

PEARLENE OLIVER INTERVIEW, SUMMER 1992, TRANSCRIPT 1

INTERVIEWER: Marjory Whitelaw
INTERVIEWEE: Pearlene Oliver

Oliver: And today it's valued at \$100,000. It cost me, it cost us - I was the bookkeeper - we only had so much money and we were borrowing it from the bank and whatnot. We paid exactly, oh, \$17,900 out in materials. My nephew just took the half price, in those days you could get for - What do you want me to do now, talk about -

Whitelaw: This is the interview with Dr Pearlene Oliver, widow of the Reverend William Oliver. Pearlene, we're going to start talking about your own family background. Where did you come from?

Oliver: I came from the - I was born in the beautiful little cove off Chedabucto Bay in Guysborough County. I was two years old when my mother moved up to join my father in New Glasgow because he had gone to New Glasgow in the opening of the Allen Mines. They were opening mines then. That would be about 1920, around that time. And so we moved up, but prior to that, for the first two years of my life, I lived in the beautiful community of Cooks Cove, right out on Chedabucto Bay. I think if there's any beauty in my life and in my thoughts, it came from that period. I really believe that - My mother used to tell me how - I can show you her picture, an old picture that was taken of her before I was born - how at that time, she had seven or eight children - when I was born, seven, I was the eighth. And how she used to walk around the head of Chedabucto Bay every nice evening when it wasn't stormy, as the tide would come in. They would be picking up driftwood, and they would get fish from the fishermen and whatnot. That was her evening walk. And when she was carrying me - I've thought recently why I have such a craving for the pounding of the sea. I've never, since I was two years old lived near the sea, and had very few occasions to even have the joy and privilege of going to the sea because I've lived, you know, inward in black areas, and we don't have the sea. We have the woods. (Laughter) So, I've often thought, when I got to the sea, it just seems as if I'm in seventh heaven, and often, you know, I dream about the pounding of the sea. I can hear the surf. I've often wondered, "Why do I have that?" I've never heard any of my other brothers and sisters - most of who are dead now - I've never heard them express that. I think it was because my mother walked, and I did it many times in my youth when she used to take me down to visit my grandmother, walk around the head of Cooks Cove, and look out to Chedabucto Bay. I think that's something there when she was carrying me got in it, because I love the sea, and I never had the opportunity to have - So, I was born there.

Whitelaw: Tell me about your father. Was he a miner?

Oliver: Yes, and he got killed in the mines, but in such a way that they tell me - I've never seen the monument - You can investigate this Marjory, you're an investigator. But my father was killed in the Allen Mines. I think it was - he was hit by a fall of coal. He was digging coal, and I think the coal came and crushed him. Maybe another man was killed with him, or possibly he was the only one, but I was then only about three or four years old. All I can remember is the crying and the sorrow of it. I couldn't remember - and they didn't talk too much about it while I was growing up, you know, my mother. They didn't talk about the sorrow of it. But he came up when I was about two years old, living in Cooks Cove with my mother there. He came up to make a way, got a job in the Allen Mine, and then brought us up to New Glasgow. So, I was about two, possibly nearly three, when we moved up to New Glasgow. From then on, there was not much beauty. But I had all the beauty in Cooks Cove. It was - oh, I just go back there sometimes now and walk around to see the gorgeous place. So, we moved up. My whole family was in the Church of England, you see. We were the only black family there, really, I think. Where we got our blackness was from my grandmother's grandfather, I think, so that's many generations. He was an African slave who had jumped ship. He hid out with the Indians. It's very romantic. My brothers and sisters were saying to me, "Why don't you write this down? Why don't you write this down?" One day, my brother, who just died recently - that's Walter Borden's father - came out here. I said, "Now, you just dictate to me what that is. I wrote it in the Bible. I've got it there, you can see it before you go." He jumped ship, and went out and was hid by the Indians. When the ship left, he stayed with this tribe of Indians down near Canso way, down that area. And he married this Indian girl. That produced my great grandmother, who - my great grandmother or my great grandfather - I haven't got that quite straightened out, but anyway, this is how this comes in. During that period, the ships were bringing in immigrant girls, and they were bringing these Dutch girls to work, you know. The son of the African and the Indian married one of these Dutch girls. So, that would be my great grandfather, and that produced my grandmother, Catherine, who showed the traits of Indians. In fact, they tell me that I look just like my great grandmother, Catherine. So, that's quite a compliment because she was really wonderful and smart. She was a widow too and she had to care for her children. So anyway, that strain came down and then there were other - You've heard - read the story of the Guysborough Negroes, they call them. I think Raleigh wrote that or someone - and how difficult. But those were, they were coming then in 1812, and there's a strain on my father's side. That's my maternal side. Now, the fraternal side came with the 1812 Negroes, and

they were settled in the Tracadie area. One of them married my mother, one of those - a descendant from one of those, a Bowden, B O W. We changed it to B O R. But they were Bowdens, and the Bowdens married Catherine Jewell's daughter, Clara, and they are my parents. (Laughter) That's a roundabout way to get at it. I've got so much different kinds of blood flowing through me.

Whitelaw: So, do you think of yourself as black?

Oliver: Oh definitely, because my family is black, my mother. Now, my grandmother was very much like her mother, who was Dutch.

