

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Beryl Stelmach

Interviewer: Jennifer Kelly and Donna Coombs-Montrose

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Location: Edmonton

Q: Tell us a bit about yourself – where you were born and how you came to Canada.

BS: You want to know where I was born. Well I was born in Mt. Pleasant. It's just on top of Stony Hill. It's in Tangiers, Jamaica. My grandmother was from Guatemala and my grandfather was from Scotland. Most of my family was born in Central America, except my mother. I think she was born in Peru, but I'm not sure. But she went to Jamaica as a child. My father is half Philippine and half Chinese. Oh my god. My mother had 3 of us. My brother is dead now, and I my sister is still alive. I don't really know my mother. My brother and sister told me about her, because they knew her well. She didn't pass away, but she went back to Peru. So my father is in Jamaica, and mostly Kingston, because he was a business man. I went to convent school. My father died in '48, no 46. So I was alone.

Q: What year were you born?

BS: What year was I born? 1924. So I was alone, and I had enough money, and I decided I'm going to go to England. Just get up and go. I didn't know anybody there or anything.

Q: How did you hear about England?

BS: We used to study geography in school. I wouldn't go to America for all the tea in China, because I wasn't brought up with segregation.

So I decided I'd go to England, and I went to Bristol. I came off the ship, which was an aircraft carrier.

I went to Bristol. The ship docked in Liverpool. I came off and took one look around. Father was a businessman and I used to go out with him a lot. The places, you can take one look and know whether you'd want to stay. I didn't like Liverpool.

Q: Were you a teenager then?

BS: No, I was 23. So I called a policeman and explained to him if he could get me a place to stay. He was so impressed, he thought I was so brave, for a woman to just get up and go like that, and he got me a place to stay. After I was there for a little while I decided to get a job. I got a nice job in the paper mills. But that wasn't my style.

Q: That was in Liverpool?

BS: No, Bristol. Then I decided I'd go in for nursing. But it was my intention that when I get to England I go do designing and things like that. But when I got there, it was lopsided. I cried. If I had a ship I could put it in my tears and sail back home. But I persevered. Then I decided, alright, if I'm going to do something like that, I'll have to have something to back me up. So I thought, they were short nurses, very much. I thought, I'll go in for nursing. So I started off in psychiatry, which was very hard. It was very challenging. But I'm glad I started off in that, because then you get to know people, and think. Then after I did it for about a year, I got my holiday and went down to Halfadrist in South Wales. I liked it there. I applied for a job at the hospital to do my general training. The matron said okay, and I was actually accepted right there. So I told her, I have to go back and give my resignation, and I'll come back. And that was it. I live there for 9 years. I liked South Wales very much, I liked the Welsh people. Then after I graduated I made one mistake. I was going further, but I made one mistake. I got married. I wouldn't do it again if I had my life all over. What I wanted, it just stopped. Life was tough, because everything was under ration, and I started keeping a house – washing and cooking. I never used to do it. It was really hard. I had my Tony, and we had what they call a council house. But we didn't have it through the government. My husband used to work for the Steel Company of Wales, and that's how we got a nice 3 bedroom house. It caused such a controversy, because people couldn't understand how just me and my husband and we have a 3 bedroom house, and they have 2 children and they won't give them more than a 1 bedroom. But the house was the Steel Company of Wales house, not the government's house. But just allotted so much. So we bought a little home a little further down the beach. We moved and were living there, doing well. I had some rabbits,

some chickens, doing really well. Then my sister came to visit me from Jamaica. We went out to Cardiff gallivanting. We didn't want to take Tony, so we got a babysitter. When we came down, our house burned down. We didn't have no insurance. In them days we think, oh my house is safe. Of course whatever didn't get destroyed, the firemen destroyed. We scraped up everything together and my sister said, move from this place, let's move into Manchester. Her husband ? and supposed to have a house. So we moved into Manchester. It took 3 or 4 months of communication, and we moved into Manchester, ? and I. Then I started working at a hospital in Eccles, Hope General, and I was doing midwifery.

