

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Gwen Hooks

Interviewer: Jennifer Kelly

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Index: Teacher, Leduc, Alberta; African Canadian; Schooling experiences as a student; Normal School education; Employment opportunities for African Canadians; Racialized incident in hiring; ATA member; Teaching in rural areas; Community historian; Formation of Breton & District Museum

My parents, my father came from Oklahoma and my mother came from Kansas. They were married afterwards. They settled in Keystone, which was the black settlement that was formed. I think there were 52 families. Times were very hard. I think one time at church ... the attendance was 83 and the collection was 53 cents. So everyone didn't have a penny. It was really hard. My husband and I were born around the same time at Keystone. His mother used to put him on the floor to play. My mother would put me on the floor to play, and give us some toys. So I'd throw my toys away and reach over and take his toys and hit him over the head with them. His mother had to pick him up. We just couldn't get along together. But then afterwards my folks moved to Radway, which is ..., northeast of Edmonton. And I took my first schooling there; from Grade 1 to Grade 6. Then from there we moved to Newbrook. Yes, I was moving all the time.

Interviewer: Did your entire family move and why?

Ya, my father, mother and myself.... Oh they were farming, they had a farm there... I think everyone did farming. So they were cutting the grain.

Interviewer: Did you have to help a lot on the farm?

Not really, not that much. My mother insisted that I go to school. Cuz she told me I was going to be a teacher. So I helped a bit, but I was the only child. But mother and dad used to go into the field and they would leave me at home. But I had a cousin that stayed with me most of the time. She lost her mother when she was- well I suppose she must have been about five or six.My folks took her and looked after her. There were five in the family. But my folks took her because we were about the same age. So she was more like a sister.

Well I suppose it was like most of the black people that came over, they were looking for a better life; a better place to raise their children. They wanted freedom. Because actually, when my father was in Oklahoma, he was just a boy.... His uncle had this plantation and he was going to sell.... But the white people around him ... they wanted his plantation. So they decided to get rid of him. In fact they were going to lynch him and take the plantation. He and his family moved to Oklahoma, so that's how they got to Oklahoma. When they got to Oklahoma the Jim Crow Law was enforced and they had no rights. So they decided they wanted to... move where there was freedom. That's the reason they moved to Keystone. Keystone is maybe 80 miles from Edmonton. They moved a way out in the bush so they could have their own government....

They arrived as families together. They didn't have too much trouble, although they had trouble at the line. They [immigration officers] always found some excuses to try to keep them from migrating. They tried to keep them out by saying that they had to have [a lot of money] I don't know how much money it was. But a lot of the Americans that came over had been working with the Indians in Oklahoma. They had intermarried and

everything. I think there was one family that came over, they had \$50,000. They had money, so they [immigration officers] couldn't use that as an excuse.

My husband's mother was a Creek Indian.

Holds up family photographs

Those are my parents, my mother and my father. Mother loved her garden, so she was always in the garden....

Ya, that was dad. I think that was at my sister's wedding or something. Mother had gone by that time.

At Newbrook there was just my aunt and uncle. No they lived at Radway, I'm sorry, I'm ahead of myself. My aunt and uncle lived in Radway. My folks, when they left Keystone, they moved to Radway to be close to my mother's sister. They had an adopted son. So there was the three of us that went to school. [I] started in Grade 1. The friends were fine, there didn't seem to be that much discrimination. The teacher, they only had the one teacher, she was a close friend of the family. She used to come visit mother all the time. So we really didn't run into any discrimination there. Not really in Newbrook.... There was not much but there was [one incident]. I think we were about Grade 6 and my grandmother was keeping children also. She had four or five different families. That meant that they're all together, there must have been about 10 or 12 that were black. And the rest were white. We got along just fine until the teacher thought that she would read the story about Epapamandus, or whatever that story is. She read this story. Of course we didn't like it, but we didn't say anything. But on the playground when everyone went out to play, I can't remember what happened. But anyway I think one of the white boys

called a black boy Epapamandus, and the war began.... And of course there were about the same number of black students as there were white students.... So all of the blacks joined in and the whites and we were fighting. The teacher came out. She was just a young teacher; it was her first year of teaching. She didn't know what to do. She finally got everyone stopped. She was crying and I think we were crying. But anyway she was a friend of mother's. She went down to mother and she was telling mother what had happened. Mother said, well don't you know what caused it? She said, no. She said, because you read that book. And she said, oh but I thought I was reading something that they would like. So that didn't happen again.

Interviewer: What were you fighting with?

Oh just fighting with our hands, hitting one another. They didn't have knives then.

But that's about all I remember, at Newbrook.

