Rubie Bond, Oral History, and the African-American Experience in Wisconsin

A lesson plan related to this material on the Wisconsin Historical Society website.

Transcript (5 pages) "Interview with Rubie Bond"

Primary Source Oral History Transcript: Bond, Rubie. Interview. Tape Recording, 1976. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Collection. Beloit College Archives, Beloit, Wisconsin.

I'm wondering why your family decided to leave Mississippi. How was that decision made and why was it made?
Well, the North offered better opportunities for blacks. John McCord, who was a distant cousin, came and explained about conditions, here and so my father and mother decided to come.

What did John McCord tell them?
Only of working conditions and the education for children, for young people, was better than what we had in Pontotoc. Those things I remember.

Fairbanks Morse had sent him down, is that right?
Yes. His parents lived right across the road. We had a highway that divided the farm that we lived on and where they lived. Of course, we've known him and, as I say, his father was a cousin of my mother's.

I've heard that recruiters were often in danger in Mississippi if they came down to get workers for northern companies. Do you recall him ever expressing any fear about this job that he was doing?
Yes. I know that many of the blacks would leave the farms at night and walk for miles. Many of them caught the train to come North, come to Beloit at a little place called Ecru, Mississippi. Usually they would leave with just the clothes on their backs. Maybe the day before they would be in the field working and the plantation owner wouldn't even know that they planned to go and the next day he would go and the little shanty would be empty. These people would have taken off and come up here.

Was there a fear that the plantation owner wouldn't let them go or that they couldn't leave?
That's very true. They wouldn't. Plantation owners had much to lose. These people were illiterate and they had to depend on the plantation owner. He would give them so much flour for use during the year, cornmeal or sugar or that sort of thing and then at the end of the year you would go to settle up with him and you would always be deeply in debt to him. That was his way of keeping people. You never got out of debt with him. And that's the way it was with my dad and this fellow, Mr. Stiggel.

So, many of the people who left were legally in debt and could have been forced to stay in Mississippi? Did you know of any instances where that happened?
No, because they would leave at night. They would leave when the plantation owner wasn't around. Of course, they needed these workers to work the cotton fields, that sort of thing. But many of them left under those circumstances.

What about this decision being made in your family? How was the decision arrived at and over what time span, and was there a lot of talk in the family about "Should we go north?" and that sort of thing, or was it a cut-and-dried decision? Who helped to make it? Do you have any recollections about that?
Well, that's almost sixty years ago, and I'm sure my mother and dad discussed it fully, but so many of their friends and relatives had come North. And this Mr. Wetherall, he hated to lose my dad, but on the other hand, he felt that if he could better himself by coming, why, go. You're entitled to it. He was that type of person. I can remember him coming over to tell us goodbye the day we left.

You seem to have had quite a different situation then from many of those who left in terms of the attitude that your boss took toward you.
Yes, yes, the last place where my dad lived, [the owner] was very different.

But I mean, even specifically in relation to this matter of leaving, he didn't seem to offer resistance like many of the owners did.
No. No threats or anything like that. No.

Were there others who had that experience? I wonder whether others left easily too, like your father apparently did--or relatively easily.
There might have been some. I can remember my father telling me about one family that came to Beloit, the Gradys. Mr. Grady had already come to Beloit. He worked and saved money to send back for his family. The postmaster, I guess, wasn't going to let him have his money, wasn't going to let his family have it, and somebody that Mrs. Grady knew, some white person, she went to see them and they went over and advised this man that he was breaking the law. He should let her have this money to come to her husband. Things like that.

Was it more typical for--
To show resistance? Yes. Yes.

You seem to be quite clear on the point that your mother would have participated in this decision. Is that right?
Well, mother and dad, they usually discussed decisions that were to be made.

I'm wondering about the role of women. What do you remember being the role of women in making this decision and carrying on the move?
Well, I think that probably blacks in this country would have died out if it hadn't been for the part that women played because men were, well, the attitude of many toward black men was that they were lower or worse than animals. And, it was a role that mothers played in keeping them alive and then providing them food and that sort of thing for their families because black men have had a hard time coming along.

Would you say that was particularly true in Mississippi?
I think all over the South. All over the South. Yes. I never thought of this before, but perhaps the move up North was almost more important to the man, was almost a form of liberation for the man more than for the woman.

What do you recall along those lines? I know this is a very difficult thing to reach back sixty years for, but if you have any recollections along those lines.
Not too much. I do know that many men came North and got employment and would save and send back for their families. Other than that I don't think I'm qualified to [say].

Now, as a young girl, did you agree with this decision to move North? Did you think it was a good idea?
Yes. I think I did. Because even as a child I think I was pretty sensitive to a lot of the inequalities that existed between blacks and whites, and I know that after we came here my mother and dad used to tell me that if I went back to Mississippi, they would hang me to the first tree.

Did you regret leaving friends, for example, or anything like that?
No, most of my friends had come North. I did have one friend that remained in Mississippi, and she was able to go on and get an education, and she taught.

You know a move like that is really quite an adventure for a young person. You were how old?
I was ten years old. That's all.

How did the move seem to you? How did you feel about it?
Well, I don't know. I guess I've always been one to sort of go off on the deep end, so I think it was an adventure for me. You see something different. I remember very well when the train crossed the Mississippi, I think in Memphis, Tennessee, all of this water on each side of the track. All you could do is think of "what if this train would fall in?" and I also remember seeing the soldiers. This was the beginning of World War I. And they were guarding the bridges and that sort of thing to prevent sabotage.

What year was this?
1917.

