

Interview with Eva M. Noles by Barbara Seals Nevergold for the *Uncrowned Queens Oral History Project*, Buffalo, New York, November 5, 2004.

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BARBARA SEALS NEVERGOLD: Good evening. Would you tell us what your full name is, and is there anything special or unusual about your name, or how you were named?

EVA M. NOLES: Well, I don't know if you want the full name. My mother didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so I'm Anna Eva Melinda Theresa [laughs] Bateman. But the Anna was my grandmother's name, and I didn't meet her until I was about four. She came to visit us. So they tried to change my name to Anna real quick while she was there, but I never answered, because I didn't know it was me! [Laughs] It's on a couple of the certificates, but other than that, no.

BSN: Okay, and when were you born, and where?

EN: In Cleveland, Ohio, April 5th, 1919.

BSN: And were your parents—who were your parents, and their names, and where were they born?

EN: Okay, my father was Charles Bateman, and he came from a—after doing a series of roots, a big family. And he worked on the New York Central, like a lot of the men did. And Mother was Ola Neil. They got married, oh, I guess in 1918, 1919. And we traveled a lot; we lived in Cleveland for a while, then in Youngstown for a while, and Chicago for a while. And my mother went on to New York, and we

stayed here. My brother and I stayed here with a friend, and we stayed in Chicago there with a friend. And finally moved here.

BSN: And what year did you move to Buffalo?

EN: '28.

BSN: And why—do you know why they moved here?

EN: No, I don't know. You didn't ask questions; it's none of your business. No, she would say, "It doesn't come before you." That was the term she always used. So, when I did ask questions I was really interested in, "Well, what do you want to know for?" And I still never found out! [Laughs]

BSN: What do you know, or were you able to find out, about your grandparents?

EN: No, just the one I have a picture of that's in the family book. Other than she was Indian, or partial Indian. She's from Tennessee, and in those days, with all the sailors coming in from Europe, they met, and I could be from anywhere! And my father was part Cherokee, and he was from Louisiana.

BSN: Okay, I'm from Louisiana.

EN: So, I don't know.

BSN: What about your siblings? How many siblings did you have, and what were their names?

EN: Okay, I had—well, four siblings. But the fourth one didn't come along until twenty years later. So, I being the oldest, Eva, a brother Charles, a sister, Donazil, and then this long lost sister came in, and she was Barbara. She's living now in Jacksonville, Florida.

BSN: And I know that your brother attained some fame as a musician. Would you tell us a bit more about him?

EN: Yes, I guess there was musicians in the family from the beginning. I think even one was in Handy's Band, the blues band?

BSN: Mm-hm, W.H., was it W.H. Handy?

EN: I think so, but I'm not sure. Anyway, my father like to play piano, but he had to have a little bit of encouragement, like whiskey. And he sang with what he played. My mother could play, but very, very seldom. So we came along handily. I took lessons; in fact, we all took lessons, and in fact I got better grades than my brother did, but I just never liked playing piano. My hands were short, my fingers were short. I would rather dance, but she wasn't going to have any of that [laughs].

So we just grew up, moved around frequently, this kind of thing. I think I changed grades—fourth grade—four times, before we finally graduated here, finished fourth grade, here in Buffalo. I remember even in Chicago going into a little one-room schoolhouse. Another time in Chicago, we lived near the truck farms, so whenever we wanted vegetables or anything: "Eva, go get this. Charles, go get that." Maybe that's why I don't like vegetables today! [Laughs] Could be. So we did move around a lot.

BSN: Can you tell me, is there anything else that you'd like to tell me about your family or your family background?

EN: Not really. It was a regular family. My mother did quite a bit on her own, really, in raising us up. And of course, you never asked why or refused to do something. I don't know about your generation, but we didn't! And of course, I wasn't allowed to date, when dating age came, without—when we went to a movie, I had to take my brother and sister with me. Well of course, the boyfriend didn't like that.

And when I came home and I could hear my father, we didn't go home!

BSN: What church were you involved in?

EN: Well, it was a Protestant church in Ohio. But for some reason, my mother wanted us to be Catholic, so when we came to Buffalo, we became Catholic. Now, she couldn't, because she had been married once before. I never knew anything about that, other than I have a sister somewhere. And her name is Della, and I often think of Della Reese. But I think Della, I think she'd be older than Della. So I've been Catholic right along.

BSN: And what church did you attend?

EN: Well at that time, St. Augustine's was sort of like a training program kind of thing. It was down where Sheehan Hospital is now; it used to be down there. And so we went to that church for a while. But in going to the Catholic church, my mother made us go to her church first, and then the Catholic church, or vice versa, whichever was the earliest.

BSN: So I'm a little confused. Did your mother attend the Protestant church, and you attended the Catholic church?

EN: We had to attend both of them.

BSN: So which church did your mother attend?

EN: I don't know if you remember S.O.B. Johnson's?

BSN: Yes.

EN: And when I say that, a lot of people wouldn't put that in, because they're thinking S.O.B. meaning the swear word. But his name was Sidney something, and he had a church down on one of the divisions and so forth. So she went there. But then, as I said, we had to go, too.

BSN: And so you went to both services?

EN: Right, right.

BSN: Was your mother involved in any women's organizations?

EN: She was in politics. I'm not sure what she did, I just know they met at our house. We were locked up in the bedroom so we didn't bother the party at all [laughs]. But other than that, there was nothing else.

BSN: Let's move on to talk about work, and about your profession. How did you choose the profession that you ultimately went into?