Q: Do you have training in midwifery?

BS: Yes. Just as the exam time was coming up, I had ?, so I couldn't write the exam. I got fed up. But we had bought a house in Eccles, and I said to my husband, I'm going back to Jamaica, and I'm going to take the 2 children. He said, that would be a good idea. So we went to Jamaica. I went first with the kids. I stayed with a friend. There was this lady that used to look after me when I was young. I phoned her and she started to help me out with the kids. I started working. I worked at the Kingston Public Hospital and then I worked at the ? Rehabilitation. I was offered a wonderful position. That's my second mistake. I should've stayed home. That was the second mistake I made, I shouldn't have left. I regret it until this day. So I decided I'm going to come to Canada.

Q: So you came to Canada from Jamaica?

BS: Yes. I was in Jamaica a couple of years. When my husband and children was in Jamaica, I used to go back and forth to the States. You can make a little extra money there, but that wasn't the point. So I decided we're going to Canada. So we got everything ready, and we have 3 sets of applications: one for me alone, one for my husband alone, and one for the entire family. We submit all 3. To our biggest surprise, we get result within 3 weeks. There was somebody coming to Jamaica to interview. I didn't expect it would be so short. But by this time I suppose they were short of nurses and things like that. So I got out everything, and we decided. We didn't know where we were going. All we'd heard about was Toronto, Ontario. We got off at Toronto, Ontario. My sister then in New York had a friend in Toronto, and she told him about us coming. They met us and we went to her place. We were there for about 2 months. Then my husband started working, and I got a job. Now we have to look for somewhere to live.

Q: What sort of job did your husband do?

BS: He got a job as maintenance with these people that make tractors, Massey Fergusson. But poor thing, it was November, and when he started the job he wasn't used to the cold. He was in Jamaica 5 years. And he got sick. When he got better he applied at Toronto General, and got a job there in maintenance. He stayed there for about 10 years. Me, I was running around. I worked at Whitney Psychiatric Hospital, I worked at Scarborough General, I was running from hospital to hospital. Simply because, when I came first, they said about 1 year experience. I got my registration, I came exam time so I

wrote the papers and I was lucky, I get it. They talk about 1 year experience, and I like to do everything, I don't specialize. So I went to this hospital and worked on surgery, and when I finished I went to this hospital and worked on orthopedic. When I served my year I go. Because that's what I thought it was. During the time you work and you buy a nice home. We had a nice home there. I used to go to flea markets. Then after I sold out and went to live in Bellevue, just north of Bellevue, and we had a business of our own. It was doing well, but things went sour. I said, I'm going to sell out, split. So we sold out, mutual consent. I said, if we can't agree, it's no good. Better live happy than just living and biting off each other. So I moved and went to Toronto now. I bought myself a high rise condominium, and I went into real estate. I wasn't doing too bad. Then when everything was alright, my husband started dropping around. I said, no, it's finished, no way. I said, I'm a Jamaican woman, I'm not a white woman, I don't support men. We were doing very well, and he came hedging around me. The only thing I can do is move out of here, and I go out to Alberta.

Q: So he was not Jamaican?

BS: No. My husband, his mother was Polish and his father was German or something. But he was nice, he was quiet, he was alright. But things went sour. Once things was sour, don't live unhappy, that's how I believe. Split and be happy. If you're going to be unhappy, be unhappy on your own, don't hear it with nobody. He's still alive. He's alright. Then I move out to Alberta.

Q: What made you choose Alberta?

BS: Because my son was in the army in Germany, and when he came back they sent him out here. So I thought my youngest son will come out here with me. He said yes, and packed and everything, and the last minute. He came out here for a holiday and said he didn't like Alberta.

Q: What year was that?

BS: Oh lord. He came out here. . . before '80. . . Anyhow, my son came out here, maybe early '79. He didn't like it, and then he came back to Toronto. He said he's going a second time again and look around, and he said for some reason he didn't like it. It was bush, this place was bush. Nothing here. All out by ? Manning Freeway is bush, nothing was here.

