

**Gift and Release Agreement:**

We MILDRED T. NESBITT and KATHY N. ADAMS  
(Interviewee, print) (Interviewer, print)

do hereby give and grant to Jacksonville State University, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at 1228 So 51 ST- BIRMINGHAM, AL on the date(s) of 3-18-96 for the oral history collection being compiled by the Jacksonville State University Library.

Mildred T. Nesbitt  
(Interviewee's signature)

Address 1228 So. 51 ST

Date 3-18-96

BIRMINGHAM, AL 35222

Phone (205) 592-9414

Kathy N. Adams  
(Interviewer's signature)

Address 12 RUBY RIDGE ROAD

Date 3-18-96

ANNISTON, AL 36207

Phone (205) 236-2666

**Interviewee Background Information**

Name: MILDRED THOMPSON NESBITT  
Address: 1228 SOUTH 51ST STREET - BIRMINGHAM, AL 35222  
Phone Number(s): (205) 592-9414  
Approximate age or date of birth: 5-12-22  
Mother's name: MARY ELLA CHEEK THOMPSON  
Father's name: BALFOUR FORSYTHE THOMPSON  
Places lived and when: BIRMINGHAM AL 1922-46; OPELIKA 1946-47;  
FT. LAUDERDALE ORLANDO MOBILE - 1947-1951.  
SHREVEPORT - 1951-52, BIRMINGHAM 1952-PRESENT.  
Education: High School; BUSINESS SCHOOL  
Religion: METHODIST  
Business, political and social memberships (past and present):  
CRESTWOOD CIRCLE GARDEN CLUB, CHARITY LEAGUE, AMULETS,  
HOLMAN & COMER SCHOOL PTA, BRIDGE CLUBS  
Present occupation: HOMEMAKER  
Former occupation(s): "  
Special skills: SEWING, GARDENING, COOKING & DECORATING  
Major Accomplishments: CARE & RAISING OF TWO CHILDREN,  
WOMEN'S SYMPHONY DECORATOR SHOWHOUSE  
Local events in which you have participated: FESTIVAL OF ARTS,  
WOMEN'S SYMPHONY DECORATOR SHOWHOUSE, FLOWER SHOWS.  
State and/or regional events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_  
National events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_  
International events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_  
Natural born U.S. citizen? (Yes) No  
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Country from which you emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_  
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_  
Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Earliest memories of Birmingham.
- II. Social events in which you participated.
- III. Role of the Church.
- IV. School years.
- V. Great Depression.
- VI. Effects of World War II.
- VII. Early married life.
- VIII. Korean Conflict.
- IX. Civil Rights during the 1960's.
- X. Vietnam War.
- XI. Effect of Depression on friends and neighbors.
- XII. Garden Club.
- XIII. Charity League and Festival of Arts.
- XIV. Social Club.

## CHRONOLOGY 1920 - 1970

- 1920 Nineteenth Amendment ratified; League of Women Voters organized.
- 1922 Cable Act granting married women citizenship independent of spouse's status; Color films debut.
- 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial.
- 1927 Television introduced by AT & T.
- 1927 Charles Lindbergh crosses the Atlantic.
- 1928 Herbert Hoover elected president.
- 1929 Wall Street Stock Market crash.
- 1931 Scottsboro Case rallies Civil Rights supporters.
- 1932 Federal Home Loan Bank Act; lowest point of the Great Depression.
- 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt elected; National Guard established; prohibition repealed.
- 1935 Social Security Act passed; Emergency Relief Appropriations Act.
- 1936 King Edward Abdicates English throne; "Gone With the Wind" premieres.
- 1938 Labor Acts and food controls enacted; "War of the Worlds" presented on radio.
- 1939 Einstein contacts FDR concerning atomic fission and bomb; England and France declare war on Germany.

- 1940 Socialist Party developed; Four billion dollars spent to build up Navy; Selective Service Training and Service Act passed(age 21-35).
- 1941 U.S. declares war on Japan.
- 1942 United Nations established.
- 1942-45 Rationing of food and manufactured goods enforced.
- 1943 FDR declares wage freezes.
- 1944 Allies attack Germany by air.
- 1945 Atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima.
- 1946 First meeting of General Assembly of U.N.; Atomic bomb tested.
- 1948 Korea splits (Soviet North and free South); new Selective Service age requirements 19-25; NATO founded.
- 1950 Korean War.
- 1951 Presidential terms limits(two consecutive terms); Television's first program.
- 1952 U.S. tests hydrogen bomb; Eisenhower elected; Korean Armistice signed.
- 1953 Oschner announces link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer.
- 1954 U.S. guarantees to help Japan's defense force.
- 1954-55 Brown Vs Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court decision.
- 1956 Salk vaccine for polio; Montgomery Bus Boycott; Autherine Lucy suspended from University of Alabama.

