know what affect it would have on us. And being a married couple you had a lot of reservations.

SH: Like, what kind of-what do you mean by reservations?

GB: Well, wondering if he would have to go and what would be the outcome.

SH: Did you notice, we saw a picture of a display in a store using the War to promote different things, like . . .

[muffled words]

GB: My memory doesn't go that far back.

SH: Not a problem.

GB: I don't remember.

SH: You just remember being excited about Pearl Harbor and stuff.

GB: Yeah, and you know, there were really a shortage of men on the jobs, and this is how we came about getting women to work on the phosphate mines.

SH: Did you, or did anyone you know work in the phosphate mines with you, or the other jobs because of the shortage of men?

GB: There were quite a few ladies. One lady that worked with me from this area, well, two of them because my sister-in-law worked at the same mine that I worked and then there was another lady but they're both deceased now.

SH: You felt more appreciated during the war because you got to work and that's something you've never experienced before, so you felt like . . .

GB: Well, I think so. I think it gave you a feeling that you were important to society.

SH: Do you think that if the war had not happened that you would have had

the experience to work in the phosphate mines?

GB: During this particular time, yes. But, back then that may have opened the door . . . because now women are getting jobs everywhere. **SH:** Um, lets see . . . When you started, you started teaching in 1940 . . . no?

GB: I married in 1940, I started teaching in 1962.

SH: And you taught some social studies at your school?

GB: Yes.

SH: Did you teach about the war?

[Overlapping muffled words]

GB: Well, according to what was in the textbook we talked about it.

SH: Did you notice a difference in what was in the textbook and what you experienced?

GB: Well, by my husband not being an active part of the war per say, I didn't have too much open experience with the war, so, really I guess they went by what was in the book.

SH: Your overall experience with the war wasn't a bad one or a good one . . . it was . . .

GB: An in-between. You know, we knew the war was going on, we knew there were certain things funny . . . for example the rationing of gas. That was something I had forgotten about.

SH: Ok, can you tell me about the rationing of gas . . . like, how was that?

GB: Well, you would have coupons I think we did . . . I don't remember

now, but I just remember you could only get so much gas at a particular time.

SH: Did that have a major influence-

GB: It didn't effect us that much because we didn't do that much traveling . . . we lived in this area and we were only like seven or eight miles from Plant City.

SH: So you didn't have to [interrupt by Berry] . . . There wasn't a large demand for gas.

GB: Right.

SH: How long did you . . . [pause] . . . You lived in Bealsville for how long?

GB: We moved here in 1943 and been here ever since.

SH: Have you noticed from then to now major changes . . . obviously its grown a lot.

GB: Ooh, yes. Because, the roads were nothing but dirt roads at that particular time, and cars would get stuck in front of my house. [Laughter] Cause I live right across the street from here, and those ruts, especially when it rains-

SH: Oh, it would get muddy.

GB: Muddy . . . and there were few houses. And the first building of this school was just that wooden structure, the rest was built you know, in later years . . . this part, and that wing over there. So, all that was built after we moved here. And we used to come whenever they would get out of water at the school, and we would furnish water.

SH: Oh really.

GB: They would come over and get water at my house.

SH: Wow . . . a lot has changed since then obviously. Do you think that, you said that you were involved in your church in stuff, were there any particular like . . . when there were a lot of men away at war did your church focus on that at all?

GB: Well, we had, I was a member at [Muffled word] at that particular time and we had a lot of older men that were deacons and then we had some that were young boys that were not old enough to go to war. So really I don't think it had that much effect on the church. **SH:** You don't remember any local people, friends and family that you've lost in the war.

GB: I don't know, I can't remember any family-[pause] I really don't, I can't remember.

SH: That's a good thing.

GB: I don't have any particular family that knows someone in the war at that time, you know, as nearly as I can remember.

SH: Right. You said your father was in World War I.

GB: Yes, but that was before-

SH: Before your time . . .

GB: Yes that was before my time, I was born after he came back from the service.

SH: What year did he die?

GB: My father died in 1969.

SH: Right, he got to live through WW I and WW II. Do you know how he felt about WW II after going to WW I?

GB: Actually, I don't think it bothered him too much cause he was over the age of being drafted.

SH: With his experience So you were born after he came back from WW I?

GB: Right, because I think WW I was in what-1918?

SH: Yeah, something like that.

GB: And I was born in 1921 so . . .

SH: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

GB: No brothers, no sisters. Well, I did have a sister that was older than I did but she died at a young age, so I was the only child for a long time.

SH: Did your work that you got at the phosphate mine change any of your social activities, I know you had to work long hours, but did it change, like, the way you use your free time?

GB: Well, it did effect my church activities some, because I was getting in at like five o'clock in the morning and church was around, well Sunday school, cause that was one of my main things, Sunday school. And, when I'd get home I'd be so tired and sleepy so I would miss Sunday school, and sometimes I would make it to morning worship.

SH: So what were your hours that you worked in the phosphate mines?

GB: Well sometimes I think we had to work like 12 hours, like five until five in the morning.

SH: Wow, so you had to work overnight. Did your husband have the same hours as you?

GB: No he didn't have the same hours, but he changed shifts . . .

SH: So you guys were together?

GB: mm-hmm.

SH: Did most women work the nighttime shift.

GB: Well, most of us were women.