Q: Was there any Caribbean community here?

BS: I don't know, I really don't know. When they transferred my son here, he had a townhouse out by Londonderry. Londonderry was just about the nicest place. My son told me it was a nice place, but he said, mom, I'm not going out there, I'm going to stay here, because I have a nice job and I'm not going to move. I said, okay. So I move out here and I was with my son for a little while. Then I worked at Oliver. I had a hard time with them there, I don't want to talk about it.

Q: Oliver is...?

BS: The nuthouse. I call it the nuthouse. Everybody in there is nuts. I worked there a year. Then I worked at Charles Camsell, because it's federal. From Charles Camsell I went to Drumheller Penitentiary. I used to work in Toronto Jail too, I did forensic. I used to work at the Don. I was in Toronto, my husband and I did real estate. Then I said, no. that was my line, but it was something to back you up. So I did forensic. I do it at U of T. So when I came out here, the people here working in the prison, they were experienced but didn't study here. So I worked there for a little while and it get me down and I was getting old, so I said it's about time I retire. I took early retirement, and that's it. I'm free, I don't regret it.

Q: Did you meet any other nurses from the Caribbean when you were in Toronto or here in Alberta?

BS: No, but when I was working at Oliver I met a couple but they moved out, they went to BC. I know one that lives here now, but she's going back to Jamaica.

Q: So there were not many nurses from the Caribbean working at the places you worked?

BS: No. Lots of them work in Oliver. When you're a registered nurse and you come out here, they try to tell you that you are federal. Well I've been a registered nurse in Toronto for 18 years. They tried to say that you're federal. So if you're not provincial you cannot

get that pay. I thought, why should I work here for pittance when I can work there for more? So Camsell at the time was federal, so that's why I go to the nut house and the jails and all that. But they give you the runaround here. I don't want to say why, because turn off that thing.

Q: When you were in England, there's 2 types of nursing, different levels?

BS: When I went to England, you had to study for 4 years. You go through everything, and you're registered. When you're registered, that's it for England, Scotland and Wales. But now I heard, but I don't know how true it is, and I hear it recently, that the nurses they give you one nurse to nurse three. Nurse three don't know nothing about nurse one, and so you got to stick it and you're not fully trained for everything. No, I did everything. When I did my training, that's why I liked to move around. Maternity, emergency, everything, OR. They give you a chance to see which one you like best. I did them all. Then when I went to Jamaica, I work in the Kingston Public Hospital in the rehabilitation center. Now the rehabilitation center, the matron there, we got on fine and she liked me. I think the reason why she liked me is because I was punctual. Rain or shine, I never late, and I was punctual. Of course I had a little car, that helps. But most Jamaicans, when they say I come to see you 9 o'clock, you have to ask them, when, tomorrow or the next day? That is very, very bad.

Q: What made you want to leave Jamaica and come back to Canada?

BS: Because of the general situation. There you work like a dog, and you didn't know what... I think the reason why I wanted to leave, I'd stayed away in England for so long and I had changed, but the people didn't change. Then when I went back after 16 years, I just couldn't take it. That's what I believe. After coming here, I thought, what I put up with here I should stay home and put up with my own people.

Q: What did you have to put up with here?

BS: Here? Oh lots of things, lots of things. You have to mind your Ps and Qs. They can give you a hard time. They can give you a hard time if they want. If they don't want you around, don't worry, they'll make you leave. But I'm tough, I'm stubborn, I don't pay them no mind.

Q: Did you find resentment because you were an English trained nurse?

BS: Oh yes, I find that a lot. But once you get used to it, it's alright. You sort of get used to it. It's alright.

Q: What changes did you see in nursing over the course of your career?

BS: Can I tell you what?

Q: About any changes.

BS: In nursing?

Q: Yes.

