

KH0001

The Making of Black Des Moines

This is a conversation among Verda Williams (VW), who wrote and produced Black Des Moines, Mary Beth Haralovich (MBH) from the ISU Speech Communication Department (TCA), and Kathy Hickok (KH) from Women's Studies and English at Iowa State University. We're talking with Verda about the process she used to make the video, Black Des Moines: Voices Seldom Heard.

KH: I think people would be interested to know about your research--what kind of research you had to do, where you found your materials.

VW: I started off, because I'm visually oriented, by going to the Des Moines Register, and when I got there I asked for their photo file on Blacks from their library. I was given an envelope with about 10 pictures in it, which consisted mostly of black people eating watermelon; there was one of a caddy at the golf course in Des Moines who was resting against the bag with his hat pulled over his eyes, sleeping. The general image of all those pictures was shiftless niggers. So I realized that I had to go to texts and leave the video and the visual for later because it just wasn't happening in what I thought would be the richest source of photos.

KH: Then what did you do?

VW: I went to the Historical Society; in fact, I went to their photo library as well and asked for the same thing and there were only one or two pictures. So I realized that I had to get specific names of people. My aunts were very, very helpful on this project and I got together with some of the long-time residents of Des Moines. Well, let me take it from the beginning. This project originated with what was to be a five-part series on WOI 5 TV news with Beverly Fisher doing one-minute pieces on Blacks in Des Moines. So we

invited about 10 to 15 Black people, a cross section of Blacks by age, sex, and economic level, and we invited them to the home of Judge and Mrs. Luther Glanton. It was sort of a party, which was really neat. There was a party going on in one room and we had two camera people. Beverly was in the basement with one camera and I was with Denny Goodrich in the den with the other camera, and we just picked people off from the party and took them in. We had arranged a set of questions that we asked each person so we narrowed down what we wanted to get out of this production.

KH: Who were some of the people that you interviewed?

VW: Of course, Judge Glanton; his wife, Willie Stevenson-Glanton, who is legal counsel for the Small Business Administration; Marguerite Cothorn, who is a retired director of the United Way; Catherine Williams, who was the highest ranking Black woman in Des Moines in Social Services; and a young man who was in the Black Panthers and is the resident Imam of the Muslim Mission in Des-Moines. That's most of the people who were there that day.

MBH: How did you find these people to interview them?

VW: I grew up in a Black neighborhood in Des Moines and I knew many of them personally. Catherine Williams lived a block and a half away, Mrs. Cothorn was south about a block, and of course the Glantons were the pillars of the Black community. We were very proud of the Glantons. Mrs. Glanton had migrated from Washington and Judge Glanton from Tennessee; when he became the first Black judge in Des Moines, it was a really big deal. So I grew up knowing who these people were.

KH: And you said your aunts were helpful.

VW: My aunts were very helpful. First of all they said, "Go to the Glantons, call them up, ask them if you can use their house." I said, "Are you kidding? I couldn't possibly do that." They said, "Don't be ridiculous, they'd love to have you do that," and of course they did. So my aunts were really very

helpful. I just quizzed them: who's this, who's that, what happened back then, what was it like in such and such a time? And I talked to a lot of other people before the taping--not only my aunts but then when they'd have their club meetings I'd come down and talk to the club members and they'd start telling stories and I started formulating ideas.

KH: So this was primary research done by interviews: people who would tell you their memories of things in Des Moines over the years.

MBH: You also did a lot of primary research with newspapers, didn't you?

VW: Yes, I was very fortunate to have cart-blancche with WOI. First let me explain something. Beverly took the initial footage from the original meetings and carved out her own five-part series. I was committed to the Extension Service, so I was doing a regular TV series and did not have time enough to really delve into the project as I felt it warranted. Growing up in Des Moines, I never knew anything about Black history, so after I finished my regular schedule with Life Force for the Extension Service I started going into heavy research and WOI said, "Pull out all the stops. Do whatever you have to do. We want this to be the be the best thing that we've had on the air." They gave me a budget to have student researchers, so I contacted Mary Beth Haralovich in Telecommunicative Arts, and she supplied the name of a student who she thought was very good, Brett Foray. Sue Ballantine, who is in both Women's Studies and Telecommunicative Arts, was working with the Extension Service on work-study, and she became the other researcher. They did primary research in newspapers. I was going to do the visual research. They were largely using the Parks Library, Sue and Brett, and not only newspaper research; Sue had been working in the archives with old films. Both of them pulled things for me. I let them know what I wanted, and they went in search of it. I put Brett in charge of national things by decades, and Sue was in charge of local.