SH: Cause most of the men were at the war. [Pause] Was segregation more or less of an issue during the war?

GB: It was very obvious during the time . . . because I do remember even some of the guys that went to the service talked about how they were segregated and they were not treated equally in some instances. I guess overall, it was a lot different, because I remember in the early 60's when I was going from here to Tallahassee for school and I would stop at a station and they would tell you there was no restroom for blacks.

SH: Oh really?

GB: And, if they had one, it would be way around the back and you had to wade through the bushes to get to the restrooms . . . and I remember when I was in Tallahassee in school, at the same time, traveling down the highway, segregation was really out, way out. Because you had to go around the back to go to the restroom and certain places if you stopped and wanted something to eat you were told that you had to go around to the back.

SH: When you started teaching did you have to deal with that issue in your schools?

GB: When I first started teaching it was still, segregation was still outstanding. A lot of the materials and

books we used were hand-me-downs. You'd get books and some of the pages were torn out.

SH: Wow, at what time did you notice that it was finally getting better?

GB: Well, in the mid sixties . . . wait, no, things were getting a little better, I'd say in the latter part of the sixties. I was transferred over to Brooker in Brandon from this school here in, I think the first year was in '70 . . . '71, I think. But what happened was they integrated the teachers before they integrated the students.

SH: Oh, so that was interesting.

GB: Mm-hmm. That's the first year I went to Brooker I had all white students.

SH: Well that was obviously a different experience for you.

GB: Well, I guess it didn't matter to me that much because I love teaching and I just was concerned about helping people.

SH: Did you feel like you were respected less at that school?

GB: No the children were great. The hate is taught anyway.

SH: I guess it was---

GB: I taught with my children and I would give them a picture, you know a mental picture, indicating that all babies whether they are black or white . . . they cry, they wet, and they have the same characteristics, and they love. And the only time you find hate is taught. If a child comes out of a family, and they say I don't associate with a child because he is white . . . that is going to grow up in the child. So I always try to establish the fact

with children that people are people, regardless the fact of the color. So, I enjoyed it, I have a picture of a young lady's family in my house presently that was in my third 5th grade class.

SH: Wow, she is all grown up now.

GB: She's grown up and she has two little boys, they're adopted kids. But, we have had a relationship from that year to adulthood.

SH: I guess, is that like your finest moment of teaching, just the relationships that you grew with people.

GB: And see the next year after they integrated the teachers, they started trickling in a few blacks. Because, we were paired up with Progress Village and they started bussing black students in, and sometimes you would have . . . it's almost like it is now, you would have maybe five black students in your class, and the majority of them are white, or Hispanic.

SH: You teach Sunday school now, you volunteer and do that now right?

GB: Oh yes, I teach adults.

SH: You teach adults at Sunday school? Oh, okay. What is the difference from teaching Sunday school now, then maybe Sunday school was back before?

GB: Well, I think Sunday school is more advanced now because people have gone to training. I have had an opportunity to go to a place called Lake Wales, up above like, Leesburg, and I have taken courses in teaching Sunday school. So, you know, back then when we first started out you taught I guess by what was taught to you around in your immediate area. But, now we have training classes and all that. Just like you go to school to

teach public schools, you go and you learn to teach at a children's, youth and all of that in the Sunday school, so you had a wide experience in teaching.

SH: Was there a time period where you weren't working in the phosphate mines and you weren't teaching? What were you doing in that time period?

GB: Well, earlier I hadn't even gone to college when I was working in the mine. That was an after experience. It was around '57, I think it was when I attended Junior College in St. Petersburg, and at that time we didn't have the University of South Florida, we didn't have any junior colleges in this area. I think the only college that I was knowledgeable of was the University of Tampa, I think that was in effect then. So, I commuted from here to St. Petersburg daily to get an education.

SH: Wow, to go to college. Did you know immediately that you wanted to get an education to become a teacher? Is that what you wanted to do?

GB: Well, I had sat on my porch and, seen the people going to and from the school over there, and I said, "I am going to work at that school someday".

SH: Wow and you just went out and did it.

GB: I just let that roll around in my mind and luckily this was the first place that I worked.

SH: Wow, so it was a dream come true. What did your husband think about you going to be a teacher?

GB: My husband was great . . . because he was the one who had to pay the expenses because I didn't have no grants and no help. [Unclear words] He was my motivator, he was

my encouragement, and he was everything.

SH: Wow . . . (pause). As far as the war goes, when you look back at all the events that took place in WW II, even though it didn't affect your family that much, is there anything that you think that you would change? If even not about WW II, about your life during the war? Anything that you wish had happened or hadn't happened?

GB: I really . . . the only thing I think could have been better was the relationship between nationalities could have been better and still can be better. Because you have a lot of hate, even today. That is unnecessary because God made all of us.

SH: I wish everyone could think like that.

GB: That's right! He made every one of us, and we have got to answer to him for our deeds done here on earth, believe it or not. So, if I could do anything about changes I would really like to see people love people and treat people as human beings, all people. Even the bad ones deserve love.

SH: I am sure you affected that a lot by teaching it to your students.

GB: Well I tried to steer that in the minds of the kids that I worked with, not because of how they look, or what they wear, you love them because they are humans just like you are. The same God that made them made you.

SH: Okay, thank you so much for everything.