

## PEARLENE OLIVER INTERVIEW, SUMMER 1992, TRANSCRIPT 3

INTERVIEWER: Marjory Whitelaw  
INTERVIEWEE: Pearlene Oliver

Whitelaw: Hello, testing. This is tape three of the interview with Pearlene Oliver. So, we're going to begin. Pearlene, you started your married life in the little church at Windsor Plains. That's where you went when you were married. Tell me about your wedding. I think this is - You've been telling me the story and it's a lovely story.

Oliver: Well, this is a good time to tell it too, Marjory, because this July it will have been 56 years ago. Oh, it was, it was a wonderful wedding, but it was so simple and so plain. It was just a matter of getting the ceremony over with, I guess, because we meant business! We knew that we were going to stay together for life. So anyway, I'm in New Glasgow -

Whitelaw: Your mother had no money. It was very simple.

Oliver: We were poor, and it was 1936, and any money that one had had to go toward food and rent. So we were, we were poor like all of our neighbours during the Depression. My stepfather then couldn't get work, so we were on relief and things like that. So, everything counted. We were going to get married in July after he graduated. A friend who graduated with him, Abner Langley, and he had discussed the wedding and whatnot. So, Bill decided that probably the best thing - and I had told him that we couldn't afford a big wedding, my mother couldn't afford it, and we'd have to get married very simply. So, he decided that I would take the midnight train from New Glasgow on the - that would be the 29th wouldn't it? I pick it up around the 28th because we were married on the morning of the 29th - midnight, and come over to Truro. He would take the midland from Windsor Plains and get into Truro that day, where his - a black friend of his was going to stand for - be the best man. I think his sister, his younger sister was the bridesmaid because my sister came with me. She was older, and she was just there more or less to see that things were done right. She accompanied me, so at midnight, she and I - but before that, my mother talked to me. You know, I was just 19 and just graduated from high school, but I was quite serious and quite mature. I was brought up in the church, and I knew I was really more mature for my age than most 19 - then - girls were. So she talked to me about marriage and all of this, and how sorry she was that she couldn't put on a wedding commensurate with the position of William Oliver and things like that. I told her that didn't matter, the main thing was we were just

going to be married. You know, it didn't worry me that she couldn't have a big wedding for 50 or 60 or 70 people, and all that food, etc, etc. So she said, "But I will buy you a new suit and new shoes." So, she took me downtown and let me pick it out. I remember it was beige, and it was quite stylish, little box coat and everything. It really looked nice on me. And a blouse, and the shoes. I don't remember a hat. But I did have a - Bill had a corsage for me when I got to Truro. So anyway, my sister and I took the 12 o'clock midnight that came up from Sydney, I guess it would come, and go through New Glasgow. It was on its way to Truro, and it was one of those trains that stopped at just about every stop where there was a milk can. So, we didn't get into Truro until - no, maybe it was - I can't give the exact time, but about four maybe, about that.

Whitelaw: Four o'clock in the morning.

Oliver: About that, because we had to gauge the time. He was to meet me there at the station, and then he had arranged with Abner that we would meet him at his church at five or five-thirty in the morning, and we would be married in his church by him with our little three or four people. And then we were to go to his friend's sister's home where she was going to have a little breakfast for us. We had to pick up the seven o'clock, seven a.m. We didn't want to miss it, that was only one train, just that seven a.m. one. And we were to pick that up to get to Windsor Plains. So, everything had to be, you know, pushed right ahead. So, we took the midnight, my sister and I, and we were very quiet. She was very quiet. I remember we didn't talk much coming over because this meant I was leaving home for the first time, and I never really went back again except for maybe a couple of days now and then when there was sickness or death. So, then we met - Bill had George Klike, they were at the station with him, and George's younger sister. I think she was younger. And that was our wedding party. So, we went up to the church, the Emmanuel Baptist Church where Abner was the pastor.

Whitelaw: That's a white church.

Oliver: That's a white church, and Abner was white. He and Bill were friends. They had graduated together in theology. And so Abner married us there in his church. I don't remember a thing about that. I don't even remember saying, I do. I have a vague picture of the little group around me, but I don't remember what I was saying. I know I said the right things, but that's gone from me. I remember the breakfast, getting into the church and going through that, I just have a feeling about it. I have just a feeling about it, and coming out and realizing, "Now, you're married." So then we went to the breakfast,

then we went to the station, and we got on the seven a.m. My sister kissed me bye, bye, and she took the next train that was going out back to New Glasgow, and Bill and I started for Windsor Plains. We got there in Windsor Plains about nine o'clock in the morning, around nine, early in the morning. The women of the church had arranged a little church picnic for that day. And it was all set up nice. It was a beautiful sunny day, I remember that. And we walked up from the station to the little place that he had fixed up as our home. He was renting this little house and he had it all fixed up, his aunt had come down and fixed up.