MBH: When you say national things by decades, what do you mean?

VW: I wanted to give the piece a macrocosmic/microcosmic flavor; and I wanted to show what was going on in the nation in the 20's with Blacks, what was happening in the 30's during the Depression, who were some of the movers and shakers in the 40's and the 50's. I incorporated the things we found with music and montages lasting anywhere from 30 seconds to a minute. I would set the scene nationally and then go into the Des Moines aspect of it.

MBH: So you set the Des Moines Black experience within the national Black experience and within the national experience generally. Is that right?

VW: Sure, historical context is more than just the Black experience . . .

KH: Yes, it's the American experience.

MBH: And in many cases, international with the wars.

VW: With the wars, yes, yes . . .

KH: When did the script actually get written?

VW: The very last thing. I spent many hours, possibly 14-16 hours a day, at the Historical Library. I moved from the basement photo file up to the first floor where they had an actual copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, copies of war records of Black military people, and so forth. I did heavy xeroxing. I collected things and they allowed me to put paper markers in the materials. They had some things, for instance, about Negro women's organizations. Some were things people had in their homes and had given to the Historical Society; they looked like they were going to fall apart. Some were actually wrapped in Saran Wrap. They allowed me to put long strips of paper in the things that I wanted, then I'd bring a camera man down and we'd shoot them. Written materials were sort of sparse in a number of areas until I found this wonderful project that was done in the 30's by WPA writers. They had started doing what was to be a very minor study of Blacks in Iowa and began finding and unearthing incredible information. There were letters actually where they

begged to be able to write a book and have it published on Blacks in Iowa and that request was turned down. But the initial work by the WPA writers is in the Historical Society files, and that gave me a lot of background information. So I xeroxed that.

KH: What else?

VW: I xeroxed articles from The Palimpsest, from the Annals of Iowa, anyplace. One Jack Lufkin, who works at the Historical Society, had done his master's thesis on Archie Alexander. I gathered all of that material and I'd take the cameraman every now and then. To get back to the question of how I wrote the script: I had all of these materials gathered and I was going crazy. I prayed, and I dreamed, and by the way, every night after studying and researching I came home and went through my extensive record collection and I taped music by decades for the soundtrack. So I worked almost the whole day on this thing. One of the ways I'd do it was, I'd dream things; the whole thing was like a jig-saw puzzle, trying to make pieces fit. I keep a piece of paper by the bed and a pen, and if something's cooking I write it down; it's not maybe quite a deep dream but where I can get up and write something down. That's how the title Black Des Moines came about.

KH: So it was creative energy, intuitive imaginative energy that went into it about as much as it was organizational, intellectual, rational energy; it took a lot of both of those things to make the film.

VW: Yes it did. And then the writing of it, I locked myself in my office at the typewriter with all of my research scattered all over everywhere and I began, as I say in the film, with the beginning. I typed the script up in a day.

MBH: So your primary materials include government documents, such as war records; transportation files, like the maps of the freeway; and local city documents.

VW: Yes, I went to the City Planning Office for that.

MBH: Newspapers, including . . .

VW: Newspaper articles including the Bystander, which was another sad story. Since the Register had such stereotypical material I thought the Black newspaper founded in 1894 would have the definitive pictorial and written materials, but there were no back copies of the Bystander. The Historical Society had some on micro-film and Sue Ballantine researched that; in fact, her husband Ken had worked on a project about it, so he was quite helpful for that. But J. B. Morris sold the Bystander, in 1970 I believe, and the West-Side Shopper bought it. When I went there, there was one Black man working on the Bystander and he brought me one little cardboard box with snapshots and Polaroid pictures. And I almost cried.