BS: The changes that I notice, it's not a dedicated job anymore, it's a moneymaking job. Most of the nurses, this is my opinion, they leave school, they study with multiple choice, they don't write essays. When they graduate as a nurse, the only experience they get is walk around and look and see. We have young nurses come here, and just come and sit around and have coffee all day. That's part of your studies. When they graduate, they might have to intern in a hospital for maybe a year. Then they decide to go to university, and they pick up a subject and they're big boss, they're big shot. They leave all the work to the untrained people. There's friction, because the untrained people don't get so much money, and they always grumble about how much they work. That's the only difference I find in nursing now. When I was nursing, my god, the hospital I was training in was a military hospital. Discipline. When I came to Canada you know what shocked me? When I get on the ward, on the block, and the nurse sitting at the desk and the doctor come in. He stand up over her and telling her this, and she don't even bat an eye. In my days we had to get up and let him sit and write down his thing. You see the doctors at the desk and the nurse sitting at the desk, no discipline at all. But apart from that, it's okay. But they do their work, because I've been sick and I go there, and they work. I don't know who they are, but they do their work.

. . . The only thing I'm really scared of is the nursing home. I hear everybody talk, you see it in the paper all the time. Another woman died the other day from starvation. When you're old, they must feed you, and that's what I'm afraid of. Afraid I might live dirty and all that, especially when you don't have anyone to come.

Q: One more question about migration from Jamaica. Were you aware of any program that existed here that attracted nurses in particular from wherever you were?

BS: Kind of. I thought to myself, I want to learn. The opportunity was here. It is here, and I get the opportunity.

Q: So there was a program that attracted you; that made you think Canada might be a good place to come?

BS: Not really. I thought I'd see what's going on, and pick what I want. Then after a while I think I'd like forensic, and I got into it. The hardest part was before you can take the study you have to get into the jail for about 6 months. How on earth I'm going to get into that jail. I inquired, and I go down to Toronto to the government office and everything, and make inquiries. Then I got in. I stayed with the jail for about a year, I liked it. Good experience. And the prison is not bad, but you have to be very careful. It teaches you a lot. Be careful who you talk with, and I don't want to talk too much. The system in one country is maybe good, but [sometimes the same system is used] in the other country and it's no good, due to the advancement. So you really can't criticize. I live

here now, complain about the food. The food is good. Once you get used to it, it's good. At least you have a choice and you can pick. It's not that they put a plate with so and so in front of you. You have 20 different kinds of salads, you got soup, you got everything. When you go to dinner, you have 2 or 3 types of things there, you can pick.

Q: So you could've chosen another type of hospital if you'd wanted, but you like psychiatry, or you wanted to go specifically to the jail, but you could've gone to another place?

BS: Oh yes.

Q: And similarly when you came out to Alberta, were there any barriers?

BS: I didn't notice it, because I didn't look for it.

Q: You mentioned earlier that the other hospitals didn't pay as well, weren't federal, so that's why you chose...

BS: No. The pay, but if you're a registered nurse in another province, I don't know if it's changed now, and then you come to Alberta, if you're not Alberta province registered, they don't pay you as a registered nurse. But they want you to take charge and do all the things, but they don't pay you as a registered nurse. So you stick to your federal. And of course the federal is the nuthouse, the prison, and certain hospitals. Charles Camsell is

one of them, and they call it the Indian hospital. I could go up north in Yukon and Yellowknife and all those places, but I didn't want to go that far.

Q: Did you have any contact with any nurses union here?

BS: No, no. When you're a registered nurse, you pay your registration every year. You don't contact them. But I think if somebody from abroad wanted to find you as a registered nurse, they would go to the nurses' so-and-so, and they would know where you are. But they wouldn't give you any information. They'd say, okay, I'll take your name and information and I give it to her, and then she can contact you. Because they know your whereabouts. I'm retired a long time, and now that I'm retired I suppose it's in a file somewhere.

Q: So you no longer maintain contact with any nurses?

BS: No. Only that Colleen, I know she's a nurse, the President of the Jamaican Association. She's doing alright, but she's working 2 or 3 jobs. I suppose they're so short that they can only give you part time. I really don't know, because I retire long time. I retire when I was 64, about 18 years now. I'm 82, don't forget. My doctor said to me, I don't know what's wrong with you, but one thing I can tell you, there's nothing wrong with your head.