EN: Well, in those days, that was the Depression. Very few people had jobs; everybody was on welfare. I finished school, only thing—well, I helped the teachers clean their apartments. But the only thing for us African Americans was housework for the women. And even the older ones got angry when us younger ones would stand on the corner with them, with our token we were given. You got a token, and I think it was a dollar a week, and a sandwich when you worked in the homes. And the fellows worked at Bethlehem Steel or some of the other places where they were all janitors, or doing the dirty work.

So, I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life; I'd been doing enough housework outside, as well as being the oldest one in the family, which meant I had to clean the house, too. So, I wanted to be a nurse, but there was no way in the world that I was going to be a nurse, because it cost too much. And come to find out there were two hospital schools in New York City, Lincoln and Harlem Hospital Schools of Nursing. There was nothing in the rest of the state. There was one school in Chicago, one in Baltimore, one in Washington D.C. But so, well, I applied for—it was Buffalo City Hospital at that time, and of course, according to what I read and what have you, a lot of the professional men, doctors, lawyers, what have you, kept meeting with him asking that a Black girl be admitted, and he would say no for

various reasons. So it finally got decided, well, they talked him into it, and he hired me as a experiment.

BSN: Who was the he?

EN: Okay, Mr.—it slipped that fast! But anyhow, when it got around the school that I was being hired, a lot of mothers pulled their daughters out of school. They weren't going to have them mixing with me. Now at that time the School of Nursing wasn't that old, but they stayed in the building that's still down on Fillmore, for the boys that were in trouble? Well, that was the nurses' home then—twenty beds to a room, and they had screens in between. But by the time I got to the hospital, they had a regular nursing residence built.

BSN: What year was that?

EN: '36. But anyhow, since all the girls had roommates, sometimes two, sometimes three, now there wasn't any way in the world they were going to force any of the other girls to room with me. So they had to give me a private room, which was fine, because all the classmates came to the private room. We had our meetings; there was no problem there. There were problems with the head nurses, and ones in charge. But I learned not to pay too much attention to it.

But you can imagine, I had to follow the book word by word, otherwise I was reported to the office. And no matter what I did, it was always wrong. In fact, one of the gang, teenage gang, was dying at the hospital, and I wanted to go see him. I had only been there just a little while, and so I went down through the visitors, and “No, you can't go see him. You've got to be in uniform.” “Okay.” So the next night I went in uniform. It was a different one at the desk. “You can't go in. You have to have street clothes.” But after a couple of days of

that, I did get permission to go and see him. And then he died the next day.

BSN: So what were some of the experiences you had during the time in nursing school that were really discriminatory, or biased against you as the only Black student?

EN: Well, the one I have to laugh at was: I was working on one of the male floors, and they had about eight gentlemen in. And one was from the South, and as many of the Southern gentlemen then—I don't know about now—were always dressed. They wore their tie, shirt, and a jacket. Here with the hospital gown on, he still wore his tie. All right. But of course, they knew I was coming, and he wasn't going to have any Negro girl taking care of him! So, people in the ward were aware of it. So, he happened to be one of my patients. And when we first moved to Buffalo, we lived in an Italian neighborhood. So I learned to speak Italian. So when I talked to him, I talked to him in Italian. He never knew the difference! [Laughs] He never knew the difference, and we got through that one all right.

BSN: [Laughs]

EN: But, another time in training, if you've ever been in a hospital you'd know that you have nourishment in the morning and in the afternoon. I was the only student on the floor. There were T.B. kids, so there were only about fifteen, twenty kids there. I went to get the nourishment, and I told the head nurse that there isn't any nourishment. And immediately: "What do you mean, there isn't any nourishment? You drank it!" Now, three gallons of orange juice? And so, she sent me to the office. When I got down to the office they had it figured out. In order to drink three gallons of fruit juice, I had to have a glass every fifteen minutes, and why wasn't I working?

[Laughs] So the juice came up on the lunch cart, but nobody ever said anything. So, just let it go at that. But that was just one of the things that—

BSN: I remember your telling me, too, as part of the graduation ceremonies, you really were treated very shabbily at the graduation dinner, the class dinner.

EN: Oh, yes. We had the class dinner, and it was supposed to be a dinner-dance. I had a date, this sort of stuff. And we were going into the dining room to sit down. The waiters came over, “We don’t serve people like you,” and put us out.

BSN: Now that was at a very famous restaurant here?

EN: Park Lane. At the Park Lane.

BSN: And nothing ever came of that, as far as the school trying to address the injustice?

EN: No. The other nurses in the class got letters from the administrator of the hospital, but I didn’t know about it until several weeks later, that they apologized, and they were welcome to be there at any time. It’s just that I wasn’t. But that was nothing. It was all the other things we learned to live with. Because there was even discrimination in high school, as far as courses that you could take. The girls had to take home economics, and the boys took a manual training type of thing. Those who had wanted to take a college entrance course: “What do you mean, college entrance? You’re not going to any college.” And they wouldn’t let them take it.

BSN: Well, I remember your saying that, and sharing with me a newspaper article that talked about why you were admitted to the nursing program.

EN: Yes. He thought, well, he finally gave in and, “We’ll see how it works out. But the patients aren’t going to like you; the doctors aren’t going to like you. The administration’s not going to like you.” Well, so he tried it anyhow. As I said, he admitted in the articles in the paper I showed you. And also, it was the New York paper that announced that I was admitted to Meyer; it was still Buffalo City Hospital, and how I got there and all the rest of it. Nothing in Buffalo! But this was a New York City paper, the New York Age. I also heard that it was in one of the camp papers up in Iceland, but I never did get a copy of that one. So as I said, I’ve had a little bit of experience.