KH: They had not kept their materials over the years?

VW: Either that, or it's somewhere and somebody doesn't want to be bothered with researchers. I'd heard that Sue's husband Ken went by the Historical Society after they had transferred things to microfilm, and they were burning the originals. He grabbed and saved a few bundles of them. Also there's a twenty-year period where nothing can be found from the Bystander.

KH: So in your materials also you had newspaper articles, both from the Black press and from the white press. You had some library research done on the historical information. You had film archives research. You had interviews, oral histories.

VW: Yes. And I went on Betty Lou Varnum's TV show to beg for pictures from people, because obviously they were in people's homes, but they didn't want to part with them. Everybody I called up said they didn't have any, so I went on television and I begged them to send pictures. We got not one picture from that bit of frustration, but an amazing thing did happen. The Historical Society is building a new building and a Black committee had been formed to

adequately represent Blacks in the Historical Society. I got the name of Herman Wadsworth, the chairperson of this committee, and I called him up and said, "Hey, I've had a hard time with the Bystander. I hear Ashby was the photographer back in the old days. Where is he?" He said, "He's dead, but call his brother." I called his brother, and his brother said, "Well, I think he gave all his stuff to Mr. Chet Williamson." Twenty-five years ago Chet Williamson's daughter was my sister's best friend, so I didn't feel at all guilty about calling him up right away, as soon as I got that name, and saying, "Mr. Williamson, my name is Verda Williams, I am Virginia's daughter and Dora Elva's niece. We lived down the street from you. My sister Sheilah was your daughter's best friend." "Oh, yeh, yeh, I know you." I said, "Mr. Williamson, do you have the Ashby photo file?" He said, "Yes, it's in the basement." And I said, "Can I come down? I can make it in 40 minutes." He said, "Oh no, it's dirty, it's in a mess, I don't want you to see it." He said "What are you wearing?" I said, "Well it's hot, I'm wearing all white." He said, "No, come tomorrow." I said, "Mr. Williamson, I'm desperate. My puzzle won't fit together." I said, "I'm leaving as soon as I hang up." He said, "Fine." I went down there and found many negatives of a period of time, essentially the 40's and 50's, that was missing from my historical visuals. Not only that, but I found a baby picture of me in a crib and my sister with her arm around me.

MBH: Were you able to simply go to the Historical Society and say to a reference librarian, "I want to see your files on Blacks in Des Moines?" Is it as easy as that?

VW: Well, I'm pretty bold, but what it really took was going there and letting them get to know me on a first name basis. I hadn't any documentary evidence about the NAACP, except maybe one or two pictures of S. Joe Brown and his wife, Sue, who were very instrumental in getting the NAACP started in Des

Moines. I was there to look for pictures. Here I was in this Historical Museum all this time, and I hadn't really been looking at the pictures on the wall. Suddenly I found on the wall a map of the Civil War which showed Keokuk, Iowa, where the Black soldiers had gone. So I started looking carefully around the walls of the historical library and I saw a frame peeking from behind the file cabinet. I literally shrieked, and the head librarian came running over and I said, "It says, it looks like something NAA!" We moved the entire cabinet out and found the original 1915 charter of the NAACP. Another exciting event was finding one of the first Blacks to work in the Capitol Building in Des Moines. I could not find out anything about him until I learned that he had been a common laborer, as George Nichols would say, for Lesley Redhead. By going back to the Des Moines Register and looking up the Lesley Redhead file, there I found Jeff Logan in a family picture.

KH: So you found the farthest back people by going after them sideways.

VW: Yes, and by researching the white people and finding prominent whites I was able to find Blacks. The same thing happened with the first Fort Des Moines and the Commander who brought Black slaves with him when he came.

MBH: So you didn't look for the Black person's name, you looked for the white person's name.

VW: I had to. That was the only way it was documented. And then I lucked out and found the Blacks.

MBH: Is there a period of time when this changes?