Whitelaw: I should explain my question. You're very light-skinned. If I met you in the supermarket, I wouldn't know that you were black.

Oliver: Well, possibly, but if you had met my grandmother, you wouldn't have known it. She was very light. She was almost like her mother, who was Dutch. She was real Dutch. My family are all the colours of the rainbow. You have them from - I would be one extreme, and then you'd have the browns. From me down, we're like the rainbow, the rainbow family. Now okay, I don't want to give you information that you don't need, but that was my background, and my grandmother - In fact, this here belonged to her, in fact that's why I wore it. I've been cleaning it up. She gave me this, at least she gave it to my mother and my mother gave it to me, telling me that. This little, this cameo.

Whitelaw: Yes, it's lovely.

Oliver: She was a beautiful lady, Catherine Jewell. And I spent my youth in the summertime going back. She taught me about bartering. We used to barter. Friday - well, maybe it would be middle of the week - she would get everything out. I'd be with her, I'd stay with her in the summer because I was her favourite because I looked like her. She'd always want Pearlene to come down, so I went down just about every summer, got there some way. And the days of bartering are the days that I often think about. She'd - it would be the blueberries - because she was self-sufficient. She had her own sheep and her own spinning wheel. She spun her own yarn, and knit her own socks and mitts. All this stuff she bartered at the big [community] bartering store in Guysborough. That would be about nineteen twenty - oh, I would think about 1927, 1928, 1929, I used to go down there.

Whitelaw: Was that Jost Store?

Oliver: Oh, I don't know, I don't remember. All I remember is the thrill of helping - We had four baskets - five baskets because she would carry four. We'd walk through

the woods to get - Cooks Cove is not very far from Guysborough Town. There was a path, and I would just follow her. I would be about 8, 9, 10, and then when I got to be 12, I didn't think that was so fashionable anymore. And then she was getting old and sickly, so we only - my mother used to go down periodically before she died. She'd have all her own stuff, blueberries, she made her own butter, she churned her own butter. And she had the cream, and she had her eggs. We'd carry all this in. She'd have most of them, and I'd carry - she'd give me the lighter basket. She'd lay them all out on the counter. I remember the man, the owner, he'd say, "Now Catherine, let me figure this up." You've got so many dozens of eggs, so much this, and he'd say, now, you've got so many dollars worth. Then she'd turn around with her list and she'd have to buy things like, well, what she couldn't -

Whitelaw: What she couldn't make.

Oliver: What she couldn't make herself, like molasses. I remember she'd get molasses for molasses bread because I ate so much molasses bread in those days. And meats, well, certain meats because she got all her fish for nothing. The fishermen coming into Cooks Cove - because she was a widow - she'd be there when the ships came in and they'd just fill her baskets with fish, you know, give it to her.

Whitelaw: And that was the way she lived. She didn't -

Oliver: She had a beautiful life. She had a thatched roof cottage, and she had married - Catherine had married a Newfoundlander. Now, that's something else, see. I didn't get into that side. She married a Jewell. Catherine was almost white looking. She was the daughter of the Dutch woman and the African slave. She married a Jewell from Newfoundland. Her daughter, their daughter, Clara, was my mother, you see. She was self-sufficient. She had her own sheep and her own everything.

Whitelaw: So, your background is Walter Borden's background also.

Oliver: Oh, my brother is his father.

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: Hector.

Whitelaw: I should explain that he's a very well known actor in Halifax.

Oliver: Yes, yes, oh yes. And their children, they're Borden's you see. So I was a Borden, those are my brother's children.

- Whitelaw: So, how did your mother live after your father was killed? In New Glasgow, it wasn't easy.
- Oliver: All right. Well, she got a little pension. You see, when she came up, it was great because for the first time he was getting big pay in the mines. They had money. I guess they thought they were rich. But it only lasted for about two years when he was killed by a fall of coal. And my daughter-in-law tells me she's researched the names on the miners' monument, and she said she's looked for Joseph Borden - or Bowden. She said, "You know", because she's got grand - she's got children now. That would be the great-great grandfather of her children. She said, "You know, his name is not there." But this monument is recent. Maybe, they just have the big explosions. He was killed while he was working, and the coal fell on him and crushed him. The only thing I can remember about it, they couldn't open the coffin. I can still see - We had a big house there up on the hill where all the black people were moving into. [lived] It was one of the biggest houses there because the miners were about the only people getting money. But that didn't last too long because he was killed. Then, she got a small pension, so much for each of us children. And then in about seven or eight years, she met another man, a Whalen, and she remarried. She had three children by Whalen, my step-brothers and sisters.
- Whitelaw: So, what was I going -
- Oliver: You asked, how did Mother -
- Whitelaw: Yes.
- Oliver: So, the first years were good because the mines were opening. Those were the roaring twenties, and there was all kinds of work and all kinds of money. It was the 'Dirty Thirties' that - he was dead then - and that's when we had problems, economically. I grew up during the 'Dirty Thirties', struggling to get my high school, and that's a story in itself.
- Whitelaw: You went to school in New Glasgow, of course.
- Oliver: Oh yes, I was only two or possibly three - almost three - when we moved up to New Glasgow. But all of my youth was spent in New Glasgow, and I married there a month after my graduation from high school. But getting my high school there in the 'Dirty Thirties' - I graduated in 1936, one of the first blacks, if not the first, but I'd say one of the first. I think I was really the first because some of the girls could teach with grade eleven, and could teach with grade ten - the black girls they put them in the black schools to teach - but I went right

through to grade 12, and got it the hard way, without any help. My mother couldn't help me very much, and none of my brothers and sisters got that far. They only went to grade eight. They couldn't, there was no money. The Thirties! We were on relief!