What role did the church play in your early life in Mississippi?
Well, I think the church played a very important part in the life of all blacks in Mississippi because it was religious center as well as social. That was one place that they could go and meet and discuss their problems. Relax. So just the--their big picnics and big church meetings they used to have. I might tell about the type of house we lived in. We lived in a little three-room house. There were two big rooms with fireplace in between…. the--fireplace on each side of the partition, and one was where we lived and the other my mother kept for company, and I remember the embroidered bedspreads and pillow shams and that sort of thing that she had in there. And the third little room was the kitchen, where we had the old wood stove, and my sister and I would gather up the wood for cooking. Whenever they would have one of these big church meetings, usually, some minister or some delegate or somebody from the church would come to our house and they would have this one room that we were permitted to peep in once a week. But the church did, it served as a gathering place for people and they had many union meetings for example between mostly Methodist and Baptist faiths.

What exactly do you mean by union meetings?
I mean the two different groups would go in together for some function.

I'm wondering now about your first impressions of Beloit. You moved almost a thousand miles north to a new community, and I'm wondering what your first impressions were.
Well, I can remember how cold it was when we got off the train at the Northwestern Station. We came here in April, and my grandfather was supposed to have found a place for us to live. We got here and found we had no place to go, so we were carried to a place on Pleasant Street, across from the college campus. It was a big storefront then. There's a little church building there now, but that's the first place that we lived when we came to Beloit here. Two or three days after we came we had snow, and of course it was cold. Then we went to school. We started to school. A strong school and the principal's name at that time was a Mrs. Horseman, and I remember they put me back a grade because I didn't have art or music or something like that. But I was much farther ahead in mathematics and that sort of thing than my classmates were. That I remember and some of my classmates--Isaac Buckridge and Cecil Carroll and his sister, Lois, and Don Benwort were some of the classmates that I remember.

Did you say you were ahead of your classmates? How did that happen, because you described a school in Mississippi that wasn't very good?
That is true. But one of the things that they emphasized was reading, writing, and mathematics. Those were three important things, and we worked on those in school and as I told you before this Mr. Wetherall had given us these schoolbooks and my mother encouraged us to go ahead with these things.

Given the opportunities that were available in the North, why did anyone decide to stay in Mississippi?
Well, I think that it was a lack of knowledge of about what the North had to offer until these agents came there to get them to come up here to work.

You were leaving at least a few of your relatives and friends behind. How did you feel about those people that you left behind and weren't ever going to see again?
Well, I think it comes back to a matter of trying to exist, really, and trying to improve your own lot.

Were there any differences that you noticed between those people who left and those people who stayed?
No. Not really.

Were the people who left more ambitious or anything like that?
No. I think not, because many of those who stayed had either begun to acquire a small plot of land or something like that and there were black tradesmen, like I say, the carpenters and the masons and that sort of thing, who had been able to improve their own lot in Mississippi. And many of those stayed and some came North. Most of these people, I think, that came North at first were people who hadn't been able to acquire anything.

I have heard it said that black people came to Beloit in very unfavorable circumstances, that they were herded on to trains and that sort of thing. What do you remember about the actual train ride from Pontotoc to Beloit?
I don't remember a situation like that. Of course, it may have been because of the fact that we paid our own way, you know. One thing I do recall, I think it was when we got in Illinois. See, before we came, got to Illinois, black people always rode in the front coach up near the engine of the train so they would get all the soot and dust and what have you, and then when we reached Illinois, if you wanted to change you could go anyplace on the train you wanted to. So they had this Jim Crow section that we rode on until we reached Illinois.

Was the Jim Crow car a regular train car? How would you describe it in relation to the other cars?
I guess you would you say it was the coach. They had coaches. Deluxe sections of the train.

Now, as far as you recall, were most of those who came up at the time you did able to pay their own way, or did most rely on Fairbanks Morse money, I guess, would be the alternative?
Well, I think those that came along with us--husbands had already come to Beloit and saved enough to send back to their families. But many of the men, they were probably the ones that were herded on trains and brought here and they worked at Fairbanks and paid back their transportation and that sort of thing and saved up to send for their families.

Did your dad come up before the rest of the family?
No. We all came at the same time. We all came at the same time.

Was that a typical situation? I think you indicated that the man often came up early.
Yes, that was true. Many of the husbands and fathers came up first. And then they would send back for their families.

Just to get the record straight, as far as you recall, what would have been the most common situation?
The manner, I think, where the husband would come first.

I'm wondering about African-American businesses in and around Beloit.
Well, at that time, there were no blacks in any business, that is, any white business or anything like that. There were no clerks in the retail stores, not even stock boys in grocery stores and that sort of thing. Of course that changed in later years. As a matter of fact right now many grocery stores that I know black people patronize, they don't have [black] checkout girls, for example or stock boys. In the early twenties there were a few black businesses here. There was a tailor and a dry cleaning establishment, and there was a shoe repair shop that I recall.

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See a lesson plan related to this material on the Wisconsin Historical Society website.

Student Worksheet

Name_____

1. Briefly summarize the reasons why the White family moved to Wisconsin.

2. What year did Rubie White's family move to Wisconsin? What was happening in the United States at this time? Why were employment recruiters visiting Mississippi?

3. How did plantation owners exercise such a high degree of control over workers with the sharecropper system?

4. Why might skilled African Americans have decided to stay in the South?

5. How would you characterize Rubie Bond's overall attitude toward life in Wisconsin?

6. According to Bond, what were some of the differences between her education in Pontotoc and her education in Beloit?

7. Carefully study the interviewer's questions. Can you identify any strategy? Explain.

8. As you read the transcript of this oral history, consider some of the strengths and weaknesses of oral history as a source.

9. Why would a topic such as the migration of poor African Americans from the rural South to industrial cities be important to document with oral history?