BSN: Well, even the African American papers did not pick up—

EN: They wouldn’t publish anything until they saw my license. And then trying to get a job, it was worse than getting admitted to school. I went to one hospital and applied. “What do you mean, you applied?” “I’m a nurse.” I showed her the license. Well, she thought a while for it, because she didn’t know anything about it. “Well, we can give you a try, but you won’t get the same money as the other nurses. You’re going to have to eat alone in the kitchen, not with the other group.” And I don’t quite remember what happened to the bedroom; they probably didn’t have one. I tried at one of the plants, because my father had worked there. And, “Well, we could give you a try, but you won’t get the pay that the others are getting.” I applied at Perrysburg, the T.B. hospital. I didn’t get any answer there. So simply by—I guess my being Catholic did help, ‘cause Sisters Hospital, they took me on. And it worked out that way. But they tried every way that they could to create problems for me.

BSN: How so?

EN: Well, one of the good nuns—now, it was all run by nuns—apparently didn't like me, or was trying me out. And as you might be aware, at the change of each shift at each hospital, drugs are counted to see if they all are accommodated. And when I was going off duty, there was one bottle of drugs gone. [Laughs] "It was there when I was here." "No, you took it." So they reported me to the drug people downtown, who came out and interviewed me to see why that bottle of medication was missing. And also, in checking, the nun finally admitted that she had taken it, just to try me out. So I was excused then.

But another thing about nursing that wasn't just me: students had no rights at all in the training, no rights. And the ones who had been there, if husbands were in service, that was no excuse. They wouldn't take anybody who was married, even though husbands were in service. So you never knew who was getting what, because it all depended on what kind of story you told!

BSN: Your first job was probably about 1940? Was that when--?

EN: Well, no. One of the things in training: if you missed a day because you were ill, or whatever reason, you had to make up two days. Now they called me in and said I was losing weight. Well, maybe I did; I don't know. And I had to go home, and stay home, and gain some weight. So, while I was home I got a job working for a dentist. I worked there, and then I asked about—it took us about six months coming back. But since they couldn't get rid of me, they took me back. But it was interesting. I understand one girl tried that after me, but she never went back. So I don't know, I just kind of feel, and I could be wrong, that this was one way of getting rid of me.

BSN: Well I was wondering when you said that you were advised all the time that you were not going to get the same pay or the same benefits that the other nurses had. Do you recall what your first job paid you, and how that differed from other nurses?

EN: According to Sisters, I assumed that I got what the other nurses got. Nothing was ever said about less pay. But then, about four or five years after that, they were looking for a head nurse or what have you, and they called me, wanted me to come down and work for them. And I just simply, "No, thank you." So it was one of my ways of getting even with them.

BSN: What was your second job, after Sisters Hospital?

EN: I probably did some private duty at Millard, Millard Fillmore. And that was no problem there. I worked at Columbus Hospital for a while, and there was no problems there, other than the hospital itself. I was working on an OB floor, and a patient went into labor. We called the doctor, and he happened to be at a dinner. So he came to the hospital with his tux and what have you. And as he was sitting in front of the patient, her water broke, and it caught him! It was all we could do to keep from laughing, otherwise. Oh, he swore! He was so mad! [Laughs] But shame on him. Shame on him!

And one time, while she was in labor, as you know, the doctors would examine and see how far along she was. And this one lady, she went into a contraction while he had his hand in. Now, he couldn't get his hand out, and he couldn't do anything else. And all we could do was laugh! And of course, we were punished for laughing, but what else could you do? He's yelling, "Help me! Help me!" And she's needing help, too! So there was something funny in all of the hospitals where I worked, not because I was a Negro, but it just fell

into place. I just happened to be there when anything happened as far as that goes.

BSN: How long were you the only, the first and only African American nurse in the Buffalo system, before the second person came along?

EN: Two years.

BSN: Two years. And so you kind of carried the standard for the race during that time?

EN: Yes.

BSN: Did you feel a lot of pressure on you, as the only Black person, only Black nurse?

EN: No, I think I had, after all, going through school that way, grammar school, high school—well, it wasn't showing in grammar school so much—high school, you got used to it. And I'd say going downtown, you didn't try on clothes. Either you took it, or you didn't. And hats, you tried on hats, but they put a lining on your head before you'd try on a hat. If you didn't, whether you liked it or not, you bought it. So it was things like that. Just at that time also came the first elevator operator, was the first Black, the first clerk at one of the stores downtown—you know, all of these firsts were coming in. And it just fit right in, and people worked out very well. It worked very well.

BSN: Take us through some of your other experiences as your nursing career developed, and you went on to other positions, and other experiences.

EN: Well, none were quite as, perhaps, as comical or as funny as what I had been through, so it really didn't make that much difference. No problem with the patients. There were a couple of problems, but I better not tell you about it [laughs].

BSN: You can leave the names out.

EN: Well, I was working on the floor at Roswell, and we gave radium—the doctors were giving radium for treatment of cancer. And there were different kinds, and this one type of radium had to be screwed in. Well, trying to get the doctor to come up to unscrew this patient was something else! Another time I was on a different floor, a men's floor. I was just coming on duty, and his wife came to me crying. I don't know if you want to put this in or not. His penis had disappeared. So I called the operator, and she started laughing before she called the doctor. Well, they're not supposed to listen in on anything, but she did! [Laughs] Well finally, the doctor came up. He says, "What's the matter, Noles?" I says, "Well, it's gone." He looks and says, "Yeah, you're right. It's gone! Did he have surgery?" I said, "No." And his wife is crying over it, on the side, and she's still crying because it's gone. Well, he figured out what the problem is, and put in a catheter, this sort of stuff. But from then on: "All right Noles, what are you doing now?" [Laughs] They were kidding me, the ones that worked with him. But for a time there, it was rough [laughs] trying to keep from laughing, and trying to do my job, this kind of thing.