Oh yes, we had friends. After that incident we got along quite well afterwards. Then from there I went to the city to take high school.

Interviewer: So you stayed at Newbrook until when?

Until Grade 9.

Interviewer: Did you get a certificate?

Oh yes, you got a certificate at the end of Grade 9.

Interviewer: What subjects did you have to take to graduate?

To graduate from high school? Yes well you had have Grade 12, all of the subjects in Grade 12. You know, English and so forth, and one language. I took German. Then later I took French.

Interviewer: So do you speak French and German?

No, I'm not fluent in either of them.

Interviewer: What about after graduation?

At Normal School was your teacher training. It was just a one year course at that time. Of course you had to have a complete Grade 12 in order to enter the Normal School. It was teacher training. They had Normal School instead of university. I think the next year it was changed to university.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to go into teaching?

My mother. And I enjoyed teaching really, so I guess it wasn't so bad. After I started [at Normal School] I... had to do housework usually [to earn money]. So [after a while] I decided that I wasn't going to scrub any floors or anything, I was going to go through and get my education. So I did.

Interviewer: Was there a fee?

Yes, there was a fee. It wasn't that much; I think it was around \$60. But of course you had to buy all of your books. But fortunately I'd worked for the Honorable Perrin Baker, who had been the Minister of Education at one time. But I worked for him. So he also knew Dr. Lord, who was the Principal, who was the head of the ... Normal School. So I had sort of met some of the teachers through the Bakers, and I'd met Dr. Lord. [Anyway] ...one of the girls that had started Normal School decided to quit. She just left all of her books and took off. So Dr. Lord called me to the office and he gave me her books. So that helped. I had help all along the way.

Housework, that's the reason I was determined to go through school....

Interviewer: So were there many other jobs available for young women

No, housework was about all there was at that time.

Interviewer: What about young men?

They usually had jobs shining shoes; that's about all they could get. Then eventually they got to be porters.... I wanted more, and I decided I wasn't scrubbing anyone's floors unless they were my own.

Interviewer: Did you learn lots of different subjects at Normal School and how long were you there?

No, just general education for teaching. Oh well just one year. It was only for one year. I remember though at Normal School there was one of the professors that we had at Normal School, he made some kind of slanderous remark. I can't remember now exactly what he said. But anyway I was hurt. So I got up and walked out of class. Of course he had to report that I had walked out of class. So he reported it to Dr. Lord. Dr. Lord said, well who was it? He told him it was Gwendolyn. So the next morning I got to school and they said Dr. Lord wanted to see me. I thought, oh boy, that's the end of my schooling. But then when I went to see Dr. Lord, Dr. Lord said, the professor shouldn't have used that expression, and that he would apologize to me and I could go back to class. He apologized outside the room door. I said thank you. I didn't really feel like it. But I said thank you and went back into class and he came in. After that everything went smoothly. Just one year.

Showing framed entry certificates

Oh this is just the entry fee, I can't even see it. [It was] for Normal School admission. So you paid your dues and you had to have the card and you had to have a complete Grade 12.

Well first of all we had to go out for experimental teaching, go to another school. So I went to Amber Valley to get my training. I didn't have enough money; I was always short of money. So I didn't have quite enough money. So I got on the bus in Edmonton and paid my fare to, out that way north. But I didn't have enough to go all the way to Amber Valley, or to Athabasca [which] is where I had to get off. So when we got to Collington the bus driver said, oh you have to get off here. I said, I can't get off here, I don't have any money. I started to cry. I said, well my cousin's going to meet me and I think he'll give you the money. So I cried all the way to Athabasca. Then I got off, and my cousin was there to meet me, and he gave the bus driver whatever I owed. I think it was 25 cents, may have been a little more. Then they took me to Amber Valley to the school. I taught with Velma, she was Velma Leffler at that time.... I chose Amber Valley because it was a black school.... I had cousins in Amber Valley. It was an all black settlement. They had their own school. Of course Velma Leffler was black, so they had the black teacher. So naturally I chose that.

Interviewer: Was it a good experience?

I thought it was; I didn't mind it really. They seemed to be very nice. But then I've spoken to some of the, they're ladies now, some of the pupils at that time, and they said, oh, Velma went away for a while and left me with the children. They said they were really going to show all the things they did. I guess they were doing them, but I never realized they were doing it [deliberately]. I got along fine....

Interviewer: How long did it last?

Oh I think it was only for a week or two, it wasn't for long anyway. It's practice teaching.