- 1957 Little Rock school de-segregation ordered.
- 1959 Fidel Castro and Nikita Krushchev visit U.S.
- 1960 John F. Kennedy elected.
- 1961 U.S. Breaks off relations with Cuba; Telstar sent into orbit; AT&T/Bell Labs instituted; Peace Corps established; John Birch Society founded; Soviets put first man in space; Bay of Pigs invasion; Freedom Riders attacked in Anniston and Birmingham; Berlin Wall is erected.
- 1962 John Glenn orbits the earth.
- 1966 School prayer declared unconstitutional.
- 1963 Civil Rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Evers killed in Mississippi; Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombed in Birmingham; Kennedy assassinated.
- 1964 Johnson's War on Poverty; Johnson elected by record vote landslide.
- 1965 First air raid on North Vietnam; Selma March; Medicare Bill; Watts Riot in Los Angeles.
- 1966 Civil Rights bill defeated, hydrogen bomb accidentally dropped on Spain, dirt removed to U.S.
- 1967 Three astronauts die in fire; anti-war protests.
- 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated; Robert F. Kennedy assassinated; Nixon elected; Jackie Kennedy remarries.

- 1969      Armstrong and Aldrin walk on the moon; Woodstock; Vietnam troop withdrawal begins.
- 1970      Supreme Court issues immediate school integration orders for Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas; Strategic Arms Limitation Talks begin with Soviet Union in Vienna.(SALT); Eighteen year olds eligible to vote.

PERSONAL CHRONOLOGY OF  
MILDRED T. NESBITT

- 1922 Born in Birmingham, Alabama May 12. Mother- Mary Ella Cheek Thompson, Father- Balfour Forsythe Thompson.
- 1928 Enrolled in Woodlawn Grammar School.
- 1940 Graduated from Woodlawn High School.
- 1941 Graduated from Burroughs Business School; went to work for Armour and Company.
- 1946 Married Sumner G. Nesbitt, moved to Auburn/ Opelika.
- 1948 Birth of first child, Mary Kathryn.
- 1951 Moved to Barksdale Air Force Base.
- 1952 Moved back to Birmingham.
- 1953 Birth of second child, Sumner Graham, Jr., joined garden club, Charity League, Festival of Arts.
- 1957 Moved into new home.
- 1958 Hired Rose Pumphrey.
- 1966 First child begins college.
- 1970 Second child begins college.
- 1975 Birth of first grandchild.
- 1976 Takes first trip outside of U.S.A.



## **ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONS FOR MILDRED T. NESBITT**

1. What are some of your earliest childhood memories of life in Birmingham?
2. What were some of the social events in which you participated or attended?
3. What role did the church play in your life?
4. How did the depression effect you, your family and friends? What do you remember about Black Sunday?
5. What was school like (elementary and high school)?
6. What were some of the memorable events or happenings during your high school days?
7. What economic class was your family?
8. What are your memories of Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term in office? The second and third terms?
9. How did the "New Deal" Administration effect you and your family?
10. Do you remember "War of the Worlds" broadcast on the radio in 1933?
11. Do you remember the first peace time draft? What were your reactions to it? (Selective Service Act 1940)
12. How did World War II effect you and your family?
13. What did you do during wartime? Did you participate in any civil defense organizations?
14. How did you feel about dropping the atom bomb on Hiroshima? How do you remember the announcement of peace?
15. What was your reaction to organization of the U.N.?
16. Do you remember rationing?
17. What was your reaction to the wage freezing of FDR in 1943?
18. What were your early married years like?
19. How did the Korean War effect you?

20. Do you remember when you first had television? What shows did you watch?
21. What did you feel about the Republicans when Eisenhower ran for president in 1952? What were your political preferences? What had they been up until that time?
22. Do you remember the 3-D movies? Did you see any?
23. How did you react to the Brown v Topeka Board of Education ruling by the Supreme Court in 1954? What were your reactions to the Montgomery Bus boycott?
24. What were your feelings about the civil rights movement, particularly the incidents that took place in Birmingham? (1963)
25. How did you feel about Bull Connor's politics. How did you feel about him as a neighbor?
26. What were your feelings about the federal government and the civil rights movement in the 60's under Kennedy and Johnson? What were you doing when Kennedy was killed? What was your reaction?
27. Do you remember when the Methodist Church split in 1956 over racial matters?
28. What do you remember about the Cuban missile crisis?
29. What do remember about Telstar? The Peace Corps? The John Birch Society? The Ku Klux Klan?
30. Do you remember the Freedom Riders in 1962?
31. What was your reaction to the Supreme Court ruling about prayer in school? (1966).
32. What was your reaction to Elvis Presley? Rock and Roll?
33. How did you feel about the Sixteenth Street bombing?
34. What was your reaction to the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy and the attempt on George Wallace?
35. How did you feel about the Wallace administration? The Folsom administration?
36. Do you remember when the Berlin wall went up in 1961?