BSN: You had a long, long career at Roswell in which you got to a position of nursing authority. Can you tell us about that?

EN: Yes. I started at Roswell in '45, and it happened that there was a new Director of Nursing there who I had met when I was in training, and we knew each other quite well. So she hired me, and I worked as a staff nurse, and then moved up to—I was given a department, and worked as the head nurse there, and got involved—and I'd tried to get involved with things, so they couldn't say, "Well, she didn't try anything."

And that was the same with a lot of the clubs in the city, where no, either very few or no Negroes had applied. And when they invited me, I always said yes, so they couldn't say, "Well, we invited one, and she refused." I stayed in the club about a year, and then dropped out, because the meetings were always at lunch time, and trying to get out at lunch time, and trying to park your car, and all the rest of it. So I got along well with the city of Buffalo, as far as that goes.

And then, as openings came up, I applied for them, as teacher of students, as Assistant Director, in meetings and so forth, with the staff. And then came the—we had a male Director of Nursing. He left to go to the V.A., where he could get more money. So when I found out why he was getting more money in the first place, I applied for the job. And it went along fairly well. And then I got to the job, I checked with them about getting it changed, just a name change, to get another couple hundred dollars in the paycheck! That's all it was, but it was the same job. So, I moved up into that.

BSN: So you were Director of Nursing at Roswell?

EN: Yes.

BSN: For how many years?

EN: Well, three as Director, but five all together as Director for other things, for in-service, for programs, for this kind of thing. So I was the next one to move up. And it's interesting. As you may or may not know, the visitors to Mr. Martin were from other schools and other colleges and so forth. And when I came in, you saw it because I was looking for it. There was always the look on their face of "What? A Black??" And then they'd smile right back again [laughs]. But I noticed each time I went anywhere with him or for him, the people there did not expect me to be his assistant.

BSN: Okay, and Mr. Martin was the Director then?

EN: He was the Director then.

BSN: While you were there, you also did some writing, and you produced a really historic volume on the history of nursing?

EN: Yes, I did that, but I also wrote for the different magazines, health magazines, and got credited for those. And then somewhere along the line, I don't know what hit me, I decided to do a history of nursing there.

BSN: I don't mean to stop your flow, but it occurred to me, it would nice if we had copies of the books, and so forth.

EN: Yes, it's one of those. Yeah. The big one.

BSN: The big one, and then under her Talking Proud books—those books, too?

EN: I was interested in writing this history of nursing because nurses were not even included in the annual reports! Because I checked with the office; I checked with Albany. There was nothing there about nurses. So, but this was a good time to start something, which I did do. And I finally turned it in, with pictures. Of course, I worked with the staff; it worked out very well. And I had no problems with the staff at that time. But I took pictures—I was very close to the—well, we were close there. It was a small hospital, and we knew everybody whose daughter had a baby, or whatever honor they got. It was that close. And the main woman, the cook in the kitchen, everybody called her Ma Kelly. So it was, I'm saying, it was the closeness there. But in going through and finding there was nothing there, I again talked with the various departments, and what have you, to see why Roswell wasn't included. I never did find out why, but after that we were included in a lot of things.

BSN: You told me something about once this was published, I the front, I guess the Director—

EN: I didn't want to say anything there.

BSN: [Laughs]

EN: Well, first place, he's dead. And the one who came after me, she's dead, too. But that was one reason why the male Director lost a lot of doctors, because no matter who put out papers, he wanted to on it; he wanted to be listed. And he wasn't listed in mine. Well, he didn't like that at all. So he took all the books already—I had a reception all set up next door over there. I had no books because he wouldn't let them out [laughs]. But the kids at the hospital knew where they were, so they stole them! [Laughs] So we made more books. But it was interesting that the state published the books, not some outsider. Roswell Park published it, and I think all the nurses got a copy. We had three receptions for three different shifts. They weren't offered to the doctors. A few of the doctors got them. But just for the nurses.

BSN: But the Director, and your predecessor signed them?

EN: Oh, of course, they signed, and they got their pictures in. Okay! And I had to find out on the Q.T. what happened there. And this other physician, you know, told me why, so there was nothing more we could do. But the books were printed. Again, there was the thought of the sale of these books, but I knew if I wanted to sell them, the money would all go back to Roswell [laughs]. So we just gave them, as far as that goes. So things went along quite well. I finally got through.

There was one day that scared me, though. I was the Director of Nursing. The Director of the hospital was at a meeting in Albany or Washington. His assistant was at a meeting in something else.

That left me in charge of everything. I talked to the good Lord all day long! “Don’t let anything happen,” or I would be blamed for it, because I was in charge. I was never so glad to see the end of that day! [Laughs] But things worked out very well.

BSN: And was the last job that you had, at Roswell? Did you retire from there?

EN: I retired from Roswell, but I didn’t quit working. We had students coming from different cities, coming to learn how to really care for the cancer patient. And I was in on that; I was one of the instructors there. And then I was on a grant with Buff. State to the different nursing homes throughout the state, where the administrators knew nothing about nursing, and were hiring people off the street. Well, when some of those girls got in and found what they had to do, they just quit! So through this grant, we went to most of the nursing homes to teach the administrators what the aides were supposed to do, and how they were supposed to do it. So that worked all right. That was a different type of job, but it still had to do with nursing, as far as that goes.

