

## Dorothy Wallace – Audio Transcript

(Interviewer) So to just begin, umm, I would like to ask you, what is your relationship or interest with history and family histories?

(Dorothy) Going to school, that was my favourite subject. And I was raised in a household where my mother came up in the time of-where school was not important out in the country to the black community. So my mother could not read nor write, but she had a fantastic memory and so that's why I feel that I have been blessed with her memory. Ummm my other siblings they'll say, I don't know how you can remember all of that, I can't, and its funny I can remember from the time like-I-I-I- can't remember too much about my father because he was a returning World War I vet, and I died- he died when I was 8. So, for my remembrance of him, just bits and pieces. But my street, the people who were around me, where I went, how I went, they are just as vivid as if I was walking through those uh-uhs streets like I was born on Degge street, I was on Campbell avenue. I mean I was on Park Street and to this day I can remember the neighbours, who they were, what they did.

(Interviewer) That's really amazing, you know and that's sort of that shared oral history is a big thing within black history and culture you know and its amazing that you can uphold that

(Dorothy) And going to school when I first went to school before we moved to Wellington Street, I was one of five black children that was at Victor Lauriston school and we had to leave Degge street because my mother could not afford the coal and wood to keep and she was left 7 children. So naturally she had to go to work and she was a domestic and so to me that we were just coming over the railroad tracks but that was like coming to the street that I live on even today. To me, that was I was coming to another world and yet every Sunday I would walk over the railroad tracks and come to the church. I was at the BME church, first Victoria Church, the Methodist church of Canada, I was involved in the church and it was taking me out of that place that I had always known on Degge street. And the people I mean that was all my world. (finding words) so you can get on with your life but those people that wrap there arms around us they did the same on to Wellington street. And I've been on Wellington street all my life now and I'm 80 and now I've been married for 62 years and I just live in this community. And this community is part of me and I'm part of it. And when you are in this community there's no such thing as I. There is we. And us who – (some talking over each other) – go and do things, we feel very self-conscience about when we're singled out and we are presented with something. It's very foreign because we're team players....

(Interviewer) (Some talking over) Because you're a group, yeah. Interesting that's the community. That is something that I think is, I mean from my understanding, you know a strong core principle

(Dorothy) Yes

(Interviewer) of Black history.

(Dorothy) Yes

(Interviewer) You know, is-is-is community. Its rarely an individual...

(Dorothy) (some talking over) Cause all we had was one another

(Interviewer) to rely on

(Dorothy) yeah

(Interviewer) because there was nothing else really. Yeah so just to speak to some histories, umm, we are speaking a little bit about the Underground Railroad in our exhibition. And I am curious as to where you first heard about it, if you were ever taught it in school and where you did and how you see it being presented these days.

(Dorothy) My introduction to how lucky we were was in (May?) through the white school teachers and through the system. And all we knew was this man named John Brown and how lucky we were that we lived in the church where he went, we saw the John Brown body lying in his grave and that was it. I knew a little bit about my own history because of my mother and, ah, growing up as children sometimes I would get into scuffles, fights over the N-word and my first experience with my mother like that was I was called the N-word and I stood up for myself. Yes and everybody in this community knew if I was in trouble by the time I got from one corner to the next corner. Everybody knew what I did, how I did. And I get home and my mother is waiting for me. And she, I told her what happened and she proceeds to tell me what part of me do you want because I am both and from then on and then I was told why she was both and why I had to be better and recognize more than what I was doing and I was

(Interviewer) How old were you?

(Dorothy) I would say I was maybe about 10, 11?

(Interviewer) That early you were hearing this

(Dorothy) Oh yeah sure (Stumbling) When I went to Victoria Park over here, that was very common because other kids were coming in and not having the knowledge (Stumbling) like they are on the other side of the railroad tracks and we are on this side. Its always been that way. We're always on the other side of the tracks and that hurts me. But I also know that it is a pretty smart thing for what our forefathers did about being in a community where there was tracks going everywhere. Why we were taught, we were taught where the CN was going to take us, (stumbling) CN was running that way, CP is this way, Chesapeake, Ohio is that way. It was because we were, we didn't know how long (stumbling) back in the day they didn't know how long this was going to last. And if you look at us and we are always near water and always up high.