Whitelaw: That was your first home together.

Oliver: Yes, but those things, it didn't - it wouldn't have mattered if it had been a tent.

Whitelaw: Did it seem like a palace?

Oliver: I loved it, but everything was old fashioned. His father had given him all this old furniture, and of course then, we were all looking for new things, I mean, young people of that day. And everything was the old fashioned chairs and the old fashioned sofa and the old fashioned table. Those are all antiques! But I didn't know anything about antiques. So it was all fixed up, and it was old, and I thought, "Oh dear me, this is an old fashioned place." All I was thinking about was that everything was so old fashioned, because the new furniture was coming in then. But then I forgot that in my happiness. And he had a garden planted. He had been there since May, you see, after graduation. He had a beautiful garden out in back, and he was a real gardener. From there, we had a wonderful day. Now, I remember so many things. I remember the family coming down. I remember every little once in a while I was so happy, and then I'd get so sad, because this was the first time I'd been away from home. I could keep happy, thinking, "Well I'm married and I love this man, and we're going to have a wonderful life together", then all of a sudden, boom, I'd go way down into the depths thinking, "Where is my mother, where are my sisters, where are my brothers?" I'd left home for the first time, even though I was 19. But that was in 1936. It was unique, and we were married 53 years when he died with me alone. He was getting ready - I was doing all the driving then - and he was getting ready to come out into the car with me while I went to do my weekend shopping. He was weak, but he could walk, and his sermon was all ready for Sunday. And the way we were married, and the way he died, he just walked in the kitchen and I'm there - I think I told you - and he walked in here, and he said, "I think I'll drive down with you" - He used to call me Pearl - I'll drive down with you Pearl. While you're shopping, I'll just wait in

the car. I said, "Good. It's a lovely day." The sun was shining. And he said, "I'll go freshen up." So, he walked in. I'm cleaning around the sink here. I go in to comb my hair, and he's laying right out on the bed, composed, as if an angel had composed him. His eyes were shut. And I said, "Oh, you're tired, you'd better not" - I looked at him, and I started to comb my hair. I'm telling you this, this is the end of our romance. And he died. He couldn't have found a better way to leave me than he did, with just he and I here together. And I said, "Oh, you're sleeping." But he wasn't sleeping, he was just, you know, he just shut his eyes. As soon as I said, "We're ready to go", he would have gotten up. It was just five minutes from the time he went in there. And he's laying so composed, his eyes closed, his lips closed and his hands crossed. He's laying back on the pillow. I'm talking to him, saying, "Well, what kind of meat will we get this weekend? I think I'll get a roast, a little roast of beef." I'm talking all this. And then when I combed my hair, I turned and I said, "I don't think you should come with me. I'll just scoot down there and get the groceries. You stay here and rest. You're tired." He didn't move. Usually, he would have said, "No, I'll go." And he didn't move. So, I went over to him, and I said, "Bill, wake up." There was no sound. He wasn't breathing. His eyes were closed. And I shook him again. I said, "Bill?" And then when I looked at him, I could see that he wasn't breathing, and I kept over the bed the ambulance and the doctor and my son's number - had it in big numbers right over the bed in case at night I had to call. So, I called the ambulance first, told them to come quickly, that I thought my husband was in a coma. And I just kept shaking him, "Bill, Bill." I didn't know how to do CPR, I didn't know how to do it. But he was so composed. There was nothing coming out of him, there was no sound. His eyes were closed, he was at rest. And in ten minutes, the ambulance was here, in ten minutes my son - God had spoken to my son at his office about an hour earlier - My son said, "I guess I'll go home. It's a beautiful afternoon, I might get some vegetables in or something." And he just came in, drove in the driveway when the ambulance was coming in.

Whitelaw:

Oh my.

Oliver:

Stephen - and they were converging. Stevie said, "Let's do CPR." He and the ambulance tried to do CPR. I'm just thinking, "He's in a coma." But he's dead then. He's gone. And when I think of it - then oh, I'm standing back there - I'm not crying, I'm not making - I'm just watching them trying to get him into the ambulance. And I'm saying, "Oh God, he's in a coma." You know, "They've got to bring him out of this, bring him out of this." And I'm saying, "Take him to the V.G." They said, "No, we'll take him to the [Infirmary], that's handier", you

see. So, Stevie and I drive down behind the ambulance and we sit there for an hour. I'm saying to Stevie, "Now, when your father comes out of this, they'll take him to the V.G. to get him stabilized." I said, "We'll take my car. We've got the car here." Then I said, "You can take my car back and get your car because if you want to go to your office and then pick me up because I'm going to stay here at the V.G."