37. How did you react to John Glenn, first man to orbit the earth? The U.S. space program?
38. How did you feel when Johnson was sworn in for the first time?
39. What were your feelings about the presidential campaign of 1964 - LBJ vs. Goldwater?
40. What do you remember about the Selma March? The Los Angeles Watts Riot?(1965)
41. Do you remember when service stations were all full service?
42. Do you remember anti-war protests?
43. Do you remember when Jackie Kennedy remarried? What was your reaction?
44. What were your political views during the 1968 Presidential campaign of Nixon vs. Humphrey?
45. How did the Vietnam war effect your family?

JACKSONVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

MILDRED T. NESBITT: LIFE OF A SOUTHERN LADY  
IN BIRMINGHAM, 1922-1970

HISTORY 500  
APRIL 8, 1996

KATHY N. ADAMS

Mildred T. Nesbitt: Life of a Southern Lady in Birmingham  
1922-1970

Born into the middle class society of Birmingham in 1922, Mildred Thompson Nesbitt has spent most of her life within the city limits. She currently resides in the suburb of Crestwood, with Sumner Nesbitt, her husband of fifty years. Much of her life has centered around family, friends, church and the local community.

Mrs. Nesbitt's family history is deeply rooted in Alabama. As early as 1815, her great-great-great grandfather, Williamson Hawkins settled in Jefferson County from Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> Josiah Wilkins, her great-great grandfather on her father's side, left Boston in 1820 and moved his wife and children to Mobile.<sup>2</sup> Still, another ancestor, Talbert Fanning Cheek, moved East from Texas to "grow up with Birmingham," in 1871.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of Mildred's birth, Birmingham was on the upward spiral from an economic slump in 1921. Birmingham had become the mid-south's transportation center. There were nine railroads running through Birmingham in addition to the government owned railroad which ran for seventeen miles from the city to Birmingham Port. The "Roaring Twenties" were getting underway with the roaring of airplanes overhead. Glenn Messer and Eddie Stinson built Dixie Airfield in the 1920's and made the first air mail flight in the South, from Birmingham to Chattanooga. Regular air mail service began in

1928 at Roberts Field. Charles Lindbergh visited the city shortly after his trans-Atlantic flight and helped Birmingham get a municipal airport by 1930.<sup>4</sup>

Birmingham had several tall buildings by 1922, that ranged from six to twenty-five stories tall. Several hotels had been built including the Tutwiler and Moulton as well as the Bankhead and Thomas Jefferson. The many hotels and the municipal auditorium helped Birmingham become a convention city. It was during this time that viaducts were built on Birmingham's major downtown streets.<sup>5</sup>

Birmingham's educational system reached a critical point by 1923. The major annexation of 1910 bequeathed Birmingham with several inferior schools. A population surge of more than 70,000 in the 1920's caused a shortage of classrooms in the city; a 1923 survey found that more than nine thousand Birmingham children were not enrolled in school. A program for building new city schools got underway in the 1920's and a few were built before the crash of 1929 ended it.<sup>6</sup>

Other local occurrences at the time of Mrs. Nesbitt's birth was the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan in Jefferson County. The Klan used East Lake Park to initiate Nathan Bedford Forrest Klan No. 60 in 1923. The crowds were so large that extra streetcars had to be put on to accommodate the crowd of about 50,000. Fireworks, a barbecue, and a car raffle were part of the celebration. By 1927 the Klan had reached its peak of influence, with members such as Hugo Black.<sup>7</sup>

While Klan members held their meetings in various city parks, they were by no means the only ones using the parks. Birmingham was basically a blue-collar city, with miners, iron and steel workers and cotton mill workers. Most of the citizens had little money for traveling and made use of the near-by parks and springs for their recreation. East Lake was a favorite place for people to come for picnics and Sunday outings. The City of Birmingham purchased the park in 1917, after an amusement park was in operation there.<sup>8</sup>

Mrs. Nesbitt remembered going to East Lake and Avondale Parks as a child,

“East Lake Park was a big part of the entertainment facilities in Birmingham. At East Lake they had a roller coaster, a tunnel of love boat ride, a merry-go-round and several other rides. My favorite was the merry-go-round. I would always get the biggest horse. But I wanted no part of the roller coaster, it was built out over the lake. Avondale Park had a zoo at the time. There were all kinds of animals, bears, elephants, monkeys. The black bears were kept in a natural cave there at Avondale.”<sup>9</sup>

Streetcars were an important mode of transportation. Many of the roads in the suburbs and city were dirt during Mrs. Nesbitt’s childhood. Although her father had an automobile, Mrs. Nesbitt and her friends would often take the streetcar downtown. “You could get on and ride anywhere for fifteen cents.”<sup>10</sup> Many of the people in Mrs. Nesbitt’s neighborhood used streetcars as their basic transportation.