(Interviewer) for protection

(Dorothy) for protection. And I'm looking at it, this is making mad telling me I'm on the other side of the tracks, I'm ready to fight you. But now I'm looking at it, hey that was a smart thing, if something went wrong you were getting out of here. So you weren't running to get to it- , you were right there. So I'm looking at it differently. So that's where I learned about my –

(Interviewer) relationship?

(Dorothy) my-my-my yeah heritage in this town.

(Interviewer) And has that, you know since evolved those feelings, early feelings? Have they changed with the development of the community?

(Dorothy) No. Chatham is still very conservative and it is still has that stigma of where I, uh, where I go. I still you would think, after the proclamation act, you would have thought that doors are open. Yes doors are open but its how you are received when you go in there. And that still exists and in this, in this small community. But when that happens to me, I make it known, to the owners to just what is going on and proceed to tell them this is wrong and I will not be back and I will not send anyone that I'm involved with in here anymore.

(Interviewer) It's amazing and you know part of this exercise is and part of this conversation is to bring about these stories, the lived experience and present it to people in an exhibition. Children will be a large audience with this exhibition and I'm curious what maybe you would say to a child who might be experiencing things like that?

(Dorothy) Don't be afraid. Fear, fear just seems to be automatically within the human DNA or what we are made up of. But when somebody calls you a name, you naturally want to react and after 80 years of being in this skin, I have come to the conclusion for myself that it's not my problem that your mom and dad or grandmother and grandfather had that fear and took that fear that they had and gave it to you and that somehow you feel that gives you the right and the privilege to use that against another human being, another child, that didn't do anything to you, what is the fear? And for me to tell my race or Black kids, that's not your problem. Leave it alone. Don't try to fix it. You can go to somebody now that can fix it. Don't be like I was and get in –

(Interviewer) get in fights

(Dorothy) get into fights. And then thinking you've won and then go home and then you get a weapon, all because of a negative word. They think that gives them power. And soon as you give somebody up your power, they've won over you. Where if you, I know it's hard to walk away, I know you (stumbling) it's not right, it's not right but it's not your problem, you don't take out other peoples garbage. So don't pick it up and carry it with you.

(Interviewer) That is an amazing sentiment, you know, I'm sure some children will use that in their everyday life and they are probably around the age you first learned about your heritage and umm I mean it will be beneficial for them-

(Dorothy) I-I-I um because of that I lost watching my brother play hockey. And my brother is a well-known hockey coach, like he played on the Chatham Maroons, which is mostly White people.

(Interviewer) Right, I learned about him from Deirdre.

(Dorothy) and uh, he, I couldn't go to those, first of all we didn't have money, that's number one. And number two is me seeing somebody call my brother the N-word and it was used or Herbie who was his best friend who was Japanese and to hear their stories and I couldn't be a part of that sport, that activity that he was taking because I couldn't, he couldn't be on the ice and battling for a puck and worry about his sister in the grandstand causing almost you know some drama up there. So it was better that I did stay away from that but it hurts me to this day when I hear the story of my brother and we are very close. But I had no part, have no knowledge of that because of the system in which we were in at that time and you're talking about the late 50s and 60s.

(Interviewer) 50s and 60s

(Dorothy) 50s and 60s

(Interviewer) Right, right, and its so challenging, you can't, you are excluded from a space because you can't bear to witness the hardship against somebody else. It's really challenging, and you know these, these hardships, these stories, we try to present in um, museums like this one here and Pickering Museum and umm, we are thinking about stories that maybe haven't been told. Stories that aren't regularly told, that should be and I'm curious if you have any that the average, any stories that the average Canadian should know about black history and maybe its anecdotal, maybe its personal. Do you have anything you think is important?