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: And we sat there for an hour, and then the doctor - the head nurse came out of the clinic. I said, "How is he doing? She said, "Oh, we're breathing for him, we're breathing for him." Stevie said to me, "They're doing CPR", you know, whatever. About 20 minutes later, she came out. We're just sitting right by the door, right by the door. She said, "You'll be more comfortable if you come into this little office." I thought, "Isn't this sweet of her." So she said, "Come into this office", and she shut the door and she left us. And I'm talking to Stevie about what they're going to do when they bring Dad out of this, eh? And she comes in with a pad in her hand and a pen, and she sits at the little desk. I didn't ask her, "How is he?" I thought she was just ready to transfer him to the V.G. She didn't say, "He's dead", she said to me, "Now, Mrs Oliver", she said, "Would you give me your maiden name?" Give me your maiden name. And that takes me right back to the wedding, my maiden name, eh? I looked at her, and I said, "Is he dead?" She said, "Yes." Then she could tell me he was dead. I had to -

Whitelaw: You had to ask.

Oliver: Yes. I said, "Is he dead?" Why would she want my maiden name? She just shook her head then. And then she said, "Do you want to see him?" And I said, "Yes." When I went in the room, in this place where they had been - they had a sheet over him - but there he was, looking 20! His flesh - I said, "Stephen, look at your father!" I said, "He looks like" - He looked like the day we were married. And he was then 77! But youth had come back to him. I had never seen anybody dead so soon. I had never seen too many people dead - after they had died. You know, I'd go to the church, I don't even look at them at the church, unless they are my relatives. I said, "Stephen" - poor Stevie, he was in shock - I said, "Stephen, you're father looks like he's 20!" The flesh was beautiful, and he was so composed. There was a swelling, like, that puffed, that made him - And I thought, "God man, he doesn't look old, he looks like he's 20." And I guess that takes me right back, Marjory, the way we were married so quietly together was the way - when he left, it was just him and I. It was beautiful. I hate to say beautiful, but it was beautiful!

Whitelaw: But you had a wonderful life together, and you did such good work together. That's what I would like to talk about this morning, the work that you did together. How long - I don't want to cut your reflection short or your memories, but I do want to ask you how long you stayed at Windsor - that was a black church at Windsor Plains.

Oliver: Yes.

Whitelaw: There's a black community there.

Oliver: Yes, black. We had a few white people there in the community that came, you know, but it was predominantly black.

Whitelaw: Was that unusual in those days, to have some white people who would attend that church?

Oliver: Yes. Oh, not if they were living in the community, or if they were intermarried. There wasn't too much intermarriage even then, but there was one or two. They didn't come regularly, but they used to come. They were the only family that had a phone. I remember once I had to make a phone call, so I had to go there to use their phone.

Whitelaw: You didn't have a phone yourself?

Oliver: Oh, we didn't even have a radio! We didn't have - No televisions, of course, there were no televisions. An old deacon down in the valley gave us an old battery radio. We just had that, and we just loved it. But you asked me about -

Whitelaw: How long you stayed there.

Oliver: Well, that would be ten months. We left there the first of May.

Whitelaw: Of nineteen thirty -

Oliver: - seven. We arrived there the 29th of July, 1936, and we left there the first day of May because he had to be at Cornwallis, see, for the first Sunday. We left a few days before.

Whitelaw: Did he get a call to Cornwallis?

Oliver: Yes.

Whitelaw: Is that the expression?

Oliver: Don't ask me to tell you about that. I'll be here all day. God -

Whitelaw: Just a minute now, I want to ask you, was that the - that's the expression that you use in the Baptist Church, that he was called to Cornwallis Street.

Oliver: Was he ever!

Whitelaw: And he was to replace the famous, the illustrious -

Oliver: Doctor White, Portia White's father.

Whitelaw: The wonderful Doctor White.

Oliver: Yes.

Whitelaw: Portia White's father.

Oliver: Yes. Well now, you realize that we're very young. I'm just 19.

Whitelaw: And he was - Dr White was very eminent.

Oliver: He was very eminent, but the work had gone. During the Depression, he was eminent. And he had singers. Oh, he had a talented family, all of his family. But the people were poor, and they were too much for the people in a way. They were very social and very talented. So, he did a radio work, and he became famous more for his radio work. Everybody knew of him, but the church was just about gone in debt. Not many people were coming, the little people didn't come, not too many. But the church had a name because he was the pastor. He was doing radio work, and it was the radio work -

Whitelaw: What do you mean, he was doing radio work?