BSN: As you reflect on your nursing career, could you identify a high point, and a low point?

EN: Well, I guess the high point was being admitted. That was a big thing. And another point was being appointed the Director of Nursing, because there were a few people there who didn’t like the idea, particularly [unclear]. They’re the ones. But other than that, graduating from, retiring from Roswell, graduating from U.B., and at that time U.B. was just starting their nursing program. The teachers came to us; we didn’t have to go to U.B. But after that first couple of years, then the next classes had to go to U.B. for it. So getting my

degrees, and getting my honors, and so forth—those were my high points.

BSN: I want to shift a bit from the work experience to your other experience having to do with your writing.

EN: Okay. Somewhere along the line, in talking to people, they would say—hearing that I was the first Black, well then they were interested in who else was first? The first teachers, the first storekeepers, the first this kind of thing. So I started some research on that. And in the book it was written of the first teachers and how they were handled. The first school, the Black school in Buffalo, up on Eagle Street or Clinton Street, one of those. Even at Masten Park, I think one of the mothers had brought her daughter there to go to school, and the one in charge almost had them arrested, because he wasn't going to have any Blacks in any course at his school. But again, we had enough to help push, to help me, and for me to help the other girls. And in this book, it does give you the first telephone operators, the first doctors, the first nurses—well, I was the first nurse. But, the first policeman. I don't know, are you old enough to know the first policeman?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: [Unclear].

EN: What was him—I don't think he was a real policeman, but they gave him a uniform... anyhow... And he was well-known on William Street. I forget his name right now; I do have it in here, I'm sure. And the first cab company that we had, Black cabs, this kind of thing.

BSN: So this is how you got interested in doing this, with people asking you because of your accomplishment?

EN: Right, right. I even have Dr. Fordham in here, this kind of thing. Rick James and the Harvey. That's right. Remember Lyons, Jimmy Lyons? And his family—they did me dirty. I was doing public

health, visiting in the homes, and I was just with them the night before. And so I went there and I said, “Is your Dad home?” “Yeah.” Now, in those days they put wreaths on the doors of the people who had died. So I went in, I said, “Well, where is he?” “He’s over there, in the casket.” [Laughs] So—

BSN: He was home, though!

EN: He was home! I couldn’t write down and say that he was gone when he was there! I sure would have been fired, as far as that goes. But I was looking for the first policeman, because they knew him by his nickname. I don’t think that was his real name.

BSN: Was it [unclear]?

EN: No, that was the first one in uniform.

BSN: Oh, okay. And you wrote this book when? Eighties?

EN: In the eighties; ’86, I believe. [Pause] Here are the first teachers. The Clapps, Burells. Ann Burrell, you remember her? Jessie. Dr. Wright.

BSN: Now, you knew a lot of these people personally?

EN: Well, that’s just it. That’s what made it easier doing it, by knowing these people.

BSN: And where did you get a lot of your materials?

EN: Personal, personal questions.

PEGGY BROOKS-BERTRAM: You know, one of the things that we have said all the time when we’re talking about Uncrowned Queens and the work that you’ve done, we say that Eva Noles, that you’ve been somebody on whose shoulders we stood, in some respects, in terms of gathering the same kind of information. Well, we emphasize women, but you certainly did a lot of groundwork yourself, and stand out in terms of—

EN: I didn't know whether he was called Big Jim, or something like that.

But the city, the streets, knew him as a policeman. So even though he wasn't, he did the part of a policeman, as far as that goes.

BSN: Now you used to have also, along with this book, or maybe prior to it, an exhibit that you took?

EN: Yes, and that was well taken. Except one, and if I ever see her! I had the exhibit, and I had it so that, at Buffalo, those in politics, those in sports, those in entertainment, this kind of thing. So I think there were about seven of them. I think there's a copy in one of the papers I have out there. And the woman—I had to go to the hospital for something, as a patient. And I had the stuff all ready, and everything set up for the next day. While I was in the hospital she called, or something. They took all of those down, because I didn't have the people in it that she wanted. So she closed the exhibit! She's still around. I've never met her. Of course, she: "You should have put this in, and this in." I said, you know, it was my exhibit!

BSN: So because she disagreed with—

EN: She closed, she took them all down.

BSN: People can be ugly, can't they?

EN: Right. But anyhow, I mean, that was just one of the things.

BSN: Tell us about this book: Buffalo's Black History.

EN: Yeah. In looking for people in here, Bob Lanier—and I have to laugh at him, because his Dad was an iceman and a coal man, you know, delivery, and he helped. But the poor boy had such big feet, they had trouble getting him shoes; I think he wore twenty-somethings. And then he was growing taller, and his clothes didn't fit, this kind of thing. So he somehow got involved with the Boy's and Girl's Clubs there, yeah, on Northland there, where the fellows had to teach him

how to walk with his big feet [laughs], you know, and play with them. But he kept tripping on them [laughs]. Things like that.

BSN: Well he did ultimately become a basketball star. They came in handy.

EN: Right, that came in later. And of course, with Jim Thorpe, the golfer—he didn't do so well in Buffalo, but he's doing well now. He's hitting all the championships for him. And of course, here's my son. He's a race car driver.

BSN: Is he? I didn't know that.