(Dorothy) I'm very much umm ... cause my father was a soldier and because most the soldiers that were around me were of the First World War, that and then after that Second World War that, so all of that's, I'm very, very, partial too. And I think especially the older ones when they would talk to me, they would always say now you're somebody we went to war, because we thought it was the right thing to do to protect everybody and then talk to some of the Second World War Vets, it's a different story. Altogether, a lot of them got treated better overseas than what they did when they come back. And a lot of them wondered why they came back. So, so that's just how-where-part of my heart lives. But for myself and for story that I would like not just because I-for the girls because the boys, they have their heroes in sports in-in, you know, the sports scene

(Dorothy) But I want the little Black girls to know that we had heroes too that I never heard about till I was 65 almost 70 years old. And that story is Sophia Jones. Sophia

Jones was born here in the city of Chatham, her grandfath-, her father was born into slavery, but his father got them out. He had to pay for them. But he got them out. And when they got -, when her grandfather got her father out, he gave them an education over in Ohio. Her father came here after he got his education, and he raised his children here in the city of Chatham. Sophia had that time, women at that time as you know, they didn't think girls could do anything. But Sophia always wanted to be a doctor. So, Sophia went to Toronto and got her nursing degree, she came back, she taught in schools, most people in this community you have people who are teachers, principals, they if they worked in this community, they stayed in this community. They didn't-they didn't go out and come in. They were in. That's how we are. So, Sophia stayed and did some teaching, she goes to her father and tells her father, I still want to become a doctor. So, she left the city of Chatham. She was born here; she left here and went to Michigan. She is Michigan's first Black Doctor. She is not known for setting up some of the best programs that umm that they have in the United States at the Spelman schools in nurses, and she was at the forefront of it. And I'm thinking, a girl from Chatham and I'm thinking Wow. It would have gave me, I think, a little bit more sense of pride than always thinking that I was going to be in a work field, where I was always going to have to do something for somebody. You were geared to go that way. Always going and fetching or giving. And I couldn't see myself that way and so I just often look back and think of Sophia who could have, you know, give me some inspiration to say, you know you can, you can.

(Dorothy) Where I gave up. I happened to be in a high school where I had to hear the N-word right from the teacher. And I was in grade 9 and I felt I couldn't be there. So I came out very young, got married young and I was a stay at home mom, and helped my husband [Wyatt?] was a lab director, so in this city of Chatham here.

(Interviewer) And are you thinking that if you had Sophia when you were younger your life may have been different

(Dorothy) \*cuts Interviewer off to say\* Yes.

(Interviewer) And maybe would you have done?

(Dorothy) I feel at times I'm so related to the community, it would have to be something in the community.

(Interviewer) right, right

(Dorothy) Cause I'm just – I think when I was a little girl, I was just a little busy body. If I wasn't at Mrs. Weavers house in 2 days they were calling us saying is Dorothy is sick? Because apparently I was a sickly little kid. Back then burning off the coal, burning off the wood, so I was a sickly little kid and I mean in the [Boswells], in the Henderson's, I just - I was everybody's kid but mothers I guess. So that's the kind of upbringing but I just feel that the determination in my mother. I look at my mother now and I do not know with having 9 children, 3 had gone when my father had died and to raise us and she

never remarried. She would be what you'd say a domestic for people who had money, wealth and so with that wealth comes some working for wealthy people sometimes things trickle down. So I never knew how poor we were till I look back on things now but I'm thinking, I can't be, we weren't too poor because the stuff they were throwing away came to us. I wore beaver skin boots and I had to stuff them with newspaper because my foot was too small but I had beaver skin boots to wear. So some of the hand-me-downs from being a domestic atmosphere doesn't make you feel so poor but –

(Interviewer) But it wasn't an actual reflection of your lifestyle

(Dorothy) Yeah

(Interviewer) And in fact it wasn't, you know, your clothing it was somebody else's.

(Dorothy) Some dresses and things that they were throwing away that my mother felt that they could be-be of use

(Interviewer) Wow! That's incredible.

(Dorothy) And I mean the drapes that hung in our house, hung in their house. So the trickle down from there. Like I said, I really admired my mother and the way that she raised us, how she raised us was you are responsible for your own actions and there is a price that you are going to pay and you might as well own up to it in the beginning because if you don't it's only going to get worse later on. And that's how we were raised.

(Interviewer) and I mean that's a great sentiment, you know

(Dorothy) I mean she did give up, I mean my mother was a young widow, and uh, there was no men.

(Interviewer) yeah she was a mother

(Dorothy) She was a –

(Interviewer) first and foremost, yeah that's amazing.

