

Betty Williams (125 Amory Street)

Interviewed by Ibrahim Diarra and Christian Tschibelu (2003)

My name is Betty Laverne Williams. I don't have a nickname, everyone just calls me Betty. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia on September 25, 1945. Atlanta's in the south, so it's a lot warmer there than it is here, but I grew up in Roxbury, so I'm use to the cold weather. It seems like it was cold here a lot! When I was growing up, I lived with my parents and my brothers and one sister. We had a large family. And we had a dog ... a mutt. His name was Lucky. We didn't have a car, so I went everywhere by walking. I didn't even take the bus that much.

Music? I like R&B, country and gospel, especially, but I like all kinds of music. I do have some favorite songs ... in different kinds of music. Like in gospel music, I like the Wynans. In country music I like Patsy Kline. In R&B I like Al Green. And, in classical music I really like Handel's Messiah. I really like that.

My favorite colors are blue and green. My favorite pastimes? When I was younger, I loved to dance. And now I love to read ... I'll read anything, even the dictionary. My favorite season is the Fall because it's not too hot, and it's not cold. I don't like the cold. And the Fall is pretty intense. I can't walk much because of my physical condition. I live here because I have a disability. I was born in 1945, so I'm not elderly yet. Sometimes I feel a little sad because I can't do a lot of things that others my age can do.

When I was a child the first thing I'd do when I got home from school was take off my school clothes and do my homework. Then I would baby sit my younger brothers. When I was really young, I had one friend I really liked a lot; I called him my "boyfriend". And then, as I got older and I moved, I had one friend who was my best friend. I didn't have a whole lot of friends ... I had the same friends in high school, but we didn't go to the same schools. Yes, I still have some of those same friends. I don't see them very much, though.

My childhood was a lot different from today. There wasn't a lot of fear. You didn't need to lock your doors. Kids would play out in the street on their own. Now it's a lot different. Kids can't play in the street because they might get hit by a car. You can't let them out of your sight because someone might snatch them. You know, there's a lot more fear. And forget about leaving your doors unlocked. There weren't so many cars in the street back then, but they still had to teach you to look both ways before crossing the street.

There was more time to play and not be worried. And, back then, everyone knew each other, so the people around you weren't strangers, they were the neighbors that you knew. Nowadays you don't really know your neighbors, and you don't have that much to do with the neighbors because it could be some "crackpot" or drug addict. I don't know! I feel sorry for a lot of the kids these days. What we didn't have then that they

have now is too much information — about things that they don't need to know.

When I was young we played a lot of games ... hopscotch, ball, tag, hide and seek ... mostly chasing each other around. You had games like "cigarette" where someone threw up the ball and called out the name of a brand of cigarettes, and the one who had picked that brand was "it". The games involved a lot of running around and physical activities ... We played cowboys, catch, racing, stuff like that. That's why there are a lot of kids that have problems with their weight today because they don't get that much exercise or physical activity.

When I was little, I played with my brothers and sister and the other neighborhood kids. Did I ever get in trouble for something that I did? Yes! But sometimes I'd get in trouble and I didn't even know what I did. The thing that I remember the most was that I stole some dimes. And I got punished for it. When I was stealing the dimes, I felt so big, and so sneaky. I had to climb up on top of the counter and reach up to where I saw my mother hide the money. Then I would get a dime and go to the store and spend it. The next week, I'd want something else, so I'd take another dime. But one day my mother found out, and that was the end of that! I got "switched," and I'll never forget it.

I went to the Boston Public Schools. The school that I went to at first was a good school for me. But then my parents moved to another neighborhood where I went to another school. The teacher in my class at that school was very prejudiced. She sat all of the Black kids next to the blackboard, and the White kids next to the window. And when I did class work in school, she would give me D's and E's— failing marks— without reason. And my mother would say "What is this?" So my mother told me to take it back to the teacher and ask her why she gave me that mark, and I did it. I was scared, but I did it. I remember taking it back home to my mother, and telling her that the teacher told me that her neck hurt — this is what she told me! I think she probably meant I was a pain in the neck. But my mother took me out of that school and moved me over to my grandmother's house. My grandmother put me in school there, and it was a different story. At that school I had very good teachers. There were still a few teachers who were prejudiced, it wasn't like the other school.