EN: And one of his pictures is there. Leland Jones, Beverly Johnson—you know, she's doing well now.

BSN: The model.

EN: Yeah, and her daughter's a model, this kind of thing. What happened? Witherspoon was an inventor. Now, the oldest Black American, again through checking, he reached a hundred and twenty-two years, and I had his picture, too.

BSN: How long did it take you to put this book together?

EN: I don't know. I think I enjoyed doing it. It wasn't any problem. Young Arthur Eave, and his predecessor, Arthur Hardwick. He ran a liquor store on Tennessee? No, Broadway? One of those. Mr. Evans, Mrs. Hackney, those kinds of things. So, and having to look through so many books to get some information I needed, I found out a lot of stuff I didn't know. And I thought, well, if I don't know them, a lot of other people don't know them.

And as it was mentioned in some of the newspapers, Black History Month was the shortest month of the year. So up until the first, I mean, you saw nothing about, too much about Blacks. During February, they're in everything! Come the twenty-eight of February, cut off! So, I had a lot that I found out. And of course, like a lot of

these things—now, they wanted pictures for here, but the one who did my pictures was charging me twice as much for pictures as the League was paying him. They didn't know what he was charging. So I thought, no, I can't get pictures of all this. In fact, I didn't get all the pictures in the other, because he was charging sixteen dollars a picture, and the other, it was supposed to have been ten, ten dollars.

Well, we got through that all right. But there were a lot of things, different things that came up, I was able to check through, with the newspapers, with the stores, the markets, the delis. Of course, in the markets, too, the food was never fresh like it is, you know, in the other markets. And, was probably twice as expensive. And the record stores, and the cab companies, and this sort of stuff. So I was able—I mean, that sounded interesting. So I know I went and visited the senior citizens at the Y. on—not on Michigan. I was involved in that one, too.

BSN: On Ferry?

EN: No, not that one. It was on—

UM: Franklin?

EN: No, the new one—Emsley. Emsley there. And I was asking—I was introduced as a writer, and I was asking different ones. “Oh, my husband did so and so, and so and so.” That was one of the names I was looking for. Or, “My uncle,” or what have you. So they gave me names of people who I knew about, but didn't know names. So that all helped.

BSN: And so that's what's in the second book?

EN: Yeah, these are all important people: inventors. And they're doing so much of that now--scholarships from the schools with the different names, Bennecker, and a few of the names like that, that nobody knew

about. And it went along, you know. I was glad to see some of this stuff, how much Blacks had done! But just like you, when you're home, if you're doing something and it takes a lot of time, you see if you can do it shorter—short cuts. And so that's what a lot of the inventions were, short cuts, that the workers had done themselves. The ironing board, to do with the trains, to do with barbering, to do with cooking—all of these were from Blacks. Now usually the owners took credit, but many instances the credit was given to whoever designed the things. Which was one way of getting it out. Now since then, you find, particularly in Buffalo, so many things named after people: the streets, the scholarships at school, things like that.

BSN: Well you know, I wondered what had inspired you to write those books, because they're so far, far away from nursing, in a sense. But I learned something about you since we've been working on this project, and that is your scrap booking and how meticulous you had been about making sure that all of your history, and of things related to you, are put into scrapbook.

EN: Well, I try to.

BSN: And you've been doing that for a long time, since you were a child.

EN: But I don't think I have these in there, however, the stories in here are the different ones way back in the eighteenth century, way back in African days, the people who were in charge. And a lot of people here in Buffalo don't know that we've had a lot of Black Ambassadors at the U.N. People don't know; they may know names, but they don't know that they're—hm-mm. Explorers—they always give credit to the other guy. The wars, the generals in the wars. They didn't know we had Black generals in a lot of the wars. So, and one

thing I'm kind of proud of, and I've only seen it one time: there has been a Black Governor in the United States. There was one— Louisiana. The Governor that was there was impeached, and this fellow was next in line. He was Governor for a week, but he was Governor! [Laughs]

BSN: Well tell me, what inspired you to keep the scrapbooks that you have?

EN: Simply to have, to show people, because there was nothing for me to see when I grew up. So, as things came on, and as I was getting into, getting all these honors and everything, in different groups, I began making scrapbooks so they can be kept for the next ones. Because a lot of people didn't believe me. Incidentally, we've had graduates from West Point, Black ones. Ships have been named after Blacks, but most people don't know that. We had General Chappy James, who was the first Black Four-Star General. Other generals that you don't hear about, unless you have read through this. And incidentally, my grandson went to West Point. He was there for a year, but he didn't like it. He didn't like the discipline, so he quit, but he stayed through his first year, and he was on the honor roll and stuff. So when he came home, he brought—"You've got to work, you can't just sit around." So he joined the Navy, and he was with them for while, I think thirteen, fourteen years. And right now, he's working as a minister; he's up in Maine. That was fine long as he didn't get into jail, like somebody else I know.

BSN: [Laughs] We're not going to talk about that.

EN: Yes.

BSN: As we kind of wrap up some things, I want to ask you: what would you say to young women, especially young African American women, who want to go into nursing? What do you think are the challenges

that they have to face, and how do you think they can develop strategies, I guess, to overcome those challenges?

EN: Well, I think it's much easier now. They have teachers that will teach them, willingly. It's hard to become a nurse anymore, than it was when I—if they wanted to, fine, they could go ahead and do it. But they had to want to. Because nurses are so important. Like we have now, they don't have enough nurses. Before, we had the same thing: not enough nurses, not enough teachers. And all that was changed.

BSN: Do you think that there's still discrimination, though, for young Black women, in terms--?