Oliver: He had his own radio and that was novel then. I had remembered in New Glasgow, somebody had a radio, and they said, "Oh, the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church Minister is on today, Sunday." This was broadcast all over Nova Scotia. That's what made him famous in those days. He was a marvellous preacher. He was a Southerner, and he had a southern drawl. And the family was talented beyond - everyone could sing, the wife, the children.

Whitelaw: I remember six or seven little White kids used to go round in concert parties.

Oliver: Oh yes.

Whitelaw: Singing to the [troops].

Oliver: Oh yes, every one of them, every one of them! Every one of them could have been a Portia. But it was during the Depression, our people had no money - in the city - that's when we went in. That's why it took us 25 years to get that church on its feet and to build. We built,

cleaned up and built a church there, built the hall, remodeled the church and everything. But Doctor White became famous through his radio ministry, and the wonderful singing of his family. They were really beautiful, beautiful singers. But the church itself and the organizations -

Whitelaw: So, you had to start to rebuild it psychologically as well as physically.

Oliver: We had to get the grassroots.

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: We went to the grassroots and we got the grassroots. We went to the right - Now, not that he wasn't doing - burying them and doing all that, but they didn't - the people that we got, weren't the people that related to him. That was more high society, you know, the people that he was working with. Spirituality was probably the second thing. With us, spiritually was the first thing. We went for the grassroots.

Whitelaw: What was your part in this?

Oliver: Oh, what was my part in this! It was glorious! Remember, I'm pregnant. This is May. When the call comes - I'm not going to get into that, because the hand of God came down hard on us. We said no three times. We said no. And I had three reasons. See, this is really - that's when I felt the stroke of God. I was young, and God was saying, "You have a lot to learn little girl. You might think you're spiritual." And Bill - I said, "Oh, we don't want to go there. Look, we're already here." And we had so many reasons. He was going to take the school over. The school board had asked him to take the school, which meant we would - our income would have been higher. We had this little bungalow, and that was my first home. Then, I'm pregnant, and I've got my doctor in Windsor Plains. And the doctor and I are relating. I'm going to have to have this baby all by myself because I know my mother couldn't come from Windsor Plains. I'd have nobody with me. This is my first baby. And it was a bad birth, it ended up to be a very bad birth because of the traumatic things I had to go through between May and June, really. The baby didn't turn right, it was breach. So, the call - if I can get this in - I want to show you how God has worked with us and how I know, I know there is a spiritual force, you see. And it's worked with us. So Bill said, "Oh, I've got this letter." They wanted us to come and take the church because of his education. He had two degrees. But he was only 23, and I'm just 19, and I'm pregnant and inexperienced!

- Whitelaw: Pearlene, when you say two degrees, that's a BA from Acadia -
- Oliver: A BA and a Masters in Divinity.
- Whitelaw: Masters in Divinity.
- Oliver: He had his Bachelor of Arts, and he was qualified, and he had worked around.
- Whitelaw: Was this unusual among the Baptist preachers of the time to have so much education?
- Oliver: I think he was about the first with a degree. There was another back in the eighteen hundreds, but he went to the States. He went there and got it, I think. Bill was the first to graduate from Acadia, and to get - not to graduate from Acadia, he was second or third, but to get the Divinity - to do that. So anyway, they sent the letter, so Bill says, "Gee, they want me to take over Dr White's work." I said, "Oh we can't, you can't do that! I can't do that! I can't go there!" Because I thought that these people were just great, eh? And I'm just 19. I just felt I couldn't do it, I need more experience. Not only that, I'm getting in with these people, and they're lovely with me. I said, "Look, you've been asked to take the school here. So, you know, tell them you can't go. Maybe later, you know, let's go later when we're older, get some experience." So, he looked at me and he said, "Okay", you know. He was just as happy because he was going to take the school, and that would be a little more income for us.
- Whitelaw: Was that a segregated school?
- Oliver: Yes, well yes, unless you lived right there next to it and you wanted to go to it. But it was - all the schools were segregated except towns. So, I said, "Oh gee, I couldn't handle that." And here I am now, eight months pregnant. So, I was leaving the pregnancy aside, but I said, "No, you're going to get the school. Let's stay and take that for awhile, and then I can work in the church and you can do the school, and we can get experience working with people." He said, "Well, I guess that's wise." So, he wrote them back and he said he didn't think he'd take it. That's number one. Then, down came a delegation.
- Whitelaw: Oh.
- Oliver: Mr Kinney and the head deacon came to see why we would say no. And then it was not only - by that time, we had two things. We had the house, we were going to buy the house. He was going to take the school, we were going to buy the house and make that our dwelling place. And

number three, inconsequential was, I was pregnant, ready to have a baby. But we weren't worrying about that too much, we thought nature would take care of itself. So they came down, and Bill said, "No, I think I'll take the school." "Oh no, no, no", you know, "you should come", said these leaders. "We need you, we need you. You've got the education." So again, we said no. That was number two. - Oh, I'm sorry Marjory.