Whitelaw: You were actually on - your family was on relief?

Oliver: Everybody was on relief! you see, the mines weren't producing, and there was no - the pottery where my stepfather worked at the pottery - that would be L.E. Shaw's Clay Works in New Glasgow. My stepfather and Walter's brother, they all - Walter's father - they all got work at the clay pottery, but when that shut down, they had no work. There was no unemployment insurance, you were just out. Now, my mother did feed us by getting chicken, you know, producing her own hens and chicken. She always had a dozen of this. We lived by a brook, so she had all the training from her mother. And she got a couple of geese, and things like that, so that for Christmas we always had goose through my mother's ingenuity. Other than that, I don't know what we would have done for Christmas because there wasn't much Christmas. But she always had a couple of geese, and she had ducks because of the brook that was running. She made use of everything. She kept us alive. I consider that a very happy time of my life, but I often wonder, "How could I have been so happy when we were so poor?" We were poor, but our expectations were not very high. We were able to survive through the ingenuity of my mother. She always had a little garden, and she always had the carrots and the cabbage. And then the produce that came through - it was quite rural where we lived, and you got your vegetables for almost nothing, you know. The people felt - sometimes they would just give you bushels of this and bushels of that.

Whitelaw: Where was this part of New Glasgow, what area?

Oliver: It was up on the hill, and it was segregated completely. Well, we were surrounded. They moved in there when the mines were opening, and a developer, [Walter Weir], was quite an outstanding man in the town at that time. He had influence, a store and a little money. He built these houses up there. The miners, these black people who moved in, rented from him, and soon it was just a hundred percent black.

Whitelaw: So, there were a lot of black miners then.

Oliver: Oh yes, that was the only thing that they could get to do. See, they couldn't get on the roads as porters. There was no other work for them, so they went in the mines. And I lost - in the mines - well, my father was

killed by a fall of coal. It was just opening, so you can get the dates of when the Allen Mine was opening, around 1920, I think it began to open. And this was big money.

Whitelaw: Do you remember how much?

Oliver: No, I just know we had everything we wanted. You know, we were happy and we had lots of food. See, I was just small.

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: I was only four when he was killed. And then, that would be in the mid twenties, I would think, something like that. We began to feel it, we began to feel the effects of his death because the pension wasn't very much. My mother had to exist on that, and then -

Whitelaw: Did it come from the company, the pension?

Oliver: It came from the company, but she - the doctor that was always attending us because everybody was sick all the time - we didn't have the proper foods and what not - he found out. It was the doctor that found out that here this was the widow of this miner that was killed. She had eight or nine children, and she wasn't getting a penny when the doctor started coming in. My mother was sick from the grief. And when he'd look around, he could see that we were in an awful condition, and when she told him that her husband had been killed in the mine, it was the doctor that went after them because she didn't know, she didn't know that she could get this.

Whitelaw: Had she gone to school herself?

Oliver: Oh yes, down in Cooks Cove. Yes, she grew up in Cooks Cove, and in the Church of England. We were all christened in the Church of England as babies. In fact, in Cooks Cove, the Jewell Family was the predominant black family there. Most of the other black families were out in Tracadie or Sunnyville. And then the Jewell from Newfoundland - that would be my Grandfather Jewell - he was white I think, white and Indian a bit. But he was very fair, very tall and fair. So, that part of the family lived in Cooks Cove, and then my mother, who was a daughter of them, married a man from a former - whose parents had been slaves - from Tracadie. He was darker.

Whitelaw: That was your father.

Oliver: That was my father, but my mother was -

Whitelaw: Of course, your husband was darker.

- Oliver: Oh yes, Bill, he's an Oliver. But you see these were slaves too, the Oliver slaves were settled around here, most of those slaves. So, some of the slaves -
- Whitelaw: Is it painful today to talk about your slave ancestors?
- Oliver: Oh my heavens, no! Oh dear God, we're so proud of them! And white people -
- Whitelaw: - and angry at the white people. Pearlene, white people tend to be a little embarrassed.
- Oliver: Well, it's not your fault. It's not your generation's fault, but you should speak out more about it, what your parents did to my parents, my great parents.
- Whitelaw: My parents never saw a black man.
- Oliver: I don't mean yours, but I mean white, I mean white. The only thing that I feel is that white people of conscience should have - and many of them did, many of them did, many of them did - but they're a little - Some of their wealth, the wealth even in Halifax was made on bartering my people, selling my people. So, that's why I speak out, that's why I'm black because of the great injustice. If there had been no injustice and everything had of been roses, I would have probably have said, "Oh well, I'm white." But I have a great feeling about injustice against anybody or against animals or against - especially children.
- Whitelaw: Well, New Glasgow has a very bad reputation as far as the blacks are concerned. It had a bad, bad reputation.
- Oliver: Well, do you know what they called where we lived? Nigger Hill!
- Whitelaw: Yes.
- Oliver: And so when they wanted to taunt us as children, they'd say, "Go back to Nigger Hill." Now, we were very fortunate growing up in New Glasgow that there was no segregation of the schools. You were ignored, but you were permitted to go. But you went knowing that you were treated as outcasts. And many of the students, including my family, my dear brother and them, who I went to school with, we were ignored. We were put in the back seats. Sometimes, I would go up and deliberately take a front seat, you know, but I would be moved back because we were not - We are here because we can't help it, see, but we don't have to really pay attention to you children.
- Whitelaw: This is what the teachers were -