[After] I applied for a school, and I got a school. It was out close to Newbrook where I lived, it was out in that area. Out by Long Lake it was. So I taught there for two years. But the children that I had were about my age. Well they weren't older, but they were around my age. The people were so nice. I used to go stay all night with the pupils at their homes. Then they'd come back to school and call me Miss Day, and I was Gwen as long as we were out at their place. It was lovely, it was nice. I still see some of them.

Interviewer: Was it a permanent job?

No it wasn't permanent, must have been interim... you could teach for a year. But you couldn't teach anywhere until you got your permanent. But you had to teach for a year and take a course in summer school.

Ya, this is the Interim. [*showing certificates*]

1942, that's the year I started teaching. Then you get your Permanent, and this is the permanent one. You could teach from [Grade] 1 to 10.

I don't think I had anyone in Grade 1 that first year. They were from Grade 2 to 9. I wasn't that much older than they were. They were all European. Most of them were English I think. There were a few German ones. I think there were only, well 17 I believe that first year.

Interviewer: What subjects did you teach?

Oh you taught all of the regular subjects. For the Grade 9s you had to teach them geometry, algebra, that sort of thing. [As well]... We'd go out. Where I taught it was quite a wilderness. There were bears out there too. But you could walk out and we used to go out around for nature studies. That was really nice. Then in the winter time, it was on a steep hill. So they had toboggans so everyone went tobogganing at noon. I went with

them of course. We would toboggan too long and we'd look up and see the inspector coming. Everyone would come in. They'd all run in, sit in their places. I would come in and stand up and answer the door for the inspector. I don't know if he saw us or not, he never said. Well he was the one that came around to the schools once a year. He'd check your teaching and you had to show him the work that the children had done and so forth. He was employed by the Department of Education. I laughed at some of the younger ones now when I tell them. When I first started teaching at Breton, am I going too fast? When I came back to Breton and I was teaching at Funnel, and most of the children there were older. Some of them were Grade 9 and 10. They were big boys, so it was a "hard to manage" school, hard to rule. So they gave you a bonus of \$100 a year, which wasn't that much, but \$100 a year if you taught one of those schools that were hard to manage. In this school there was about 6 black students. So we taught [and] we used to play games and we'd go out in the wintertime and go sliding. I was right with the kids. We'd see the inspector coming and everyone would run and sit in their desk. The inspector came and he'd say, well how is the class? I said, oh they were fine. Did you have any problems today? Oh no, I had no problems. So this went on till the end of the year. At the beginning of the next year I lost my bonus, because I didn't have any problems, it wasn't a hard to manage school.... But now some of the pupils live around here. They said, why didn't you tell us, why didn't you tell us? ... when we saw him coming, we'd start showing out. Then when you got your bonus we could all have a party. They were lovely [students].

Interviewer: How often were you inspected?

I think it was every three or four [times], maybe it was yearly. He tested children and gave questions for them [to answer].

Interviewer: What would happen to a teacher who failed?

Well that would go against your teaching. Probably her conditions of employment. She'd probably find it hard to get a job next year.

Interviewer: Did you find it hard to get a job at the end year?

Not really.

Well as long as I was at Funnel, that was the one that had some black students, but there was an incident that arose, but not with my teaching. It was some of the residents that lived in the town, they had a drama club. They put on a play in Breton. They put on this play. Of course they had one of Al Jolson's plays, so they had their faces painted black and the whole bit. Some of the students that I had ... were in high school. So the Drama Club always showed the play to the high schools to get their reaction. Of course these black students came home and told their parents, and the parents got mad. So anyway when they were going to present the play, some of the parents went down and disrupted the play. In fact they were throwing eggs at it. Especially when this lady came out. So the Drama Club of course, they were very angry about this. So they got a lawyer and charged them for disturbing the peace. We got [a] lawyer. And the lawyer we got was Shoctor, who just passed away. He was our lawyer. He came out and he charged two of the boys. (my husband and another boy) for disturbing the peace. I think they had to pay a fine of \$10 or something; wasn't very much. But he told the rest of the club and the ones that were there, when you're in a mixed settlement, you never do anything like that. If you had wanted someone to play the part of a colored person, you should have asked some of