(Dorothy) and uh, when I had children, one of her things, advice from her to me was to stay at home and enjoy your children

(Interviewer) and you did

(Dorothy) yeah I did

(Interviewer) that's great. And it seems like also you had children outside of your own. When you are in the community, speaking to everybody, and it seems like you've been a support system. Even just from watching you interact with Michelle there, like, there's so much love.

(Dorothy) Yeah. Well I just – I just come up – come up in-in-in that. Everybody is connected in this area one way or another and because we had the – Wilbur Forest was

a school but it was turned into a community center, after we were allowed to go the White schools and that community served everybody. Not just Black kids, mostly Black kids. But I can honestly say to you sitting here, after the Second World War, we were united nations before there was united nations.

(Interviewer) Wow, incredible. You wou- \*Interviewer gets cut off\*

(Dorothy) We had the Japanese, well they corrected me on it because I would say we had a Japanese concentration camp and Samantha would say Dorothy you can't say Japanese concentration camp, you have to say Internment camp

(Interviewer) Internment camp, yeah

(Dorothy) but to me its still the ---

(Interviewer) It's what you know. I mean it's what you called it, you know.

(Dorothy) and so, a lot of a Japanese were interned in there and when the war was over they came into the community. And then they stayed in the community, and they were part of the community. And then the Dutch started coming and then once the Dutch started coming in and they were building their church and we at the British Methodist Episcopal Church on the corner here, we let them use the church till their church got built. So that was communicating with all the different people coming and going in this area. So, I always say we were united nations before there was one.

(Interviewer) That's a great thought. That, I mean all these different races and countries and groups all in one place, you know, its \*stumbles\* a larger representation of what Canada is now but the Black story is so different than a lot of those other stories. So I am curious, maybe personally is there something that is challenging for you to speak about when you speak about the Black history?

(Dorothy) For me, the Black history is so unique because you can't tell this story without the US. The US can't talk about us. You know we are all intertwined and then like our-our-our mother you know Africa. I, myself, I'm concerned for the next generation because they don't seem to have a meeting ground and it's the same with umm-, I can't speak on the Indigenous people but I mean they scattered us so.

(Interviewer) Right

(Dorothy) And they divided us. That what I'm hoping for us to come altogether but we are divided and I don't think the division is so wide that it will never come back. And-and that is very challenging to me but my goal here is to get this story into the schoolbooks which hopefully I'll live long enough in the next 2-3years that it will, and I also want adults, White adults, who have children who have grown up and who have married Black men and Black women that they get an understanding of this mixing. It just didn't happen over night, it's been going on since the beginning of time and you shouldn't really hold that misinformation that was told to you. You gotta let it go. Because how are

they going to grow up. They've got like what my mother says "I'm both, now which part of me do you want today."

(Interviewer) right, interesting

(Dorothy) and I do-I do, have concerns because my own grandchildren are mixed and I want them to be treated like everybody else. I want a, it's never going to happen, but I want a plain levelling field. I want the school teacher to be able to teach my great-grandchildren or my -, I don't think I'll have any but they're all 4 legged ones now. But I want any child that comes through her door that they don't have to be afraid to walk in there. I don't want them to feel that if you're not a basketball player or a baseball player that you maybe want to be a doctor, I want you to have the same, you give them the same as you would everybody else and I don't feel that is happening at this time.

(Interviewer) Interesting. Uh, \*stumbles\* That's an amazing goal to have. I started thinking about how you were talking about this meeting ground, this space, like you had this community of sorts. And I think about the modern world and technology and you know phone calls or Facebook groups, I find that can be a mode of a new sort of meeting ground but I was curious as to what you think about that as compared to what your community was like?

(Dorothy) to me I don't think I could, well maybe because I didn't come up in to it and I never had it and I still don't. Uh, I'm better at the one on one, you're looking at me, I'm looking at you. You can sense how I am, the way I can sense how you are. How can that really -

(Interviewer) Yeah it can't really, you know.

(Dorothy) No

(Interviewer) It's so much more meaningful, I agree. Well you know there's clearly a back and forth with 2 people and there's energy and the energy doesn't exist in this community

(Dorothy) and-and-and I'm a very sensitive person. I can, like, I can walk into a room and sense.

(Interviewer) right, you can read it.