Oliver: Well, that we felt. They never asked us any questions in class. That made me work all the harder, but my brothers were just ruined, they were just made errand boys. They were strong, and the teacher would say, "Oh, run down town and go to the drugstore and pick up my prescription." And all of these things. I remember that, and I hold that against them to this day. He's dead now. That would be my - not Walter's father because he got most of his education in Cooks Cove at the little school there. He stayed with my grandmother to help her out. He was one of those that stayed back. But the brother who was nearest to me, he's got some children today in Dartmouth who are policemen. They would be Bordens, beautiful young men who are policemen. But my brother, Lester, was close to me. We were together. I used to be so pained for him because I knew what was happening, and I got the homework, and he would get it from me - most of it, you know. But he got discouraged because he couldn't stay in - he couldn't sit in his seat long enough. It was, "Lester, do this, Lester, do that." Running errands. And if the teacher wanted something bought, or she wanted something from the drugstore or a prescription, most of the teachers - and they kept him there - or clean the blackboards and do these things. He was strong. So, by the time he made grade eight or nine, he had lost all interest. But I didn't.

Whitelaw: But do you think, at the time when you were a school girl, did you recognize this as -

Oliver: Oh yes. I accepted it too, we accepted it, and I'm glad we did accept it because if we had started to fight it, we would have been killed. We just felt, "Well, we're not as good." We felt that. But when we got together, we knew we were, and the only thing that saved us was our little church, which now I feel has done its work. I think now we should be integrated.

Whitelaw: Well, we'll come to that later.

Oliver: But the church -

Whitelaw: Was the church in New Glasgow strong?

Oliver: The black church?

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: It was strong for that, and then we were fortunate, I was fortunate we had a missionary - beautiful lady - come, Agnes Whering.

Whitelaw: Were you, had you become a Baptist by this time?

Oliver: Well you see, to be a Baptist, you had to be baptized. They just went to the church. I was the first one of the family to become a Baptist. I was baptized through Agnes Whering. And then later, not too many - no, not too many of my brothers and sisters. They were told by my mother, "Well, you've been christened in the Church of England." But there was no Church of England, and they couldn't go to the Church of England in New Glasgow. But they just felt that they were - they went to church but they weren't baptized. I became baptized when I was 12 - 11.

Whitelaw: Very emotional experience was it?

Oliver: Well, they didn't want to do me because they didn't baptize children.

Whitelaw: Oh right, it's adult baptism isn't it?

Oliver: Well, you had to be 16, you had to be, you know, of age. Sixteen was pretty well of age. But I loved the missionary and she was teaching me all my - oh, she had me memorizing the Bible - I had a great memory - memorizing the Bible from one end to the other, and getting me all these Bibles. She also got me, she looked after much of my clothing through friends of hers. They would send her clothing, and she kept me pretty well clothed, Agnes Whering. She called me her little girl. So, if it hadn't been for that, I don't think I could have struggled to get the grade 12. But she just kept encouraging me. She saw this in me, see, and encouraged me. And I didn't get any encouragement from school teachers until I got in high school. There was a sister of a missionary who was my Latin teacher - I won't call her name - but her sister was a missionary out in China, I think, someplace. And here I'm the only black in the school, in her class, Latin.

Whitelaw: You were bright.

Oliver: Oh Latin, oh Latin, oh gosh, memorizing all those declensions, oh did I ever! And she would do this for me, she would do this to raise my self esteem. When we'd pass in our translations and whatnot -

Whitelaw: We're coming to the end of the tape.

Oliver: Yes. She would always, when she was passing the papers out, I could get pretty well - if it was worth a ten, I'd get the ten, but she'd always say to the class, "I wish you would do the work like Pearlene does. It's so neat." And she'd hold it up. Now, I knew some of those other kids were doing neat work, but I think she did that for my - And I can recall, gee I felt like, I felt like a queen when she would do that. That was just to encourage me, and I always made a good mark, and I always worked extra hard on the Latin because -

Whitelaw: Big subject.

Oliver: Not very popular. They don't want you to talk about it.

Whitelaw: This is side two of tape one of the interview with Pearlene Oliver. We're going to talk about segregation in New Glasgow, and also how you struggled to get through high school. Let's start with that.