Whitelaw: That's all right. I'll get you another glass.

Oliver: The third time, they went back and they reported, and a bigger delegation. Listen now, it came three times. And so I just said, "Well, why are they bothering us?" You know, they can get somebody else, somebody who would be glad to go to the city. We want to stay here and work with these rural people." Number one, he could still get the school, number two and number three. By the time number three came, God said, "Okay, this is enough." This is what happened. We're going to - No, I'm going to have the baby, and I've got my doctor, and I'm relating to him. I've got the bed and the room, and everything is all organized here, you know, for me to have this child. Then, before the third came down, after the second came down - You have to excuse me, I'm trying to get this correlated - The first group - the letter came and then the first group, and before the last group came, my doctor was curling, and had fell and had got a concussion or whatever, and was seriously injured. I got this letter from his office saying I would have to get another doctor. "Have to get another doctor!" And I'm just about a month and a half away from the baby. "How could I get another doctor?" You know, this was just terrible! So, before the third group came, I had no doctor. I had no doctor. Then I said, "Well, I'll get another doctor." Bill said, "You might as well come to the city because you can get a doctor up there faster than you can get one here." See? I said, "No, we'll stay." Now, we're going to buy the house. And this day, somebody from the tax comes up, and they tell us that the man who owned the house hadn't been paying his taxes and they were going to put the house up for sale, and it had to be cash. So, that meant we were out of doors. We were sitting in the house and they did it in a month. The house, they're bidding on the house outside.

Whitelaw: Oh, how awful.

Oliver: No, this is God working again, telling us, "What's a house? I'm calling you to a field, and you're putting this house" - The doctor, I have no doctor, now I have no house. Not only that, but the man who bought it, a Mr Whitehead, a white gentleman that bought it, came in, and when he saw my condition and he saw how sad we were, he apologized. But he said, "Reverend Oliver" - I don't

think he was reverend then, he hadn't been ordained - but he might have said, Reverend Oliver or licentiate or whatever - "I have to move in in a month because I'm out of doors." He bought the house. He had no place to go with his family. He said, "I'll need my house in thirty days." So, I have no doctor. I said, "What's going on here?" I had no house. Then, the third delegation comes.

Whitelaw: At the right time.

Oliver: Yes. Bill said, "You have no doctor, Pearl. You might as well come to the city, you'll get one quicker. You have no house, there's a parsonage there waiting for us." So, when they came, we were out, we were out, we were out! We had to be out of that place in three weeks. We had no place to go. So, we came to the city.

Whitelaw: The coffee pot is bubbling, so we could turn it off, I think.

Oliver: Do you want some more coffee?

Whitelaw: No, I'm all right, I'm going to drink the rest. We've come to the end of, we've come to the end of the tape. The coffee pot is making a bubbling noise, so I will turn the cassette over.

END OF A SIDE OF TAPE

Whitelaw: So, this is side two of tape three of the interview with Pearlene Oliver. So Pearlene, you did go to - you did come to Halifax in the Cornwallis Street Church.

Oliver: Oh, this is something else, this is something else. Do you want me to tell you this? I think I should, to show you what kind of a person I was. Here I am, it's May, the first of May, my baby's going to be born the end of June, so I'm seven months, aren't I? The delegation had come from the church down, and we had to go. I say, God just said, "Push, this is your work." Because we were saying, "No, no", and God just pushed us. There was nothing else to do. Now, to get to Cornwallis Street, I was a little nervous. I was afraid. If I had not been pregnant, I would probably have felt, I would have felt more manageable. But I'm going there, and I'm seven months pregnant, and I'm, I'm scared. So, the church had said when they were down, "We'll arrange to have a" - told Bill, "we'll arrange to have a delegation meet you and Mrs Oliver at the station. You get a truck or a van or something." He did get a truck. It was a big truck, a big covered truck, "to bring your furniture." He had all this old fashioned furniture, you know, and we were going to bring that with us. So, Bill said to me, a few