Mildred remembered childhood days when ice was kept in a wooden box lined with metal and an ice man made daily deliveries. He would chip off pieces of his huge blocks of ice and give to children to eat as well as give them wagon rides up the street during the hot summer days. His ice wagon was

pulled by horses. Food was often very fresh, according to Mrs. Nesbitt. Her mother, Mary Thompson would walk to the grocery store and pick out a live chicken for dinner. Most of the time either the grocer or the next door neighbor, Mrs. Finley, who raised chickens in her back yard, would kill it. Mrs. Nesbitt remembers only one time when her mother attempted to kill a chicken herself.

“She took Daddy’s hatchet and went down on the chicken with it, but she missed the neck and hit the body. Blood spurted everywhere. The chicken twitched all over the back yard. It was a horrible experience.”<sup>11</sup>

Church activities were important social events in Birmingham and Jefferson County. Sunday afternoons in the summer were the times for picnics and watermelon cuttings. Mrs. Nesbitt remembered how they would cool down the watermelons in the cold waters of Turkey Creek. Other socials included hayrides.

“Sometimes we would get a wagon drawn by a horse and load it with hay. We would get up on it with our bandannas and overalls and go out to somewhere like the Artesan Wells, which is where the Eastwood Mall is now. The Artesan Wells are still there, but they are under the drainage system.”<sup>12</sup>

Mrs. Nesbitt considers the church to be a very important factor in her life. She currently attends the same church that her grandmother joined as a charter member. Mrs. Nesbitt feels that belonging to the Woodlawn Methodist Church is a long time tradition in her family. She has been a member since her youth and has raised her own children in that church.<sup>13</sup>

By the time Mildred was eight years old, the Great Depression had struck the nation. Birmingham was among the cities hardest hit. Jefferson County and Birmingham both voted overwhelmingly for Franklin D. Roosevelt, hoping the



“New Deal” would help pull them out of the economic depression. Some city businessmen helped relieve their employees while the banks were closed. Victor Hansen, publisher of the Birmingham News, came to the aid of his employees by asking local grocery stores as well as utility companies to extend credit to them by charging everything they needed to him. He agreed to pay the bills when the banks reopened. Two grocery stores, Hill and A&P gave out food tickets. The Coca-Cola company paid its employees with orders of Cokes, while the Britling Cafeteria gave credit to people who worked downtown.<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Nesbitt recalled that the Great Depression did not affect her family as much as it did others.

“My daddy had a job as the assistant traffic manager at Frisco Railroad. We hardly felt the Depression. I remember the Marsh family, though, the father lost his job. The mother knew that she could bake and began baking loaves of bread. The six children in the family would take the bread door to door and sell them out of big wicker baskets. The bread sold so well, that Mrs. Marsh began baking cakes and cookies, saving enough to open a bakery there in Woodlawn. The bakery was so successful that the family opened more bakeries in other sections of town, eventually going into the wholesale baking business.”<sup>15</sup>

Even though room and board was available at six dollars per week, tens of thousands of Birminghamians could not afford that. Steel mills had been shut down, and over a thousand mortgages were foreclosed in the city area by the end of the first quarter of 1933. It seemed indeed, that absentee landlords, such as U.S. Steel controlled Birmingham. Loan sharks descended on the city in a feeding frenzy. Their money came from outside lenders, so that when the loans were paid back with interest, more money left Birmingham’s economy.<sup>16</sup>

Municipal park property was offered for sale because the city

government had no money. A public outcry against the sale of Lane Park was all that saved it. Oscar Wells of the First National Bank of Birmingham played an important part in making a loan to the city of one million dollars in 1933.<sup>17</sup>

Some people attributed Birmingham's slow recovery to the steel industry. U.S. Steel charged a higher tonnage rate for its Birmingham steel than its Pittsburgh steel. A factor in Birmingham's steel price was the added thirty percent freight rate charged by the northeastern owned railroads. The "Pittsburgh Plus" surcharge was profitable to the company, but it meant that Birmingham felt the first cut backs in production, rather than its sister city's plants. In the 1930's, the president of Tennessee, Coal and Iron made an open statement that he did not care to see diversified industry come to Birmingham, that TCI sold steel.<sup>18</sup>

The social well-being of Birmingham took a precipitous plunge along with the economy. Roberries and murders increased which again brought charges that Birmingham was the "murder capital." Studies done in 1935 showed Birmingham to have the highest illiteracy rate, the highest venereal disease rate, and the lowest per capita income of any city in the country within that population range.<sup>19</sup>

Federal authorities along with the Red Cross attempted to find work for the unemployed and food for the hungry; the Red Cross initiated a "spring planting" and gave out free seed and land for gardens. Libraries, parks, and recreational facilities were activated to help fill idle time of the unemployed with education and entertainment.<sup>20</sup>