Oliver: Well, you have to go back to the time, and realize that it was - I'll talk about the thirties. Everything was segregated, especially the living. We were more or less contained on the Hill, and called by the locals, the white locals, that was 'Nigger Hill', you see. But there's always in every group those couple who are more progressive, who can get a little money together and whatnot, and we had those four or five families. So, they moved out and got a community going up on what is called The Mountain, and then another group through great difficulty - two families that I can remember - moved over to the Parkdale area under great difficulty. But these were progressive people. The majority of the people were like my mother and father, they were just ordinary people. But these were the more progressive, and thank God for the few who are more progressive in every group. So we had black people, the majority of us, and that's where I lived, growing up on the Hill. Then you had the people, two or three families, who had a little more money, had better homes and cars, but they were treated as out - you know, outcasts, but they got in on the end of the street. Then up on the Mountain, nobody was living up there then, and one family got quite a bit of land up there and got two or three of their families up. That would be the Williams Family and the Clark Family. And they farmed. Now, I lived with the miners. Most of the miners were up on the Hill. We were the ordinary people. I just grew up the ordinary. We looked upon these others as the upper class of our - but they were nice and they helped. But the majority of my people, oh, I'd say 80% of them, lived on the Hill where I lived. And maybe 10%, well, I'd say 90%, and the other 10% would be divided between Parkdale and the Mountain. And they were really - we looked to them. They were leaders. We were just the ordinary people, happy people. So, I grew up on the Hill, and it was segregated, but the schools weren't segregated at that time, you see. The town schools were. Out here, like this community, wherever there were black people settled in little refugee communities, their schools, and were until we came on the scene.

Whitelaw: You're saying that the school in Lucasville, where you live now, was segregated.

Oliver: Oh yes, oh yes.

Whitelaw: But not in New Glasgow.

Oliver: Well, the towns, the towns couldn't do it.

Whitelaw: As I remember, the washrooms were segregated.

Oliver: Not in the schools.

Whitelaw: In Truro they were.

Oliver: Oh well now, you're going to talk about Truro, that's -

Whitelaw: That's different.

Oliver: Oh dear God, I don't want to get into that. We wouldn't even stop in Truro if we could help it. Truro was horrible!

Oliver: Oh, but New Glasgow, because there were so many of us, and we were, we were - we minded our own business, we didn't bother them, and we lived our own lives. We had our own church, we had our own entertainment, and we knew how to survive, so we kept our distance. But we were - in leadership, we were self-sufficient - and we didn't give a darn what they thought. Now, you couldn't eat in any restaurant in New Glasgow. I mean, if you wanted to - at that time. In fact, my husband when - this would be in the forties - after we were married. He was wearing the uniform of the captain, he was a padre. And he was driving through, he was going through to Tracadie to help them there get organized into something, and he stopped in New Glasgow. He went in for a cup of coffee, and they wouldn't serve him.

Whitelaw: Although he was in the uniform of -

Oliver: Oh yes, of a captain.

Whitelaw: Of a captain in the Canadian Army.

Oliver: Yes. That's when we became militant. If you said militant, that's - No, we weren't militant, we began to say, "My God, we've got to do something about this." So anyway, he just wanted a cup of coffee and a sandwich to do him until he got down to Tracadie where he was going down there to organize these people into a continuing education or whatever - a working community group. So, we knew better. He thought with the War on, he felt that he was safe with the uniform on. He learned his lesson that day. And the little girl began to cry, she cried.

Whitelaw: What little girl?

- Oliver: The girl that was serving. [the waitress] She wouldn't come up, and he said, "Well, I'd like service please." She said, "I'm not allowed to serve you." She was just 18 or 19. He said, "Why?" She said, "We're not allowed to serve any black people." And he had the uniform of an officer. And at that same time, I had two of my brothers preparing to go into Germany to fight. They were overseas, two of my brothers - the one that I told you about that was ruined in the school, and my brother Jack. And they really fought in the army, they were in the army fighting, and they were overseas. And here's my husband, a chaplain, and they wouldn't even serve him a cup of coffee here. So, that's when I got militant. I knew it was my home town, I knew it was my dear husband, and I figured this is the straw that breaks the camel's back. Plus, what was happening to us in Halifax, or in Nova Scotia or in Canada, that I became - I took to public speaking and was able to get results.
- Whitelaw: And of course, there was the old story of the theatre, the movie theatre in New Glasgow.
- Oliver: That happened afterwards.
- Whitelaw: Did it?
- Oliver: That happened after that episode. That just added fuel to the fire.
- Whitelaw: Tell me the story about that.
- Oliver: Well, Vi [Viola] was a member of our church, and she was -
- Whitelaw: Vi?
- Oliver: Vi Desmond, Mrs Desmond, and she was a beautician. Everything was moving then for us, and so she was, she had gone to the States and taken the course, how to look after black skin and how to treat black hair and things like that - black people's hair, rather. And so she'd got her training in the States, and she came back here, and she started to do them. She opened her own studio in Halifax, and all the black people started going to her because she knew the right creams and the right powders, and how to get the hair done right, and everything like that. She didn't have to do it as - we were just using what white people used, which wasn't right for us. So, then she began to train a group of girls here to go out. So, to do that, she had to go first and open up the fields for these girls in Nova Scotia where they could work. So, on this particular occasion, she went down to New Glasgow to speak to the people in New Glasgow and to open the field to send - to get students, number one, to her school, and number two, to send one of her graduates