(Dorothy) yeah.

(Interviewer) yeah you understand.

(Dorothy) and I understand where and if I feel, 'no I shouldn't be here'.

(Interviewer) interesting

(Dorothy) and I will before I leave make a connection with that person that I feel is stopping me from doing it. I will meet their eye and then I will turn and walk out the door, so that they are aware of why I am not there.



(Interviewer) Interesting that is so interesting. That constant action

(Dorothy) Yes

(Interviewer) where you are dealing with people. You are engaging with potential barriers to entry physically into a space, that's, that action, from my perspective, its very admirable to see you do those things and to hear about those stories. And I think maybe for some children who would be listening, maybe that's a good quality to be carrying on in their life, you know.

(Dorothy) And when the children come in, you-you-you, can see the ones \*stumbles\* and its mostly the Black children (Incomprehensible) it's because they haven't heard the stories, they're parents haven't talked to them about it. And that's why it is so important that's its coming in to the history books.

(Interviewer) Absolutely

(Dorothy) and I got to tell you, I feel so sorry for some of the older ones that have gone and passed and all the hurts. So many hurts all because of someone feeling, made them feel that they weren't good enough. And I think sometimes we threw in the towel a little too early. I know, myself, I think I did. But I'm making – I always knew I was a late bloomer but I mean this is ridiculous, at this stage of my life, that I'm just coming into my own.

(Interviewer) Well you seem so knowledgeable about your community and it seems like you found yourself, from my perspective.

(Dorothy) yeah

(Interviewer) You feel- you present yourself as you are comfortable being yourself and at what point in life did that come about?

(Dorothy) I think because I was a stay at home mom, and Aunt Dorothy was there, and I'll always Aunt Dorothy, Aunt Dorothy, Aunt Dorothy, Aunt Dorothy and I was always at home and my husband took a fall and had to be away. We had never been apart before.

(Interviewer) Okay, wow.

(Dorothy) And he had a brain injury and so he was in London for a while (Incomprehensible). For the first time in my life, coming from a family of 9, getting married, having children, being there for them, being there for him, I never was alone in my life at all and then when this happened well say, that's when I found Dorothy.

(Interviewer) You had to figure out who you were.

(Dorothy) Yeah. And I will be honest with you, when he, I've been by myself and everybody would say 'oh she's in this house all by herself, oh she's going have to sell the house and move in --- \*stumbles\*' and leave the community? And go where? Where do you want me to go? I've been here all my life, where do you want me to go?

(Interviewer) It's your space that you know well.

(Dorothy) and so I just gravitated \*stumbles\* this place was in serious trouble and I said 'okay I'll go over, I'll help', for some reason I'm on clean up duty and that's all I came over to do. But when he was gone and I found Dorothy and I'm going to tell you I found Dorothy, right, and I've been like that ever since. And nobody, and I mean nobody is taking me away from me. If it took me that long to get there. And I mean even my brothers and sisters are amazed at what I am doing.

(Interviewer) Well I mean it's a good sentiment, it exists in everyone. There are barriers to finding yourself and ultimately you need to find yourself to be happy and it's a different story to everybody. But like yourself as an example it's something that younger people might look up too. To think about, you know, there's hope if you feel uncomfortable with yourself, you know. It's the ability to become happy and do good work like yourself is there.

(Dorothy) I feel like for every trial and tribulation, when you are going through it, yeah, you see everyday its never going to end but it does. And I'm going to tell you all those bumps and all those scars that I have been through I'm going to tell you where I'm at right now at this time in my life, those scars and those knocks and those bumps have made me who I am.

(Interviewer) That's incredible. I want to ask you, if you were to leave this conversation with one sentiment that you could provide to a Canadian person, wherever they may be umm what would it be?

\*Long pause\*

(Dorothy) You live in a country that men fought for and died for and left their families and their wives, and their life, to give you the opportunity to go forward. To be who you want to be. You cannot throw that away and not give back for what was given to you. You have to somewhere in your life give what was given to you. It's only a short little while but the sacrifice that they made has to be continued on. It can't be wasted. And you can't take it and make it more profitable for yourself than helping somebody along the way that you are going to meet. You have to give back. And that is what I would say.