VW: Yes, around the 50's it changed. Judge Glanton, of course, had a major file, after the 50's. In fact, the head photo librarian at the Register told me, "I was ashamed to give you that file, but you asked for it, and I had to give it to you. But one of our editors banned any use of pictures like that and really made an attempt toward the positive." So, anyway, starting around the 50's Glanton had a tremendous photo file. The curious thing was, for the

Black Panthers, they were using United Press International or wire photo things, and I couldn't get permission to use those: you have to pay a hefty fee. Demonstrations during the 60's at Drake University were all wire photo. Why didn't the Register send somebody down to take pictures? I don't understand that.

KH: Tell me about the twenty sixty-pound scrapbooks.

VW: Ah, Fred "Bubbles" Burrell. Sue Ballantine had seen an obscure notice that said there was some man who had been collecting from every possible Black magazine or anything that had anything to do with Blacks, from the Register, from the Bystander, from Sepia magazine, Ebony, Tan, Jet, and he'd been keeping this collection for years and years. His family had even gotten involved in it. There wasn't a name, it was just a mention. Sue was like me and had become obsessed with this project. One Saturday she took her son to the Library with her and she found the article identifying Fred "Bubbles" Burrell. She called me right away, screaming--I mean it really was an exciting thing. I located his wife. Mr. Burrell had passed away, and she said, "Yes, you can come in," and in the third floor in an attic there were about twenty bound scrapbooks made with butcher paper, paste, and thick plywood for covers. I literally had to have somebody help me lift them. When the cameraman came, both of us had to lift them to be able to shoot the pictures we wanted. I should mention something else, too, the cooperation of Living History Farms. Sue Ballantine made historical costumes and we shot some original footage at Living History Farms. I wanted to be able to show Des Moines kids that there were Black farmers back in the old days. If you ask anybody now, they'll say there aren't any Black farmers and there never were any Black farmers. I wanted to show them that, so I started negotiating with Living History Farms. They said, "Oh gosh, Disney was here last year and it took them three days." I said, "It will take me two hours." They said

"Impossible!" I said, "It will take me two hours, I'm bringing two cameras." So I took my chief camera videographer, Denny Goodrich, down there. We looked at three areas because I wanted to show three time spans. We went from our original opening shot to an area where there was sort of a trading post where slaves realistically would have been. Then we went to the town to show that Blacks did own businesses in Des Moines. And then we had another area, a farmhouse, to show that there were prosperous Black farmers; my voice-over in the piece talks about this. I used all members of my family as actors, and one grad student. We finished in two hours. It was supposed to rain all day and there was supposed to be a tornado, and again I prayed, I mean I really prayed very hard for this project. Absolute sunshine. Sue researched and made wonderful costumes, and the costume mistress at Living History Farms gave us the right costumes for an authentic reproduction of those scenes.

MBH: Can we talk a little bit about how you put together the final product?

VW: Let me tell you how I did it. I had interviews, I did the research, I collected the written WPA materials, and when I got to a point where I'd find somebody like Lesley Redhead, I'd run over to the Register. I ran back and forth, and I shot a little bit at a time. Then I took the transcripts (my secretary transcribed all the interviews) and with a pencil I chose the good parts. I had in my mind the outline I was going with: the 20's, 30's, 40's; I was starting in 1804 with York, a slave with the Lewis and Clark expedition . . . at Parks Library I found a picture of him. So I had in my mind to do it by decades, first with the beginning, and then with interviews. For example, Buxton was a booming coal-mining town; Dorothy and Elmer Schweider had already done slides and I had done narration for them, so I had some background there. But through looking at what we call paper dolls--I cut out my interviews, and pasted them on a page--then I wrote narration to match, and I was ready to edit. Denny Goodrich is a man I have worked with for six years, and we have