down there weekly to do their hair - those that wanted it done. So, she didn't know. Now at that time, the theatres in Halifax - and I don't remember any time they were ever segregated in Halifax, you could sit anywhere. When we came to Halifax in '36, they weren't. Now, what they were back in the teens, I don't know, the theatres and whatnot, but the restaurants were and the hotels were. But the theatres, you could sit - most people didn't have that much money, so it was cheaper to go upstairs anyway. But if you - but Vi had a little money, she was a little business woman. So, she went in and she asked for a downstairs seat. She was supposed to go up in the gallery, see. She asked for a downstairs seat, and she laid down so much money, a bill, and she just scooped up the change. It seems to me like in the end, they were saying she defrauded the Queen out of one cent. That was the tax between upstairs and downstairs. So, they must have given her - they must have known she was black although she was probably a little darker than I am, but not much. Anyway, they got around it by saying that she defrauded the Queen [King] out of one cent. But anyway, she took her - because she had asked for a downstairs seat and laid down, say a five dollar bill, she just scooped up her change and put in the purse. She went right in to the usher, and the usher didn't notice anything. He just gave her her receipt, and she went and sat downstairs. But, there was somebody coming after her, somebody who was going to come in later, some woman that was going to take her - well, I don't know, I didn't get the sequence of this. But anyway, they found out that this person who was black looking was looking for Mrs Desmond or whatnot, and they found out then that she was black. In the beginning, they couldn't tell. So, they found out, so they came down, the usher came down and he said, "We're going to have to move you. You have to go up to the gallery." She said she had never sat up in the gallery in her life, you know. She was very fastidious, and very petite. She was a real beautician, you know, she was just gorgeous. So anyway, she said, "I asked for a downstairs ticket. I didn't count the change. I asked you for a downstairs, and that's what I thought I had. I'm not moving, I'm not moving!" They said, "Well, if you don't move, we'll get the police to move you." So, she said, "Well, you'll have to get the police." She was determined she wasn't going to move because she said, "Downstairs", and she didn't count the change to know the difference. And so, two policemen came in, and they picked her right up, picked her right up. One took the feet and the other took the head, and they carried her and they put her in a paddy wagon. They didn't just put her out in the vestibule or on the street, they had the paddy wagon there. The woman had never been in anything - not only did they put her in the paddy wagon, but they put her in jail and kept her there in jail and kept her there all night! Because there was

no way that they could get - See, she wanted to get out, she wanted to get out on bail, she had money. She wanted to get a lawyer. So, they just said, "You just stay here all night." So, they kept that woman in jail - the dirty devils! Yes, that's what I call them, the dirty devils! So, they kept her in jail all night. Now they had, by that time, her friends found out what was going on, the talk got around. But what could they do now eh? It was ten or eleven o'clock. She was locked up in jail, and they had to wait for morning. So, some of the friends were there for the trial in the morning, and the judge found her guilty - or whoever it would be - guilty of defrauding the Queen [King] out of one cent, and fined her whatever the fine would be.

Whitelaw: It would have been the King at that time.

Oliver: Well, whatever.

Whitelaw: Whatever.

Oliver: Whatever, whatever, whatever. I wasn't there. But she did tell me the whole story, and I did fight. That's one of the things that they were talking about, militancy. And so anyway, she was all upset, so she came right back to Halifax by bus or train. I don't know how she was travelling. I don't think she was driving a car. And the first person she came to was Bill and I. And because it was New Glasgow, my home town, I knew what they would do, but I didn't realize that she was going to get caught in a trap like that. And she came, and I said, "Well, we'll fight it, we'll fight it!" I said, "We'll get a lawyer." I called the meeting because it was a woman, and I was mad. And the War was on! And there were other things that had happened. So, I called a meeting, but then our people were divided. Some said, "Oh, she must wait. We can't do that, we can't fight. How can we win? What can we do?" Some of them, some of the men, some of those men, they're still living - When I look at those men today, you know what I feel like! (Laughter) So, I said, "Well, let those who want to stand with me. We're going to fight it, we're going to get the money and we're going to get a lawyer".

Whitelaw: Was this a municipal regulation, that Blacks had to sit upstairs?

Oliver: Well, it was town, yes, just in the town. But Truro was the same way.

Whitelaw: Oh, Truro was worse.

Oliver: Oh Truro, Truro was just like South Africa. So, we evaded it. I felt sorry for the people, but we evaded it. But getting back to Vi, bless her dear little heart, she was crying. She said, "Well, I don't want to make any trouble." We said, "Well, there's lots of trouble. Hitler's making his, so we might as well make hay while the sun - If we're in a democracy, we'd better fight for our rights now." And again I thought, "I've got two brothers over there that might not come back." I didn't expect them to come back. They did, both of them, thank God! So anyway, we put on something, raised some money. I don't know what we did - bake sales - to get a lawyer. The lawyer we got, I don't know whether he was waiting for us or not. (Laughter) But anyway, we were naive, we were very naive. But we got publicity, and we got the publicity which was worth more than money, because we got good people on our side. And I can still recall the letters that were coming from white people all over Nova Scotia with one dollar in it, two dollars in it, for the lawyer to help us. So anyway, we got enough to tell the lawyer we had the money. And we took it to court, and we lost.

Whitelaw: Oh.

Oliver: (Laughter) We lost because they said, "Well, she was - ultimately - you're fighting discrimination - but ultimately, she defrauded the Queen out of one cent." But we never had to pay any court costs, we never had to pay the lawyer, we never had to pay anybody. So, we had that much money to put in our funds to fight the next case.

Whitelaw: Was there another case?