Over three hundred sixty million dollars of relief money was used in the surrounding area over a four year period. Repairing the statue of Vulcan and moving it to a new home atop Red Mountain was a Works Progress Administration project. U. S. Steel invested about twenty nine million dollars in its Ensley and Fairfield plants as economic recovery slowly returned to the Birmingham area. However, as the economy returned to Birmingham, its educated young men began to depart for Northern cities to find better paying jobs.<sup>21</sup>

During the economically depressed decade of the 1930's, Birmingham's citizens were too concerned about their own livelihoods to express much interest in world affairs at that time. However, after Hitler's rise in power, the onset of the European war, and Japan's military actions against China and other southeast Asian countries, Birminghamians began to respond. Initially, because of the far distance of the warring activities, most were not concerned with intervention. Slowly, residents began to feel a need for military preparedness and defense spending. Many of these people realized that much of the equipment used in war materiel would be made of iron and steel, and that it would enhance the area's industrial community.<sup>22</sup>

The demand for war supplies expanded Birmingham's industrial capacity. Factories began operating three shifts daily. While men worked swing shifts, women accepted jobs on assembly lines. Birmingham became known as the "Arsenal of the South," and was proud that the enemy had marked her as the second target on the bomb list after Pittsburgh.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, Mildred Nesbitt graduated from Woodlawn High School in 1940 and subsequently received a certificate from the Burroughs School of Business about a year later. Her first job after finishing the business school was with Armour and Co., located on First Avenue North in downtown Birmingham. She would usually ride the streetcar to work at a cost of fifteen cents each way. Occasionally she would catch a ride to town with her father, if he was working in his office that day. Because she was still living at home and had no outside expenses, Mrs. Nesbitt used her salary to purchase suitable clothes for work.

“In the business school, they taught us how to use the different business machines like the comptometer that is not used today. It has been replaced by the computer. They also taught us to always dress up for the job, including dress shoes and stockings.”<sup>24</sup>

Many Birmingham and Jefferson County boys joined the armed forces as the country entered the World War II. Mildred remembered the Selective Service Act being passed when she was a senior in high school. She did not like it at all because it meant that too many of her friends and boy firends would have to go [sic] to war. It also meant that her brother would have to go.<sup>25</sup>

World War II had an immediate impact on Mrs. Nesbitt's family as it did on hundreds of thousands of others. Her fiancée, Sumner Nesbitt, joined the Army Air Corps and her brother, Tommy Thompson joined the Navy.

“My brother was stationed at the Naval Base in Guam, and was one of the first to go in the invasion of Iwo Jima. The Japanese suicide pilots would glide their planes into the navy ships and blow them up. My brother's ship was hit but not damaged very much. There were four boys from our family stationed at Guam. After Iwo Jima, Tommy returned to Guam and found two of his first cousins also stationed there. After he came home from the war, he found out that another first cousin, Marine Pfc. Orville Reid, had been killed at Iwo Jima.

Sumner, was stationed in England with the Eighth Air Force and flew a number of missions over Germany. He was a navigator on the B-17 bomber planes. They bombed factories and railroad yards and several other places. I think that he saw more action than he wanted to, but he came back home safe and we were married two months after he came back."<sup>26</sup>

Many of the returning soldiers took advantage of the GI Bill to go to college and build homes. College enrollment surged and many of the local universities found themselves without the facilities to accommodate the new students.<sup>27</sup>

After marrying, Mildred and her husband Sumner, moved to the Auburn area so that he could finish college that the war had interrupted. Because of the housing shortage, the couple found themselves living in nearby Opelika, after spending the summer in Sumner's deserted fraternity house.

"During the summer break the Delta Sig(Delta Sigma Phi) fraternity let us live in their house. The housemother was gone and all the boys were gone. They let us live in the housemother's quarters. I went in that big kitchen and tried to cook on that huge stove. I have never seen a stove that big. The skillet was the biggest thing I have ever seen to put two pieces of bacon and two little eggs in. But it was fun."<sup>28</sup>

After that summer, Mrs. Nesbitt got a job with a bank in Opelika. She worked there until Sumner graduated.

After her husband graduated, they moved to Ft. Lauderdale, where he had a job in the Sears Managerial Program. In 1951, after Sears and Roebuck had transferred Sumner to Savannah, Orlando and then Mobile, Uncle Sam activated his Air Force Reserve Unit and transferred him to Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana. They found many of their high school and college friends from the same reserve unit stationed there. They also made

many lasting friendships with others from Birmingham whom they did not know prior to the Korean Conflict.<sup>29</sup>