Q: So you would've been a member of Alberta Association of Registered Nurses?

BS: No. I'm not provincial registered in Alberta. So that's why I worked with the federal.

Q: So was there a federal nurses organization?

BS: I don't know. I did say federal government, they don't pay you much. But they do pay, and now I'm getting my pension. The pension keeps me, I can manage with my pension very good. I don't get no assistance or nothing, I don't ask for nothing. I never get nothing from them, because I don't want to cry wolf. But my pension pay for my keep and buy my medication. And I'm paying roughly \$1000 a month.

Q: This accommodation costs you \$1000 a month?

BS: Yes, roughly, a little change left. And my neighbor, he's in hospital now, he pay \$1800, hook on to your pension, well your income, they call it. Then they subsidize the ?, it's the law that they have to take in so many from the ? ??? It always cause a little talk. Look at them. You're not doing this, are you? Oh god no.

Q: Your accent is very much Jamaican still.

BS: I always visit the Jamaican Association. I've been visiting them for quite a few years, I don't know how long. But now, since Grace is not so much with them, I have nobody to pick me up. That's the reason why I miss out on something. I lose interest now.

After a while you lose interest, after years and years. And I was sick and all that, and I'm getting back on my feet now. So maybe, if I can get to it, yes, give them a couple of dollars to help. But there's no guarantee.

Q: Were you ever an active member of any Jamaican organizations?

BS: No. I never liked to push.

Q: Did you ever experience discrimination in any of your workplaces?

BS: Wherever I worked I never experienced any discrimination, because I think I know how to handle people. And lucky for me, I'm always in charge. So if I see anybody funny, I assign them, and I make a list and put at the end of the bulletin board and say, refer to your lists. So they can't say, oh my god, I forget to do that. But she can do it, you know what I mean? Oh no, I'm like that. That's where the psychiatry come in handy. I personally know, on a few occasion I would invite somebody to my house. I could see the shock when they meet my children and see that my husband is white. I could see it. And when I go back to work, I could feel it. But I don't pay them no mind, because I'm making them nothing. That's how I look at it. But to me personally, no. Turn it off. I remember they taught me in England, she said when you come to work in the morning, please remember, put all your troubles in the locker and come and do your work, and on your way home you pick it back up and go. But don't bring it and work. I never forget that.

Q: Could you tell us a story that would sum up what nursing was like in the first decade of your practice?

BS: We were a bunch of young ones and we get together, and we really stick together. I enjoyed it very much.

Q: Were there a lot of Caribbean nurses in England at the time?

BS: Oh no. And down in Wales I was like a mascot, because there weren't many. We got on fine. We stick up for each other. There's only one thing I remember incident that happened. I was so ashamed of myself I didn't know what to do. The teacher left us for a while, and we know she's gone for a few minutes. I light a cigarette and I was puffing away. And another nurse was doing it. When we put out the cigarettes she walked in and said, I can smell smoke, who was smoking? The whole class stood up except me. And it was me was smoking. I kind of realized. Then afterward the whole class stood up. Like a little puppy dog... We used to stick to each other, and go on holidays. When we got a break, we go over to Ireland, hitchhike. In those days, people with cars used to look out for students hitchhiking. But now they kill you. I used to hitchhike a lot.

Q: In the last decade of practice, do you have any memories that stand out?

BS: No, I enjoyed it. After a while you get old and you have eyes behind your back. You have to be able to run too. I was slowing down and I decide, what's the good? I'm alone and I'm working. I used to get one wage and put it in the bank. I used to get the next wages to pay my rent and buy my little things. What am I working for? So I decided to retire. I think about it and how much I would get to live on, and get my superannuation.

Q: Was there a lot of pressure?

BS: In the jail?

Q: In Drumheller. You said you had to have eyes behind your back.