the colored people to do it. Oh he really told them. This was Shoctor, Joe Shoctor. So after that there wasn't anything they could do. But some of these members who were on this drama club were also on the School Board. So when they were going to close the school, when they were amalgamated and put a lot of schools together, I was teaching in Funnel. So I was going to apply naturally for the school in Breton, which was only 2 miles away or something. No they didn't want me to teach in Breton. Some of them did; well the ones on the School Board. So an inspector came out and he said, well Gwen it's like this. They can't stop you from teaching in Breton. But he said, you're a young teacher, you haven't been teaching very long, and they could sure cause a lot of problems. So he said, it's up to you because they can't stop you. I thought about it. My kids were small, and I thought about it. He [the Inspector] went to the school, Warburg school, and he asked them. The Principal there said, oh yes, we'll take her, she's a good teacher. We don't care what color or nationality she is. She's a good teacher and we'll take her. So then I went to Warburg and taught there for 25 years or so. Then I found out later that one of the Superintendents, after I wrote the book, one of the Superintendents came by... he lives in Edmonton. He and his wife came by and had tea with me. So we were visiting and he said, you know, I'm going to tell you something that you didn't know. I said what? He said there had been threats made that if I did teach in Breton, they would take it out on my family. Well you know, my little kids. I didn't know that at the time. But anyway I went to Warburg.

Interviewer: Were you well received in Warburg?

Oh ya, with open arms. I can remember the principal at Warburg telling the class in the auditorium. He said if there's any slang words used or anything that causes any trouble

against; you're going to be in trouble". Oh ya, he told the whole class. He said, we're all one school and we're all here to learn. So we don't want anything like that. Oh yes they would. The towns were only about seven miles apart.

Then when I went to Warburg we were having a teachers' meeting. They had them every three or four months or something. But anyway, the inspector was one of the speakers. So when he got up to speak he said, I won't repeat the words, but he said, oh something about, it was racial anyway.... I was so mad, and I was going to get up and walk out again. So the girl that was with me said, no Gwen, don't go now. You're too mad, you'll say something. She said, wait until you calm down. So I did. I sat there and fidgeted, but I sat there. When it was over I went out to the door and I waited for the inspector to come along. He came by, and when he came by I told him just what I thought. I said that was a terrible remark that you used. And I said, and you're the one that's supposed to be educating us and educating the children. He apologized. After that it was fine. As a matter of fact he was really good. Every time they had convention, I had to be chairman for something or other.

Interviewer: How many years did you stay at Warburg?

Around twenty-five. No, I went back to Breton for the last four years. They were glad to have me. Well they wanted me back the second year, but I wouldn't go back to Breton because I was established in Warburg, getting along fine in Warburg. Although Warburg was 10 miles farther than Breton to drive.

Interviewer: Did you get promoted during your time of teaching?

Oh yes, I did in Warburg. Actually, they were looking for a special education teacher... they only had two [positions] in the county of Leduc. One was at Leduc and the other one

was at Warburg. I said, [to the Principal] you know I might be interested in that. He said, well if you want it, we'll start working on it so that you get it right away. I went to [look at] the different schools and everything. Some of the schools where they had special education I wasn't impressed with. But anyway I went. So then I decided that I would take it. So the Superintendent came out and said, Gwen if you want it it's yours. So I got the Principalship of that [Special Education school], that's how I got the Principalship. I had been offered the Principalship of the Elementary School. But my children were small, and it would be a lot of work, and I refused it. ... My husband was working so... I didn't want that. But I did take the special education [job], and I enjoyed it. I really did enjoy it....

Interviewer: So you retired at Breton?

Ya, the last four years. After 35 [years], supposed to have been 35 years anyway. Well the eight days that we were out for strike...well we couldn't count that. So that made me eight days short of the 35 [years].

Interviewer: Tell me about the strike

There was a strike. We were striking for higher wages. The ones in the west wanted wages like the ones in the east that were in Leduc. It was organized by the County of Leduc really, and the school division....

Interviewer: So were you a member of the Alberta Teachers' Association?

Ya. Oh ya. In case you had problems, you could always contact them and they would look into the problems for you. I don't think I ever contacted them about anything.

Oh at the beginning yes. ATA was divided up into locals. That's when I was President of the local. Attend the meetings. And discuss other proposals that had been suggested, and

so forth. Oh ya.... As a matter of fact I think when you started teaching you joined the ATA. Ya you did.

Interviewer: Tell me about your writing of poetry

Well I've always been interested in poetry. I had written some poetry before I retired. So I decided that I would continue writing poetry. My sister in law, she used to come out and she always wanted to read my poems. She'd say, oh have you written any more poems? I'd say, oh yes. So I'd start looking for them in all the dresser drawers and all over. So she said one time, Gwen get these poems and put them together and have them published. So I thought well maybe I will. So I did. That was when I joined the World of Poetry.

[*shows memorabilia*] Oh this was for writing a poem, ... I worked a lot with teenagers, so this was about my prayer for teenagers. But this was only a silver award. The others were golden awards. But this was my favorite poem. [*shows plaque*]

Silver Poet, 1990, Congratulations to Gwen Hooks, honored as a Silver Poet for 1990. A Prayer for our Teenagers: "Lord give them wisdom and goodness of heart. Keep them safe from harm. Help them do their part for they will be rulers of the land. Give them strength and courage to make a firm stand, to work for what's right, give this world a new birth. Help them to erase the damage we've done to this earth." That's part of it.