days before when they were taking everything down, all these beautiful old chairs, even an organ, an old fashioned organ. We were going to take that with us too. It belonged to his family, possibly his mother. So anyway, Bill said, "Now, I've got to get you into Windsor to that train. You go on the train and there'll be a group of women at the station to meet you. I'm going with the truck. The truck doesn't know where to go." I said, "No, I'm not going in that. Do you mean, you're going to put me on the train and I have to meet these people all by myself?" Remember, I'm still 19 and pregnant. I said, "No, no." I said, "If you're going in the truck, I'm going in the truck too." "Oh Pearl", he said, "Look at you." He said, "You can't go in the truck like that. Look at you! You're big", he said. "The bumping of the truck!" I said, "If you go in the truck, I'm going in the truck too. I am not going on that train, meeting those people by myself in this condition." He said, "Okay." He always agreed with me. That's true, he always agreed with me. "Okay." So, the people from the church, on that morning - I remember the morning, I was crying and crying. Now, I'm leaving the beautiful home. I cried the day I left New Glasgow, I'm crying the day I'm leaving Windsor Plains. The people were so good to me. And all this lovely little old house that I thought was so grand. And I'm crying, but I'm going in the truck. So, the man looks at Bill, and he took Bill aside when he saw me standing there, see? I had my jacket on, but I was pretty big. And I guess the man was nervous.

Whitelaw: I would think.

Oliver: Yes, but I wasn't. (Laughter) So, he said something to Bill and Bill said, "No, she said she's all right. She's coming with me. We're both going together. She wants to go there with me." He said, "She doesn't want to go alone on the train." They got all this stuff up on this big truck, got it all covered over. They put me in between the driver. Bill puts me in between the driver and him, and we come to Cornwallis Street. The delegation is waiting for us. They didn't expect him to come there in the truck, much more me! So, that shows you what kind of people we were. You see what I mean? Those things didn't bother us. We were coming here to do God's work and we had seen God's hand, so we knew we'd better just do it. All these women are down there waiting, the train comes in - waiting for both of us - You see, the minister and his wife were arriving on the train! In the meantime, they're waiting, the train comes in, and there's no minister and no minister's wife. Just prior to that, while they're going to the station, the truck pulls into the parsonage and they unload all this stuff. I go in and stand in the parsonage, and Bill comes in. The men are - I think there was a man on the back, sitting in the back of the truck - or there were

some men down there. I think Bill had arranged - there were men there from the church who were unloading this stuff. And I go into this empty parsonage, and it was just hollow, you know. And looking at it, all these rooms and everything. I didn't care, Bill's here, see? I didn't want to meet all those people down there - shy too, a little shy. They said, "What happened?" They're down there saying, "What happened? We'll have to go down and see what happened down there", you know. They drive up by the church, and they see the truck there and it's just about all unloaded. They knew the furniture was coming in. That's right, and one of the men was to be there to help with the unloading. They drive up, and they say, "They're here." They came in. I was so embarrassed! We're there in the middle of the parsonage, Bill and I standing together, telling them where to put this and where to put that. And the women just looked, as much as to say, "What have we got here? We didn't want our minister and his wife to come in a truck! We wanted them to come on the train", because they're quite, you know, sophisticated, see? So, that showed you. I said, "Oh, dear God! Did I get started on a wrong foot! I don't care." I wouldn't have been happy. I didn't know those people, and I would have been very uncomfortable! Not today, or if I had been 25, but I was only 19. So, Bill was - we were shamed. Bill would say, "Pearl, it was your fault that we came in the truck." He said, "You wouldn't go on the train." He said, "Even if you had gone on the train, it wouldn't have been so embarrassing." The man didn't know where to take the furniture so Bill had to go on the truck. I said, "If you're going on the truck, I'm going on the truck!" Isn't that something! They forgave me. They just thought - they said, "Well, if he's got two degrees, he must - he's somebody. And she's a high school graduate, and she looks pretty good, even if she is pregnant. She must be a little somebody, so I guess they're all right." And we got over that hump.

Whitelaw: And you were there for twenty -

Oliver: - five years.

Whitelaw: Twenty-five years. But tell me, now tell me about the work that you did. You mentioned a girls camp a moment ago.

Oliver: Yes. Well, when we got there, the church was down. Doctor White was dead, some of them were in mourning. You know, Doctor White had just died in September, and this is the next spring. Now, he had been there for 18 years, and he was a renowned man, but as I said, he was famous through his radio broadcast. And through the excellent singing -