the kind of relationship where he'll start a sentence and I'll finish it. I visualize what I want, to go with what I've already got. The first thing we do is lay the sound down. And then Sue typed up a description of each shot on thirty-two reels of 20-minute tapes. I had her type each single shot per reel, then cross-reference that by year, so I had a list of 40's, 50's, 60's, then I had her cross-reference by person. Actually I had about 50 reels of video. So, for example, every place that Archie Alexander appeared, I had that indexed. Denny went to the back room where they keep all their props at WOI and dragged out this cart on wheels because there were so many tapes, and we laid it out. I have a picture of the two of us doing this; people would walk by and laugh at us. It was originally supposed to be a thirty-minute special and it ended up being an hour. People would walk by and say, "That Verda Williams can't do a half hour without 50 tapes." The worst thing that happened was, after Beverly Fisher had done her five-segment series for sweeps, the female anchor of 5-TV News arrogantly reached under Beverly's desk, took six tapes out, and re-recorded news stories over them. That meant I had to go back and re-interview not only Marguerite Cothorn, but James Bowman, who is Assistant Superintendent of Des Moines Public Schools, and several others. And I did additional interviews where I needed them, like Edna Griffin, who was very, very instrumental--she was such an activist in the 40's and 50's and 60's and she's an activist now and has been named to the Iowa Woman's Hall of Fame. Anyway, those people who laughed at us, those people who thought it was just a flash in the pan were wrong. WOI submitted that show to every possible awards program, because we got deluged with calls the night it was aired and with resulting letters asking for it to be played again, and we got good press.

MBH: And what awards have you won?

VW: The United Press International Investigative Reporting Award and the National Continuing Education Association Research Award.

MBH: And the program is now in wide distribution across Iowa, isn't it?

VW: Yes, I think WOI, I can safely say, has made almost 200 copies. It's on file in Iowa City at the Historical Society, it's in the Des Moines Historical Society, it's in the Des Moines School System and the Ames School System, and Blacks in California have made their own copies of it, so it's in wide distribution.

KH: Where are all your materials, your fifty reels of video and all of your research that you had in your hands? If somebody else wanted to look at these materials, could they, and how would they do that?

VW: Marguerite Cothorn wanted me to write a book with her and I told her I'd written all I cared to write, so I gave her my written research materials. The tapes are in my office at Morrill Hall, which is about to fall down at the slightest breath.

KH: Will the tapes be archived somewhere perhaps?

VW: It has been suggested to me that they should be, but I am very possessive of those tapes, WOI gave me those tapes.

KH: So they are your tapes now, you own them?

VW: They are my tapes, and I use them to do things for class situations. I have been asked to do workshops on stereotypes, I've been asked to do things in Women's Studies on Blacks, and in Speech, and in other departments at the University, and those tapes are there for me to use.

KH: They're your research materials.

VW: They're my research materials and I add to them. I've even started shooting some things myself.

KH: One last question that I have is, if you were to tick off the things that were essential to making this project a success, what would those things be?

VW: Prayer, number one. WOI support, student support with Brett and Sue, support of faculty members at Iowa State University, the Extension Service releasing me, getting to know people.

KH: And what about the support and cooperation of the Black community, which seems to me to have been crucial?

VW: Yes, it was, indeed it was. The support of the Black community really paid off.

KH: The support of the Black community of which you are a part, into which you have an entree.

VW: Yes. To summarize this whole thing: when I had my orals last Wednesday, July 8, it was suggested to me that I do a special project on the freeway. I had to argue to do that segment on the freeway in Black Des Moines. I thought that was the single most important thing that happened to the Black community of Des Moines, because when I grew up we had our own homes, we owned them; we had nice yards, we had pride in our neighborhoods; we had extended families, I couldn't do anything in Des Moines without word getting home to my mother before I got there. The freeway came through and broke us all up. Crime soared. I mean when I moved back from New York to see what had happened to the young Black people, I was astounded, because once we had picnics, we had Good Park, we had the Y, we had all these things, and then the freeway came through and just scattered us. Realtors took my mother to the shoddiest homes I have ever seen, because they had a plan of relocating blacks to certain areas in town, and in most cases that happened. My mother refused to go, and we integrated a neighborhood. But that was a particular joy to have that suggested to me on the day of my orals, because I had to fight for that. Some of the Black leadership felt that the freeway really wasn't that important in what happened to the Black community in Des Moines. I think, on the other hand, that it was everything.

KH: If you were going to do anything different, looking at Black Des Moines now from the perspective of its being a year old, what might you do differently?

VW: Do the 80's.

KH: Do the 80's, include the 80's?

VW: Yes, but I wouldn't change a thing that's in there now.