(Interviewer) That's amazing. That's an incredible thought. Everybody is given some sort of opportunity and it seems like you have so much experience and it sounds like with that experience, giving back has given you so much joy.

(Dorothy) Yes

(Interviewer) right?

(Dorothy) Because I felt that for what the community did for us and that they interfered with us living, they were just there. And the corrections and the opportunity to be kids and growing up and seeing how you grow, and how you are growing. It doesn't seem like very much but it is. It's truly, to me if you've talk to other people who have lived in

this community and who have left this community, they'll tell you, they'd give anything to come back. But I just happen to be one of the lucky ones that have stayed. And yes the community has definitely changed. There's not as many Black people in this community as there was but that's progress of things and moving along. And I wondered myself for a long time 'What happened?' and you know life happened.

(Interviewer) All these different things.

(Dorothy) Like Windsor happened and the automotive, the guys would have stayed here but they had to leave for their families. Big thing for my generation, as rock n' rollers, well we had to go to big town Toronto.

(Interviewer) right, the big city.

(Dorothy) So you can see how different directions for

(Interviewer) and those communities become built in those places, right? Yeah. Even if it's not here they carry on that forward hopefully at least.

(Dorothy) It's hard for people to believe that in this city of Chatham in the 1850s there were more Black people here in this city than anywhere else in Ontario. Even bigger than Toronto. Toronto got mostly the Caribbean and the people coming from the islands but we were mostly in this area when we were coming up through the south. My family mostly came from Delaware and so that's why it was what it was. And they were free and an education and they were doing and everything. But it was the war, the civil war, so you could see that at that time it was starting to decline and go in a different direction, cause a lot went back to help to fight, a lot left, like my Uncles and things left Canada and went to Michigan. And then like my father did go to Michigan, it's funny because in my family I have three American siblings, they are dead and gone now, but I'm home grown, I tell everybody I'm home grown –

(Interviewer) Chatham, that's amazing

(Dorothy) just over on Deggs street and it's funny how I know who, my mother birthed at home, I was given the information that the nurse who attended her, who helped my mother was Mrs. \*Patterson\*. I remember – I have all that knowledge. And I –

(Interviewer) I want to say, that you are this incredible knowledge resource for Chatham and for elsewhere as well, but you really are. I was just talking to Deidre, you are going to love Dorothy she knows everything about, a little something about everything.

(Dorothy) Yeah I think so. A little like –

(Interviewer) and it's true

(Dorothy) like growing up like for my first job, I ran an elevator at the William \*Pitt\* Hotel.

(Interviewer) oh wow

(Dorothy) and so uhh being at the William \*Pitt\* hotel I was in the center of things.

(Interviewer) yeah you learned, you heard conversations

(Dorothy) Just to give you one little story, because I didn't have my father, my father had died. And I ran the elevator and sometimes as not having a father I would had older brothers but just to be connected to my father I would go to Harrison Hall which was our city hall and I would go around the corner and they would have up on the wall in city hall all of the names of the soldiers who served and my fathers name was up there. And it was just 'there he is'. You know I couldn't see him but-

(Interviewer) he's back.

(Dorothy) yeah that kind of thing. That's what I would do. And that was my connection to him and when they tore down Harrison Hall and put up the mall down there, ohhh I was –

(Interviewer) You must have been so upset.

(Dorothy) \*stumbles\* He's dying again.

(Interviewer) yeah he's being taken away

(Dorothy) So, so, I was very upset.

(Interviewer) Yeah I can imagine.

(Dorothy) And so I – somebody was in here – so I said what ever happened to that scroll that was up on the wall with all the soldiers names that served here and they looked at me like I was on another planet.

(Interviewer) Really

(Dorothy) They roll up stuff and put stuff somewhere and we don't know where it is. But everything in this city as I was growing up I didn't have to go past the third street bridge, cause all my needs were met.

(Interviewer) its all right there

(Dorothy) all my needs were met.

(Interviewer) in the community, right?

(Dorothy) Yes. In the community.

(Interviewer) it's about localization, you know keeping it very close. It sounds like that's sort of your thesis with this whole conversation, is like keep family members close, and share stories and ultimately your lifestyle will be amazing. Yeah it's really incredible. Dorothy, thanks so much for sharing your story.