- Whitelaw: Of his family.
- Oliver: Of his family. Not so much what was going on in the church. So, when we get there, we come with the grassroot religion and the grassroot approach, getting these people in the slums. And it was really slummy then, if you can recall.
- Whitelaw: I can recall, those were the days when the old part of Halifax was a terrible slum. Creighton Street, Maynard Street.
- Oliver: Maynard Street was a little bit better, but Creighton and down Grafton - we had people from Grafton, he did ministry with those people.
- Whitelaw: This of course, was before the old part of town had been paved, before Scotia Square was built.
- Oliver: Yes. That was the slums, we were working in slums.
- Whitelaw: Jacob Street.
- Oliver: Yes, Stairs Street and Jacob Street and Grafton Street and Argyle, wherever they could get into. And then Creighton Street, a certain part of it. It was strict discrimination. I mean we were really, we were really a downed people.
- Whitelaw: I happen to know something about this. There were slum landlords who were making huge profits -
- Oliver: Slum people had to pay their rent.
- Whitelaw: - on slum property. And often, there was no running - there would be three or four houses without any running water.
- Oliver: One tap, just a tap.
- Whitelaw: And no toilet.
- Oliver: Just a cold tap, just a cold tap. And tenements, there were tenements.
- Whitelaw: Yes.
- Oliver: Now, this was our work. Our work wasn't the sophisticated work that you heard on the radio, and the high singing. They soon deserted us when we started working with the grassroots. So, Bill started visiting everybody, Grafton, Water and all those. I couldn't because of my condition, until my baby was born. He went into all the homes, and they couldn't understand - because he was young, educated well-spoken, nice personality - why he would be interested in them, you

see? Because they weren't society. Now, I grew up poor, poor, but decent, and I loved my people. I knew that we were in this condition not through - I always knew that from a child - it's not our fault! And I still maintain that today. It was through terrible discrimination and through put-down. And if you take a child, or take a people, and you put them down, "You're nothing! Get out of here. Go back there. We don't want to be near you!" What kind of people are you going to have? Only the rare one is going to catch a vision and come out. And that's the way we were living. "You're nothing, you're black! You were slaves!" And we didn't even know that we had been slaves because they never taught us that in school. We didn't know, we didn't know why! We thought we were pretty good! We didn't know. "Why don't they like us? Why do they treat us this way?" We didn't know the story of black history and slavery. In our schools, no mention was made of it, see? Because they were covering it up and making it look as though we were our own -

Whitelaw: You were creating your own standards.

Oliver: Yes, that we were no good!

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: We were no good, so we didn't deserve an education, we didn't deserve to live good. So anyway, when we came here, the harvest - the seed had to be sown. And so, you ask me about my work. I had to wait for my baby to be born, and about a month after my baby was born, the July, August, September starts coming. I see all these little girls going down to Alexander School, and they're not coming to Sunday School. I have to find out - they're living around Maitland Street - and I have to go out to talk to some of them, you know, and whatnot. I was very young then, very personable, and I kept myself nicely dressed. You know, I wasn't a typical minister's wife, I didn't look that way. I wore nice things, not expensive things, but I kept myself nice. And so, they liked me. They liked me for my empathy with them, and they liked me because I wanted to empathize with them. But I came out of that! These were our people. So, I started working, calling them, getting them organized into things I had been in. CGIT, I grew up in the CGIT, and that was the first thing. I took all ages just to get them in. And I got a little mission band going, anything to get them into that old hall. And it was hard because they weren't used - they didn't come, they didn't bother. They might have gone to some of the Salvation Army some of them. So anyway, then when they came, I knew all of the new games that I had learned in Girl Guides. I had been a lieutenant in the Girl Guides, down in New Glasgow, you see. We had a Girl Guide troop in our church, and I was the lieutenant.

Phone Rings

Oliver: I'm not going to take that.

- Whitelaw: We're back talking - we just took a break - we're back talking about the little girls who were, you were trying to lure into coming to Sunday School.
- Oliver: Coming to the church, yes. I got them into the CGIT. I was very young then too, so they used me as a role model. I'd take my babies right into the old hall, and some of them - they'd take their turns at looking at the little baby while I was teaching them. It was mostly music and games, and a little treat, and a Bible story. I'd keep them there for an hour, then I'd say to them, "Now, I haven't seen you come into Sunday School. Why don't you come?" Some of them probably felt they weren't dressed well enough. But I started winning them that way. And there was a time when I had so many girls - I was just taking them from 10, 10 to 14, that's all that was in that area. That was quite a gap - I had so many there, I had 70 girls coming in there. So, all I could do was to make them feel, "This is a good place to come to. We're having fun, we're learning a little bit about Jesus, guess we'll come on Sunday." Then, to get them to come on Sunday - this is the girl's work, see? It was the tender trap, really - to get them to get used to coming, because they weren't worrying about coming on Sunday, many of them. They were from downtown and all around. We had to get uniforms. So, we put on something so that they could each have a blouse, the uniform was just a midi, you know, midi.
- Whitelaw: Yes. This is a CGIT uniform.
- Oliver: Yes.
- Whitelaw: And I remember what they were. There were midis down to their hips, I think, and a black tie.
- Oliver: Yes, that was them, and black skirt.
- Whitelaw: Black skirt.
- Oliver: So, even if they only had a black dress, they could wear the midi. And even if they didn't, it didn't matter to me as long as they had the midi on. So, now they start coming, and so to get them in church, Bill would get me to take a service, a girls service, so that they could sing and they could read the scripture and take the offering, things like that. Involve them! So, I had a girls service so they could march in. They all had to be there that Sunday, see? And they'd come with their midis on. Some of them took them sometime before they'd - they wouldn't come unless there was something going on for girls - So, got them coming that way, and gee whiz, when Chatelaine shows me the woman of the year, the Women of Halifax - That was the year - I'm bringing this in now to show you. They wanted me to have a group of those girls, Chatelaine Magazine in Toronto, and I've got the pictures of all of that. So, they sent their photographers and