When I was in high school, I took the "general course," that's what they use to call it back then. They had the academic and the general course, and since I didn't think I was going to go to college, I took the general course. It was more basic than the academic course which had languages and other courses. I use to play basketball in school. I wasn't that good at it, but I played. I also played softball. In junior high I was on the girls sports team, but when I got to high school, I didn't play. Today I like to watch football on TV ... and golf, too. They're different, but I like them both.

I was a young girl in the 1950's. There was a lot of time to play. When I became a teenager, my family was a little bit on the poor side, so when other people had refrigerators, we still had an ice box. And we still had a stove that would burn wood or coal. And we had to do our laundry in the sink. We had a big old sink with two

sections, one deep and one shallow, and we would wash the clothes in the sink with a scrub board. It seemed like the clothes would never stop coming. I had a lot of brothers and sisters who were younger than me, so I was the one who had to do most of the laundry. There were no Pampers, only cloth diapers. I never wanted to wash the diapers, so one time I 'forgot' to wash the diapers. I went to bed, and in the middle of the night my mother came in and said "get up and wash those diapers." I was so sleepy, but she made me get up and wash them. It taught me to take care of my responsibilities, and that playing when you have work to do is not a smart thing. Do your work first, then you can play.

When I was growing up, my neighborhood was not very mixed. At that time, most of the White people were moving away, and my neighborhood was mostly Black people. It was like that for many years. In our neighborhood, everybody got along. Kids all played together. But as I got older, more and more kids moved away.

As a teenager, my life was the same as when I was younger. I had some fun. I didn't date, but I use to go to dances that we had at school. And those were mostly girls dancing together. The boys didn't dance much. And in high school I played on the sports team— mostly softball, so we would go around to other schools and play their girls teams.

My parents wouldn't let me stay out after dark when I was a teenager. I would be down the street talking with a friend, and as soon as it got dark I would hear my mother call me: "Betty ... come home." We could go over to our friends houses, or around the corner in the neighborhood, but it just happened that one girl whose house everyone liked to hang out at was right down the street from my house, so my mother could call me home whenever she wanted me. When we hung around together as teens, it was mostly talking, telling jokes, discussing clothes, boys, how school was, who was doing what they weren't suppose to be doing ... like when somebody got pregnant. I think I had learned most of my lessons by the time I was a teenager, so I didn't get into trouble. But one day I just decided to quit school. I didn't feel like it was doing anything for me, so I just stopped going. Then my mother made me get a job, so I didn't finish school.

Some of the things going on in the world right now make me sad. Last week I was listening to the news, and it made tears come out of my eyes. Because I'm thinking about these people who are in the Army of the United States, and going off half way around the world to do what the President told them to do. Some of them may be killed, and it made me sad. Most of the time when I hear the news, it makes me sad. And sometimes it makes me mad.

What was the biggest adventure in my life? I had an uncle who would take us on trips in his car ... so he took us to Canada, and we went to Niagara Falls, and we went to Philadelphia (where his wife's mother lived), and he took us to Montreal. The best time that I had on one of those trips was when we went to this place called the Mohawk

Trail. I saw the most beautiful scenery, the mountains, the trees and the view enveloped all of this wilderness all around. I will never forget that — it was truly, truly beautiful.

There are a lot of things I wish I had done when I was younger. I would like to have seen more of nature. Spending most of my life in the city isn't what I really wanted. I wish that I had been able to go to the mountains, or maybe take a trip on a boat, but I've never wanted to fly! But I wanted to see things in their natural habitat ... see where people come from, see where an animal lives. Just the couple of trips I took with my uncle and going fishing quite a bit in the little lakes and streams around Massachusetts, those were really fun adventures for me.

What advice could I give? The most important thing to know is that everyone makes mistakes, we're all human, no one is perfect. You can't look down on someone and think you're better than them, you have to give people a chance or the benefit of the doubt. Of course, if he proves that he ain't no good, then you can leave him alone!