Oliver: Oh, God yes. Yes, but we didn't take it to court. We always, you know, could get it straightened out. The thing that I was involved with that I think is very important at this time, was the nurses. That was about the same time. So, I was fighting for the nurses, and I think this is very important. We just took it for granted when we graduated, those of us who did graduate from grade 12, you can't be a nurse. We just took it for granted. We wouldn't dare apply, we were intimidated anyway.

Whitelaw: You can't be a nurse because you're black.

Oliver: Oh yes, they didn't accept - they told us that once we started things, the struggle. So, I accepted that fact, but I didn't have to worry too much because this wonderful man, Bill Oliver, was down at our church, and he had two university degrees. I knew that was the kind of a man I wanted to marry. We fell in love, and got married. So, I didn't worry whether I was a nurse or not, I just became a minister's wife.

Whitelaw: But you would have liked to have been a nurse.

Oliver: Well, that would have been something for me to look to, but I knew that I couldn't be anything else but go into a segregated school, one of the little black schools, and they didn't have adequate books, they didn't have adequate buildings. It was pathetic the buildings they had.

Whitelaw: I've lost you here.

Oliver: I would have had to go and teach in a community like Beechville or Tracadie or Hammond Plains. They wouldn't have put me in the regular - even if I - not only that, but if I had become a teacher, they'd take you raw, the way you are. Especially if you had a grade 12, they would snap you up, but they wouldn't allow you into the Normal School. They wouldn't even train us in the Normal School.

Whitelaw: Oh really.

Oliver: Oh no! Bill broke that down.

Whitelaw: Did you give up the idea of being a nurse?

Oliver: I wanted to be something. No, I knew I couldn't be anything here with grade 12, and I had another girl who didn't get grade 11 or 12, but we had a pact made that we were going to go to Boston. We weren't going to stay here. You see, I was only 18. So, we were going to go to Boston and get more education there, and work. There was lots of work for - Black people could get good jobs working in Boston. We had friends there and whatnot, so we were - this girl and I were going to go together. That was my dream, so I knew I wasn't going to teach in one of these black schools where they didn't even have books for the students, and the buildings were leaking. That's where poor little Marie Hamilton - when we found her -

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: And so that was Dr Oliver's work about that in the education. But the nurses, I never even thought that I would - I wouldn't apply because you didn't want to have them tell you - Well, I was very proud, and I was going away.

Whitelaw: It would be very humiliating.

Oliver: Well it would, and you just took it. We were so downtrodden that we felt, "This is the way things are and we can't change it." And when we did reach the stage where we felt, "We can change it", we did it because of the War. We said, "If we're fighting democracy, then

we're going to fight here to change this." That's when we became a little militant. But prior to that, we were afraid. There were riots, you know. I mean, we knew that if they came with guns or something, they could just shoot us down. They'd do it. So, it was self-preservation. We were scared to death of white people because we felt that they would shoot us! There had been riots in New Glasgow in the teens and early twenties, there were riots all over the place. And we learned, we can't fight them. Now, when we did, we did it the right way. We did it during the War, and we made inroads then, and people's minds were open to what Hitler had done and what Hitler could do, and what racial and that kind of prejudice can do to people.

Oliver: So, back to the nurses.

Oliver: Oh yes, back to the nurses. So, here I am now, I have two children. I have my first son, Bill, and my second son, Phil. And I'm working like mad in the church because Bill's in the army and he's moving around. That's extra income for us because we were only making fifteen dollars a week. Our salary was fifteen dollars a week and we were both working for that at the church. So, I would do the work of the church, he'd be there for Sunday to preach.

Whitelaw: He was being paid fifteen dollars a week -

Oliver: That was his salary. [in the 1930's during the Depression]

Whitelaw: - as a minister?

Oliver: That was his salary.

Whitelaw: And this was the Minister of Cornwallis.

Oliver: Fifteen dollars a week. But you must realize the people didn't have the money. They had to pay him, and they were all on relief.

Whitelaw: And you were earning fifteen dollars a week.

Oliver: No! We both worked for the same fifteen.

Whitelaw: Oh, for the same fifteen.

Oliver: Yes. So, I did the church work, keeping the church, the organizations going, take my children right from this door into that door - we lived in the little parsonage on Cornwallis Street - and I would take my babies right in there with me and get the children organized, the girls organized, the women - work with the women, and all of that. And then he would work with the men, and be there