While Mrs. Nesbitt was living outside of Birmingham, political activities were dominating the scene. In 1948, Philadelphia held the Democratic Presidential Convention. It was almost a replay of the 1860 Democratic Convention where William Yancey walked out, taking many southern states with him, after the party refused to support the Alabama Platform. This time, Alabama led the walkout of "states righters" in protest of a strong civil rights platform. Later that year, Birmingham hosted a convention of the "seceders." The Tutwiler Hotel was headquarters, and the meeting was held in the Municipal Auditorium. Although, there were no officially elected delegates, most of the southern states had representatives present. "Bull" Connor, a third term police commissioner, welcomed the conventioners to Birmingham. The "Dixiecrats," as they called themselves, nominated South Carolina Governor, Strom Thurmond for president and Fielding Wright, the Mississippi Governor, for vice-president. It was doomed from the start. Most Southern political power figures refused to support the movement, as did most southern newspapers. Truman won the election which meant four more years of Democratic control.<sup>30</sup>

Possibly, the most exciting event Mrs. Nesbitt missed while she resided out of Birmingham was the Alabama-Auburn(Alabama Polytechnic Institute) football game. This was the first match-up of the two teams since 1907. Forty-five thousand people were on hand at Legion Field to see Alabama beat

Auburn with a score of fifty-five to nothing.<sup>31</sup> This was probably one game that neither Mrs. or Mr. Nesbitt were sorry they missed.

After the Korean Conflict, the Nesbitts returned to live in their home town. Mrs. Nesbitt began joining local women's clubs and attributed many of her skills in decorating and landscaping to what she learned at garden club meetings.

"I joined the Crestwood Circle Garden Club when we moved back to Birmingham. We had different lecturers at our meetings and the owner of Aldrich's Nursery often talked to us about how to balance the look of our houses with shrubbery and flowers. I think that a garden club is an excellent way for couples just starting out to learn how to fix up their yards and gardens. We also had certified flower arrangers show us the basic forms of floral arrangements."<sup>32</sup>

Mrs. Nesbitt became involved in other civic clubs as well. She became one of the charter members of the Charity League, which was the benefactor of the Speech and Department of the Spain Rehabilitation Center at University of Alabama Birmingham. Charity League held fund raisers such as fashion shows, luncheons, and an annual brunch before the Alabama-Auburn game.

"The money that we made was donated to the Children's Hospital and for equipment used in the Speech and Hearing Department at Spain. Dr. Ann Jacobson was in charge of the physical therapy department at Spain and was responsible for organizing the first physical therapy department at UAB. She worked with the Charity League also. Our members volunteered to work at Speech and Hearing eight hours a week. After a member reached the age of thirty-five, they became a senior-sustaining member and no longer did the volunteer work."<sup>33</sup>

Since 1936, the University of Alabama had offered extension courses in Birmingham, but not college degrees. The Medical College in Birmingham was created in 1943, and within eight years, the University of Alabama Birmingham was established. Six years later, the UAB campus had fifteen square blocks

square blocks encompassing University Hospital, and by 1971 had appropriations to buy forty-five more.<sup>34</sup>

Today, UAB Medical Center boasts of being one of the best medical training complexes in America. It includes the Spain Rehab Center, Spain Heart Tower, the first public diabetes hospital in the country, and one of the most reknown cardiac surgical centers in the nation. UAB is responsible for bringing more white-collar professionals into the city, creating a balance between white-collar workers and the blue-collar steel industry force. UAB's growth has made health care the dominant economic force in the city and is currently the largest single employer in Birmingham. Other health care Institutes have been established, such as the Baptist Medical Centers, Brookwood and Carraway Medical Centers. Specialized health care centers such as Health South and the Kirklin Center along with a sports health care center are continuing to develop in Birmingham.<sup>35</sup>

Women's clubs in Birmingham have made a long-lasting contribution to the city's cultural activities. Beginning as a project of the Women's Committee of the Birmingham Symphony, the Festival of Arts first appeared as the Festival of Music. In 1953, Mrs. George Bridges became chairman of the Birmingham Festival of Arts. From there it grew into a permanently established annual cultural affair of the city. The Festival is a community affair involving people of all classes and races. Each year the Festival salutes a different country, exhibiting that country's arts, culture, and food. The Festival is held at Woodrow



Wilson Park spanning several days.<sup>36</sup> Mrs. Nesbitt became involved with the Festival when Mrs. Bridges took over.<sup>37</sup>

Mrs. Nesbitt was active in social clubs as well as service clubs. One of her social clubs was the Amulets Club that held annual dances with "big name" entertainment, such as the Glenn Miller Band. Other clubs included various bridge groups and a Mah Jongg group.<sup>38</sup>

While Mrs. Nesbitt's civic and social activities occupied a large part of her free time, she was a homemaker full time. Her talents in sewing did not end with dress-making. She was able to recover furniture, make draperies, and do beautiful needlework. Her creations also included formal wear. Mrs. Nesbitt was able to reproduce designer fashions at a fraction of the cost. She learned to sew at age fourteen, because she did not like the way her clothes fit.<sup>39</sup>

Another talent of Mrs. Nesbitt's is cooking. Her specialties are cakes. This is another skill that she learned during her youth. As a teenager, she would bake cakes and invite friends over that evening and serve them fresh-baked cake.<sup>40</sup>

Like most of her friends, Mrs. Nesbitt employed a maid one day a week. The family maid was a black woman, Rose Pumfrey, who worked there for nearly twenty years. Her help gave Mrs. Nesbitt extra time for civic activities. She seemed to be part of the family. While working for Mrs. Nesbitt, she never indicated that segregation bothered her. It was not discussed.