EN: There is some, yes, but not like it is in the South. In the South, you know what you're not supposed to do. You know, you step off the sidewalk. You don't do any of this. But here, they do it differently: you just don't get the job.

BSN: So, what you're saying, it's more subtle?

EN: More subtle. Not as bad as it used to be, but it's more subtle.

BSN: So how do we teach our young women, and men at this point, because men are going into nursing—how do you teach them to recognize it?

EN: Well, I think the different clubs, the different groups that they're having for teenagers, to get in, see what it's like. If you really wanted to do something, or wanted to be a nurse, fine. There's no trouble applying now, providing you meet the grade levels, the intelligence, things like that. If you really want it. And there's so many more schools available now, today.

And it's interesting that since my history's been out, I received a letter from somebody from Jamaica who went through the same thing. Another girl went through the same thing in Canada, but it was put on the election—it was on the ballot, whether to admit one or not!

And she got, she was admitted. But you don't find, to go through what I had to go through, no. You just have to make sure you follow the moves.

BSN: What do you think about your personal style, or your supports, maybe, at the time, helped you to persevere in the face of all that discrimination?

EN: I think I'm just stubborn. I was just stubborn, and I wanted to make it. Knowing, too, that I was the first, I didn't want anything to happen that I had to quit. I just stuck to it. And you get used to that. Maybe you girls never had to go through that. But like going through it at school, it didn't bother you that much. And when I was going, doing my housecleaning jobs, the older ones didn't want us young ones in there, because we were taking away their jobs. Well, I didn't want to do that all the time. So, it worked out that way: all right, I was going to try anyhow, and see what I could do.

BSN: Did you have the feeling that—and I think we still have the feeling, even now—that you were representing the race, and so you were representing all Black people?

EN: Probably, yes. Probably. Because if I had failed, it would have been all over, all over the States. Oh yeah, that Governor's name was Pinchback. The Black Governor was Pinchback. He was on for, well, one year, but he was Governor.

BSN: Well, as we wrap up, what would you like to finally say, or go on record to leave a message for the young people and the old people who are watching this?

EN: If you really want to do something, you can. Be prepared to work for it, to study for it, and go without a social life if necessary, to meet the grade that you want to be. And I find that they're doing that now.

There's more agencies open; there are more groups open to help them with meeting people, and how to handle it, this kind of thing.

BSN: Any questions?

EN: One of the things—are you through taping?

BSN: No, say what you want to say.

EN: In the nursing home, as I said, you were either a room mate, or two or three of them, what have you. We had to sign a slip of all the people we knew, male and female, young and old, who might call us, or who might come and visit. Well, as in a whole new place, there were rules. If he wasn't on the list, you didn't get to see him. Or, if you did, it was with a chaperone. Then they got so when the fellows called, then you had to report, "Oh, that's my brother." But after a while, you didn't know which brother you had! And we knew that in the office they were listening in on conversations, so we all talked pig Latin. And we always had to checked. Ten o'clock was bedtime, and not only was it bedtime, but the one in charge made rounds, and pulled the sheets back to see if you were in pajamas, or if you still had your street clothes on!

BSN: Now, when you lived in the dormitory, while you were in the nursing program, was this year-round? Did you get the summers off?

EN: No. Well, two classes a year were admitted, and there were about a hundred in each class. No, you worked in the summer. You may have gotten maybe a week, a couple weeks off. But that was it.

BSN: So this was really home?

EN: This was home.

BSN: And in your graduating class, you finished, out of a hundred, in what spot?

EN: Top.

BSN: Number one?

EN: Number one!

BSN: Number one. So, for an experiment, you really [laughs], you were more than they expected.

EN: That's for sure. That's for sure.

BSN: But still not good enough.

EN: No, not for what they wanted. And the only reason—it was mentioned during graduation. Reverend Nash, not on the program, interrupted the program to say that I was the Black girl, that I had, you know, was number one, and all the rest of it. Because it was never mentioned; I was just there.

BSN: So they didn't have a valedictorian? You weren't acknowledged as the valedictorian?

EN: I wasn't acknowledged as anything, other than the pictures of us, the four of us, honor roll, and me. Just that. But there was nothing else that was mentioned.

PBB: And Reverend Nash wasn't on the program.

EN: No, he wasn't on the program, but he just interrupted.

PBB: [Unclear] [laughs].

EN: Yes, and from there, and I got letters from other hospitals, other cities: "If you need a job, call me." New York City, Washington. And telegrams: "If you need a job, contact us." But thank goodness I didn't have to go that far. I would have gone if I had to.

BSN: I just want to ask you real quickly: even though we're kind of going in and out of different things, because we can edit this tape, that's okay. Because I wanted to go back for a minute to ask you about your family, your siblings, because I know your brother was, as I said, a musician. And he played with a particular group, or several groups?

EN: He went to Florida to retire, but he didn't retire. Come to holidays, he had a gig. They'd come to his house, or they'd go to their house, you know, wherever it was. He was written up very well for the newspapers.

BSN: Who did he play with?

EN: Anybody.

BSN: [Laughs]

EN: And he took advantage of things; he liked to read. He liked to watch people. I was at a convention at one time, and he was there as entertainment for something else. But there was a fellow there tuning pianos; he learned to tune pianos. When he went back home—he was living in New York, people didn't want them, and they threw them out. So his buddies would bring it home and let him remake it. And then he'd sell it and maybe three or four thousand dollars. But he liked his music; he always did. And was honored there for his musical ability, this type of thing.