Interviewer: Tell me about how you got involved with looking history of the community?

Well we formed the historical society to tell about the different ... [people] in the community. This was in Breton. So they started the Breton and District Historical Society. I became President of that. Then we decided to work on, [and] to write, a book of the different ones that had lived in the area. They sent their stories in. We had them published in: *The Ladder of Time*.

Interviewer: Is the book about the whole community?

Yes, it's all on families. We were quite fortunate too, because it was the best local history that was published in 1980. So we got the award, which was \$100 for being the best book.

Interviewer: Was the King family included?

Oh they were yes. As a matter of fact, I think Charlie King was the President of the UFA United Farmers Association. He and one of the Premiers were good friends. It was Diefenbaker. Oh yes, all of the families are. I think there's 500 or something. Some didn't send in their histories, but most everyone did. It was a lot of work. The year I retired we started it. I guess it was in '80 or '79. We didn't finish it until '80. So we started it before then.

After we finished the book and we had some money left over, of course the grant helped too. So then we decided to restore the Breton cemetery that was the Keystone Cemetery. The Keystone Cemetery was mostly from the black citizens that had lived in Keystone. So we restored that. Then after we restored that we had a little money left over. That's when we started to work on the Breton and District Museum. Oh well, we started from, not a large group of us that worked, about 10 or 12 I guess that worked together. I was at a meeting somewhere. One of the trustees of the county, one of the trustees was there. He said, hey Gwen, I hear you're thinking of starting a museum. I'll tell you what, he said. We're going to close one of the schools because it's quite old and we're going to close it. If you write in for it, you'll probably be able to lease it for \$1". So I went right back and told the rest of the Committee. So when the School Board had their meeting, we were all

there. So we got it for \$1. We got the lease of the school for \$1, they weren't using it.

That's when we started our museum.

Ours would be the only one close around that was started by a black settlement. There are other black settlements too. In this area, it was started by a black settlement. And it was Keystone. The name wasn't changed to Breton until they put the railroad through. One of the MLAs was quite instrumental in getting the railway, so they named it after him, Breton. [They changed it] from Keystone.

Oh definitely. And the things they did, write-ups about them and everything.

They didn't really have a black baseball team, not in Breton. There were a lot of blacks that played with the team, but they were not a complete black team.

Interviewer: Was it only blacks buried in the graveyard?

The graveyard was predominantly [black families], I think there were 3 white families in it. The rest were black. Of course I know we didn't get all of them, because at that time they didn't keep records like they do now. We put in as many names as possible. They cleaned it and restored it. Eventually the Brazoo district took it over. They cut the grass and keep it clean and painted.... So now we've closed it. It's just a historical site. We got this great big stone as our monument. With all the stones that are around in Breton, we bought this one from a way out. \$200 for a big rock. So we put this rock and we established this rock. Then we put a capsule underneath it. It's supposed to be opened in 100 years I believe. Oh I'm sure I won't be around at that time.

I have been active, yes.

Interviewer: You've been around for a while!

Eighty [years].... Oh yes. I remember William Aberhardt. I was quite small when he became premier. They had a picnic, well it wasn't at Breton, I think it must have been at Radway, because I was quite small. I was running in the races. Of course my cousin and I were running and he won. He won 25 cents and I won 25 cents. Everyone was voting for Aberhardt because he was going to give everyone \$25.

Interviewer: Are these certificates in recognition of your teaching?

I think the School Board or someone, or maybe it was the Department of Education. They sent each one that was nominated or chosen for the teachers... life membership there. So then after that I started on the *Keystone Legacy*.

Interviewer: What made you write the book?

I wasn't interested in history when I was younger, when I should have been listening. But as I got older I was interested in it. I just felt that they had formed this black community, and they were the ones that had really started western Canada or western Alberta. I felt that they had done their share and they should be recognized for it. So that was the reason I wrote the book. Because our pioneers had really gone through a lot and they had really suffered. Just to find a better place for their families. I felt that they should at least be recognized in history for the part that they played.

I still have lots of friends; at least I hope I do.

Interviewer: Do you have any future plans?

At this stage of the game? I don't know. I have thought of writing a book... different ones have been after me to write a book about my teaching experiences so far. But it takes a long time, it takes two years. I don't know if I want to subject myself to that. But anyway, we'll see.

Other than that, I've enjoyed it. And I've enjoyed the interview.