Until the 1950's, communication between Blacks and Whites was virtually non-existent. The white population did not realize the growing

dissatisfaction of blacks with segregation. There was very little open hostility by Birmingham blacks and the system of segregation had been embedded in the customs and laws for a century. Most blacks were economically dependent on whites and there seemed to be little possibility for change.<sup>41</sup>

In November of 1962, Birmingham voters approved a new form of city government, a mayor-council style. However, after the new city leaders were elected in 1963, the incumbent officers refused to leave. The courts upheld the change of city government but the former commissioners would not vacate their offices for the newly elected leaders. Still further court proceedings were required to oust "Bull" Connor from his office.<sup>42</sup> Mrs. Nesbitt remembered Bull Connor:

"We were living in Florida when we heard on the radio that Bull had walked out of the Democratic Convention when delegates were advocating strong civil rights in their platform. Bull was a stubborn, short sighted, self-righteous, power greedy, old-time commissioner. As a neighbor, we seldom saw him, but when we did, he was usually obnoxious."<sup>43</sup>

Two years after Freedom Riders who came through Birmingham were beaten and terrorized by Klansmen, the Southern Christian Leadership Commission led by Martin Luther King, was dragging from a long frustrating campaign centered in Albany, Georgia. He felt that it needed a "shot in the arm," and became convinced that Birmingham would provide an excellent testing ground for the national movement. Children and teenagers joined the marches and demonstrations that continued for forty-five days. One of the most unforgettable happenings was caused by Bull Connor's determination to put an end to the marches. In May of 1963, Connor used police dogs and fire-hoses

turned to full force on a line of marchers, knocking them down. Many of them were teenagers. Water from the hoses was also used on very young children dressed in their best Sunday clothes. The white community learned about this on the national news that evening.<sup>44</sup>

Mrs. Nesbitt's reflections on the Civil Rights movements during the sixties were that outside agitators had come to stir up trouble, and that the blacks were out of line to "take the law into their own hands and obey only those that suited them." She also felt that the demonstrations were staged for the national news media.<sup>45</sup>

Although the city political power has been in the hands of Mayor Richard Arrington since 1979, Mrs. Nesbitt never voted for him, stating that she thought he had wasted too much city money on non-essential projects such as parks, and waited too long before attempting to do anything about Birmingham's crime. When asked if there were any blacks who could garner her vote, she replied, "I would vote for Fairfield's mayor, Larry Langford. He would be a great mayor for Birmingham."<sup>46</sup>

Since Mrs. Nesbitt was born in 1922, Birmingham has seen many changes. Political power has swung from one faction to another and from white to black. White collar workers outnumber blue-collar iron and steel workers and the business of medicine has overtaken the steel industry as the city's driving force.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Family lineage documented in the Birmingham News, December 16, 1931. Leah Rawls Atkins, The Valley and the Hills: An Illustrated History of Birmingham and Jefferson County, (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, 1981), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Diary of Josiah Wilkins, in possession of the author. Kathy N. Adams.

<sup>3</sup> Birmingham News, January 3, 1920.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm C. McMillan, Yesterday's Birmingham, (Miami: E. A. Seaman Publishing, 1975), 124.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 124-126.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>7</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills, 113.

<sup>8</sup> Bertha Bendall Norton, Birmingham's First Magic Century: Were You There?, (Birmingham: Lakeshore Press, 1970), 59.

<sup>9</sup> Mildred T. Nesbitt, Interview by Kathy N. Adams, March 18, 1996, Birmingham, AL, Tape Recording.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills, 144.

<sup>15</sup> M. Nesbitt Interview.

<sup>16</sup> McMillan, Yesterday's Birmingham, 146.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>18</sup> Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce, Century-Plus, (Birmingham: Oxmoor Press, 1976), 21.

<sup>19</sup> McMillan, Yesterday's Birmingham, 147.

<sup>20</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills, 143.

- 
- <sup>21</sup> McMillan, Yesterday's Birmingham, 147.
- <sup>22</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills, 146-147.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> M. Nesbitt, Interview.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills, 152.
- <sup>28</sup> M. Nesbitt Interview.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills , 154-55.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> M. Nesbitt Interview.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills, 152.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Norton, Birmingham's First Magic Century, 301-302.
- <sup>37</sup> M. Nesbitt Interview.
- <sup>38</sup> Mildred Nesbitt, Telephone conversation with author, March 20, 1996, written notes.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills 156.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> M. Nesbitt, Interview.
- <sup>44</sup> Atkins, The Valley and the Hills, 158.
- <sup>45</sup> M. Nesbitt Interview.
- <sup>46</sup> Mildred Nesbitt, Telephone conversation notes.