BSN: And his name?

EN: Charles.

BSN: Charles Bateman.

EN: Yeah, Charlie Bateman. My father was named Charles, but the one before him—the one named Charles died. Meanwhile, they had named my father Southern. But he didn't like that, so he changed his own name to Charles! [Laughs] So different things you can do, when you want to, and who you know, that produce things like that.

BSN: And one other thing I want to ask you just before—you've traveled all over. We've talked about all the places that you've traveled as a result of your nursing career. You've been to—

EN: To several places. You've seen the book—

BSN: Japan?

EN: Oh, yeah. If you belong to the American, or in your country, if you were head of nursing, or in nursing in that country, you automatically became a member of the International Nurses' Council. And they met—I think they're still doing it—every four years in a different country. With the best prices ever! When I went to Japan, well of course, I had to go to New York to get a plane that flew to Japan, all right? It wasn't even a thousand dollars to go from here to the end of the United States, and go to Japan. It didn't cost us anything like that.

And going to—we went to South America, where their life is quite different, and had a nursing convention. All the cities that we went to expected us, and we had special name tags for them, and it had been in their papers, that the nurses from the world were coming to visit, this kind of thing. Well, one of the places—I was with three or four others—we were visiting, the policeman pulls us in the office, and locks the door! Well! And come to find out, he was working second shift, and he was told if he learned English, they would promote him. So we had to teach him some English right there, in order to get out of jail! [Laughs]

BSN: What country was this? Where were you then? What country were you in?

EN: South America. And also, if you went to visit anybody, like I wanted to compare nursing things for both places, you were supposed to get permission from the Mayor to go see somebody. But we couldn't find the Mayor, so I went anyhow. And typically, when you're at any hospital, if you want to know something, you ask your sweeper, the housecleaner. Even at Roswell, a fellow came in, he says, "Well, what am I doing today, girls?" [Laughs]

Well anyhow, when I asked at the desk, did anybody speak English, and they said yes, and sure enough, it was the housekeeper that they called to come down. But while we were waiting, this old man came. He was a sweeper. He said, “What do you want to know?” [Laughs] So you learned, you know, all of this. And as far as being insulted, you weren’t insulted, you just—at least I did. And I’d never let others know that he was speaking English! But it was things like that that made you think about it, as far as that goes.

BSN: Well, it has been so enjoyable. I know we can go on and on and on, but we really appreciate your agreeing to be filmed and to share all of your experience with us. It’s just marvelous talking with you, and we thank you for your time.

EN: Well, you’re very, very welcome, but I’ve got lots of other stuff.

PBB: I know!

EN: Lots of other places that I’ve been. In fact, we were meeting in—where was it? Either Japan or Hawaii or something. And I made friends with these other nurses on the plane. They were from the Philippines. So sometime during our visit there, they got word that the fellow representing the Philippines wanted to see us. So, “Come on, Noles.” I didn’t speak no Filipino! And he was asking, well, what part of the Philippines was I from. [Laughs] And trying to think of different names that came up. I don’t know whether he knew I was fibbing or not, but I was accepted along with the rest of them, as far as that goes.

BSN: We’re going to take some pictures of your scrapbook to incorporate.

EN: Well sure.

[Tape off/on]

PBB: --School of Nursing. And you know, it was this huge business. And the nurses did all the public health education. They came to the home. They delivered the babies and came to homes. And you could always tell a public health nurse, because in the summer she had a blue uniform and a white hat, and [unclear] bag and blue shoes.

EN: Yeah, we had brown ones.

PBB: Yeah, and they always [unclear]. They had a big blue sweater that buttoned up the front; they had that [unclear].

EN: Well, if we wanted to use sweaters, we had to wear them under the uniform.

PBB: At Johns Hopkins School of Nursing you could wear the sweater, but you had to wear it in a certain way. And if you got too hot for it, you'd have to unbutton it, and you'd have to put it over your shoulders.

[Tape off/on]

EN: --went down for breakfast, but you had inspection first, to make sure that you wore black shoes with stockings, that they were whole, that you had a slip on. I'm not sure if they checked for panties or not. But there were a couple of schools that sent male nurses. And they were in the door way just enjoying [laughs] everything that they were testing. But when you went down for lunch, if a senior—

[Tape off/on]

EN: --but his Lieutenant Governor was there, and [unclear]. That was another thing: we learned our anatomy in the autopsy room. And it got so it didn't make any—

[Tape off/on]

EN: --in one of my books there. But I wrote it for the church. They wanted something because he was getting up in age. And like I said, I

think I told you, that the woman in charge wouldn't pay out, "That's too much," and wouldn't pay the printers. But they wanted the book. Yeah, so they got—I don't know where they are now, because all of them were not sold. But on that first book, it was interesting, with their meetings and what have you, that Revs would say, you know, they should get it. Well, I think I sold thirty that night; everybody in the meeting got one.

BSN: But you know, that's—the whole issue of what you write.

EN: This was one of the women, one of the older women there, at Roswell. And she lived in South America, where everybody had maids. So when you worked on her floor, apparently the girls had to wash her underwear and her stockings, things like that. When I came on, I refused.

BSN: That didn't go over too well, did it?

EN: No, it didn't! But I still didn't do it!

BSN: They really bring back memories, don't they?

PBB: That reminds me, yeah, and it brings back a memory to me of my roommate. I used to work in an office with her; she used to be a stenographer who was in the same office. I sat next to the window that was off of the toilet. And I remember that Alice would come, and she was just crazy as a loon. She was just crazy!

[End of Interview]