for the formal services. Now, on this particular day, he was down at the harbour. A ship was coming in or a ship was going out, and some of our boys - he had to be at all of these ships when they were going out to speak to any black boys, to take messages that he might have to give to their families after the ship was safely over there, you see. So, he was down there, he had to be there when these ships were going out. So, a little girl came to the door. She was very white looking, and she was crying. She came to the door, and she wanted to see the minister because the taxi driver that brought her down from the V.G. Hospital, said, "Lady, I don't know what to do with you. I'll take you down to the minister." And this is what happened. She said she wanted to see the minister. I said, "Well, I'm the minister's wife, and he won't be back until six. You'd better talk to me." And this is her story: She had come up here to apply to get in the V.G. Hospital. She had a grade eleven, and she had all her references. She had done the writing and they told her to come up to - whatever the formalities - [register, etc] and when she went in, she had to - she was very white looking - and she had to do the formalities of filling out the form. And in those days, it said, race, and she put Negro. When she wrote Negro, whoever was the superintendent, looked at that and gulped, and said, "Oh God, we're caught." So, they went right out and they said, "No, no, you have to - we didn't know." You couldn't tell, she was so fair. And she had beautiful brown hair, but she knew that she had Negro, but she was going as a Negro just as I was. She was much fairer than I was. She put Negro down, she didn't know. So here she is, they put her out. [she was ejected] She had come out and there was a taxi there, and she was crying. Anyway, she got to the taxi and said she didn't know what to do. She was just a little kid - eighteen in those days. So, he said, "I'll take you down to the minister", because Bill was well-known by that time. That would be about 1940, the War was well on, maybe 1943. Because it took us a couple - took us a year - I had to speak for a whole year to get the hospitals in Canada to drop the bars. So, that made me mad, that really made me mad! I didn't care what the people were thinking. I was going to fight this damn thing! Because I knew this dear little girl had come all the way up, and she just had enough money to get her back down to Antigonish. So, she had to stay there until Bill came. He drove her to the station, and he got her on the train for Antigonish, where she could phone her mother. And she had to go! And so when she got there, of course her mother had relatives in Boston. Our people were moving toward Boston. But you realize in those times that even our doctors - the West Indian boys were coming out, getting their training at Dalhousie, but they couldn't intern. They had to go to Boston to intern. They wouldn't let them intern in the hospital. So

naturally, the nurses aren't going to - the black girls aren't going to get in as nurses. So anyway, she got back safely, but it turned a key in me. And I had a lot of things then to talk about and to gripe about, and I got on the public speaking. That was my first public speaking. We had a black organization that we were trying to get organized called the - I gave it the name, and they accepted it, the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Colored People. I took the name from the Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the United States, where Walter White was doing so much about the lynching. So, I said, "Well, we'll be the Nova Scotia." Then I wrote - I've got a letter from Walter White. I wrote Walter White and I said, "We're going to use this name. Have we permission?" He said, "We have no objection whatever! Go ahead!" So, I began to speak.

Whitelaw: And where, where did you begin to speak?

Oliver: The first place to speak was, not for the Nova Scotia Association because that was just, Bill was just getting that organized, and I was in there with him, but he was getting them together. But Mr Husbands had an organization, and it was called, The Negroes Citizens Improvement League - B.A. Husbands. And I was speaking in the church and I was talking to everybody around the community. So this night, B.A. said, "I'm going to have a meeting of the Nova Scotia Colored Citizens Improvement League." He came down to the parsonage. He wasn't a Baptist. I don't think he was - yes, he was a Methodist. So, he came down and he said, "I heard you at one of the womens meetings." That would be the group, black womens group. He said, "I want you to come and speak. I want you to talk about all these things." I said, "Okay." So, he said, "I'm going to have a reporter there." So, B.A. was in with the politicians, eh? He did his thing. So, B.A. Husbands had a reporter there from the Herald Mail, and I spoke about the nursing and about all of these other things that were going on - I haven't got time here to list them - that was causing us grief. But particularly the nursing. And I did say, "What in the name of God are we doing over there fighting for democracy when we don't even have democracy here? We don't live in a democracy. We're just like serfs. And this girl" - I mentioned this particular girl - now it got all, good publicity, the Halifax Herald Mail, you know, they're wonderful. They even put my picture in the paper. At that time - I'm not too sure, I think they did at that time for B.A. - I think B.A. Husbands got my picture in the paper. This was in, and that was great, publicity was what we needed. Now, the publicity finds its way all the way to Toronto. The Toronto papers are picking this up, and then prior to that, the business men - I'm talking to everyone that will listen to me - and I'm talking about democracy, about Hitler. I'm mixing it

all up, it's one big pot! But I'm saying, "What are my brothers fighting for? They probably won't come home. They'll probably be killed over there. What are they fighting for, if here, their children can't even be trained to be something?" And that, I was trying to shame Nova Scotia. Now, the Halifax business people, getting all this publicity, and they don't like it too much. So, they call me up, but they're wonderful men. I have to give the men the credit because the womens clubs didn't invite me too much. But these men, and this is an interesting thing, Marjory, the president of the business men, Halifax business men - they were all - you'd know what I mean. They had luncheons.

Whitelaw: The Board of Trade?

Oliver: Possibly, that would be the Board of Trade. They had luncheon meetings. So, they were going to have this luncheon meeting at the Lord Nelson Hotel. Now, we couldn't get in that Lord Nelson Hotel! And I was saying too, you know, the Americans were coming here as tourists and we had to find places for them. They come with the money, these doctors from America, and they couldn't get in a hotel and what not. I was busting everything that I could get to bust. So, they said to me, "Well, we'd like for you to come and speak to our luncheon meeting." That was the most traumatic. That was the beginning of my outside speaking, and it was very traumatic because I knew, number one, without them knowing it, I would be breaking down the hotels, because we couldn't get in the front door of a hotel. And the man had said to me, "I'll be waiting for you right at the entrance. You be there by ten to one."

Whitelaw: He didn't know?

Oliver: Yes, he wanted me to come and speak about -

Whitelaw: But he didn't know that you -

Oliver: He knew what he was doing. He knew what I was going to speak on. He told me -

Whitelaw: Did he know that you couldn't get into the hotel?

Oliver: Maybe, maybe, yes, yes, yes, they knew. Well, I couldn't say, I couldn't say.