---

Published Works Cited

- Atkins, Leah Rawls. The Valley and the Hills: An Illustrated History of Birmingham and Jefferson County. Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, 1981.
- Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce. Century Plus: A Bicentennial Portrait of Birmingham, Alabama, 1976. Birmingham: Oxmoor Press, 1976.
- McMillan, Malcolm C. Yesterday's Birmingham. Miami: E.A. Seaman Publishing, 1975.
- Norton, Bertha Bendall. Birmingham's First Magic Century: Were You There? Birmingham: Lakeshore Press, 1970.

---

Unpublished Works Cited

Adams, Kathy N . ed. Diary of Josiah Wilkins - 1820.

Nesbitt, Mildred T. Interview by Kathy N. Adams, March 18, 1996. Oral History Collection, Jacksonville State University Library.

Notes  
Telephone Conversation Between  
Mildred T. Nesbitt and Kathy Adams

3-20-96

- K: What were some of the social clubs that you belonged to?
- M: I belonged to the Crestwood Circle Garden Club, Amulets Club and various bridge clubs. I was also in a Mah Jongg club. We took turns meeting at each other's houses. We'd all bring our own lunch and who ever's turn it was to have it would fix a dessert.
- K: What were some of the functions that the Amulets had?
- M: Every year they would have a formal dance with a big-name band like the Glenn Miller Band. We'd also have luncheons and committee meetings.
- K: Tell me about the Charity League.
- M: I got in as a Charter Member. Our first project was with the Easter Seals. Then we began working over at the Spain Rehab Center with Dr. Ann Jacobson. She was head of the physical therapy program there. We had money makers like fashion shows and the brunch before the Auburn-Alabama game to help the Speech and Hearing Center and later on, we helped sponsor the EPIC School. Bear Bryant's daughter was the first president. Virginia Cobb was active in it too. It's still going on today.
- K: Were you active in the PTA's?
- M: Yes, I was not an officer, but I was a room mother several times, and worked the carnivals at Holman School.
- K: When did you first learn to sew?
- M: My mother taught me when I was about 14 years old. I didn't like the way my clothes fit. Mama would always make them look too baggy, so I decided to do it myself. I learned how to make better stitches than she did, and I learned how to tailor clothes to fit me.
- K: Tell me about your first job. Where did you go to work after business school?



M: I really don't want to say.

K: Why not?

M: Well, Sumner teases me about it.

K: What does he say?

M: He kids me about being a weenie girl at the Armour & Co. assembly line.

K: I thought you had an office job.

M: I did, but he still kidded me.

K: What was the pay?

M: Very little.

K: How did you get to work:

M: I rode the streetcar for 15 cents. Sometimes my Daddy would take me and then we'd eat breakfast in the coffee shop at the Empire Building where his office was. Sometimes George Bridges would eat with us and I would think I was really something. I remember that he would bring beautiful flowers from his wife's garden and just put them on the tables there.

K: Did he own the coffee shop?

M: Oh, no. That was just the kind of man he was.

K: When did you learn how to cook:

M: Well, I started baking cakes when I was in high school. If some boy called and wanted to come over, or if some of my friends came over I'd just take them all back in the kitchen and make a cake. I would make while we all stood around and talked. As soon as it came out of the oven, I'd ice it and we would eat it hot. Usually there were several there and the whole cake would be eaten before it even cooled.

K: What kinds of cake did you make?

M: Most of the time I would make a white cake with seven minute icing.

K: Did you use a mix or make it from scratch?

M: We didn't have cake mixes then. I had to make it from scratch.

K: And you stood over the hot stove beating that icing with it flying all over the place?

M: It didn't fly all over the place. You must take your eye off the mixer if it flies over everywhere. Besides, we didn't even have electric mixers. I had to beat it by hand.

K: You deserve a blue ribbon if you stood there and mixed it all by hand.

K: OK. Back to the sixties. Have you ever voted for Richard Arrington?

M: No.

K: Have you always voted for a white person?

M: Yes.

K: Why have you never voted for Arrington:

M: Because he didn't live up to what I expected. He spent way too much money on parks and wasted it. He waited too late before he even tried to do anything about the crime here.

K: Would you vote for a black candidate - ever?

M: Sure, if I thought he was qualified.

K: Do you think there are any blacks out there that are qualified for an office?

M: Yes. Look at Bessemer's mayor. He's done a lot for them.

K: Do you mean Larry Langford?

M: Yes, him.

K: He's the mayor of Fairfield.

M: Are you sure? I thought he was the mayor of Bessemer. Well, anyway, I'd vote for him. He'd be a great one to have.