BS: Well you're working with murderers and rapists and psychopaths. But you don't walk alone. If you want to go from point A to point B, you have to have a guard with you. Especially when they're all out. They won't do anything, but it's to kind of tell them to stay off. But you never can tell. They're doing life. They can do anything, they can't do more life.

Q: Was it women or men?

BS: Men. I've always worked with men, apart from when I was doing midwifery. I always worked with the men. A bunch of babies.

Q: So it wasn't tense for you.

BS: No. As I said, when I was in Wales I was like the mascot, everybody liked me. If you work somewhere and you know that everybody like you, then you like everybody too. There was one woman there, a physiotherapist or something, and she was an old battle axe. She was after everybody, it doesn't matter whether you're blue or green. No matter where you go you find them like that. Some people are mean, born mean. They're after everybody, even their own mother. That's right.

Q: Did you have that same team spirit in Drumheller?

BS: Ya, you have to, whether you like it or not. You have to work as a team. You have to go out night and give medication. Oh yes, you have to have teamwork.

Q: You were not targeted because you're black?\

BS: No, we had 3 of us, 3 black. And the guards, some of them are black too. No, no problem. If they want to say something, they keep it to themselves. I didn't mix with them that much. You're not 100% isolated, but you have to watch out. No, no problem. I never had no problem about segregation, because I don't like segregation, so I stay away from it. I never had no problem about black or this. When I was in Jamaica I had more problem than when I'm here, because they used to call me two-for-one. Neither one or the other. But everywhere you go, there's prejudice. The black prejudice against the black, some

prejudice because they have a bit more education, prejudice because they're better looking or they live in a better house. Wherever you go you bump into it. You just have to live with it and ignore it. Now I'm living here. I get up in the morning and I go for my breakfast, and I come back to my room. Especially for the past year, I lie down and sleep till 11 o'clock. I get up and go do my laundry, and I come back to my room. Then I read. I read the Bible a lot, I study the Bible. And I play my thing. I don't go to church but I love to read the Bible. I study the Bible with the Jehovah Witness. Let me tell you something, if you want to know about the Bible, study with them. They know the Bible inside out. I like it, the lovely stories in the Bible. When I have time I read the stories, and then I read the scriptures. As long as they're talking about God, I'll talk with them.

Q: What words of advice would you like to share with women today?

BS: My advice would be, keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut. Just listen and watch, and you learn more. Just listen and watch. Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut. You don't know who you're saying this to, because they're all related. You have to be very careful. That's all. Mind your own business. I remember when I was little my father used to say, you go there to drink the milk, don't go and count the cows. I'm here to drink milk, not to count cows. I get along with everybody. I run a little joke once in a while, because I'm not a barbarian, neither are they. So once in a while I go in. I bet you anything, the phone probably ring to ask me if I'm not coming. I got no problem. When you reach a certain stage you couldn't care less. Everything is mind over matter, and if you don't mind it doesn't matter. I don't pay them no mind, It don't bother me at all.

Take me, for instance. How can I be segregated and how could I be prejudice? I have every nation in my blood. My son married an Italian girl. The kids, you don't know what they are. My grandchildren look like... My granddaughter, she was only 12 when we took that picture. The one in the blue, she's only 12. She's just 15 now. She's 6'1". She's a police cadet and when she graduates she says she's going to be a policewoman. She wants to be a policewoman. She says she going to grab one man this way and the other one this way, and bang their heads together. I say, you think it's that easy, eh? She does martial arts, and she think she's strong. There's Jimmy and his mom. . . . My grandson here, he said, my grandma is smart and I am going to go to university and be smart like her. So his sister says, how can you go to university from here? How you gonna get there? Don't worry about me, when she croak she gonna leave some money for me to buy a car. Well that's not so bad. But this big one here, 18 year old, he phones me. He said, grandma I'm coming to see you, and please don't kick the bucket before I come. I thought, between me kicking the bucket and croaking... It's a pity I didn't have a bigger group. If I had known, because I have my 80th birthday, all the family will be together. But I don't know where it is, somewhere in a box. It would be me and all of them. When you finish I'm going to leave you and go for lunch.

[END]