their writers down and everything, and I was - They were taking - they chose I think two, maybe three women of Halifax. They were featuring the women of Halifax, and everybody - They usually took the high -

Whitelaw: The socialites.

Oliver: Socialites. So, the year they choose the two socialites and Mrs Oliver, oh, that was quite some talk. But I was right there with them, see?

Whitelaw: And this was because of your work with the CGIT groups?

Oliver: Well that, and my public speaking. I'm also working on the nurses, getting them in, by this time, eh?

Whitelaw: By this time.

Oliver: I also have three or four babies, children, so they wanted to come. So, the photographer came down and had a photograph with my family and my children - and the girls. So, that got me in Chatelaine. I didn't want to be there, but that was great to be there.

Whitelaw: Good publicity.

Oliver: The first black woman. Anyway, they've had a few since then.

Whitelaw: Pearlene, you mentioned a camp.

Oliver: Yes. So, Bill was at the same time, whatever time he had, and strength that he had, he was doing the boys scouts, because he had been a master boy scout and had been in boy scouts all his life in Wolfville. So, he organized the boys into the boy scouts. I did what I knew, the CGIT, I had the girls coming. Now, Bill - camping was the main thing with the scouts, so they could go to Miller's Lake. They had - that was the boy scout camp. So every year, they went out there for ten days. Bill would come drive back and forth, and he had a couple of the men and the older boys of the community that would stay if he had to leave to come in for a wedding or anything. They had these camps. And then I said, "Well, why don't we get" - No, we had gotten this land here then, this was the beginning of it. I said, "We own land out there in Lucasville." I never thought about the poor people, but we owned all this land, relatives, we had gotten it. "Why don't we have the boys come out there, and then when the boys leave, let me bring the girls in? Some of the women of the church can come and help me." They thought that was great. Well, since we owned the land, we didn't have to ask anybody. But we were making bonfires, so they came after us. This would be in August. And so they had to make us dig a pit because we were just clearing away fires, you see, out here. Then

some of the kids from the community came up. So, we used that field.

Whitelaw: Have you got a lake out here, because Miller's Lake -

Oliver: Oh yes, a lake right down in back of the church.

Whitelaw: Miller's Lake is lovely.

Oliver: Yes, we were out in Fall River too.

Whitelaw: Yes.

Oliver: So, you've got a lake here.

Oliver: A lake here, and a lake out in Fall River. We also took them out to Fall River. Then we had to move it. We took them to Fall River because we had a little cottage out there, but it was too civilized out there, you know, and the kids were making too much noise really. We knew that. It was just a couple of summers. And then we got this land, and we brought them here. And so we had the camps. And for the camps, now, the boys would come for eight days to ten days, but the girls would only be here for four days. That's about all I felt I could keep them because you know, they had to have food and everything. And then I'd get women to come. I'd have it organized, get up in the morning and blow the whistle and follow everything, just like the boys. I'd have about - Bill would have about 50 boys, I'd have about 50 girls. Then the War was ending, and we got all the surplus army tents. Bill had been in the War, you see, so he spoke to whoever looks after the stuff that's left over, and they gave us all the army tents we wanted.

Whitelaw: Army surplus, it was.

Oliver: Yes, army surplus. They gave it to us. "How many tents do you need?" We said, "Five, six", got them. Then mugs, that's right, we got all the mugs and the tin plates and the knives and forks. And particularly, particularly, the great big tents. So, Bill got it first for the scouts, got it for the scouts from the army, because he had been in. And then they told us to keep it. So, when the girls - that was one of the other things, I said, "Look, you've got it all set up here, now the boys are leaving. Let me bring the girls out", see? We used to come out to visit them, see, if they were camping there. And the girls would come out to visit their brothers. We had camp visitor's day. We did everything like the regular camp, because he had been in camp, and I had been in Girl Guide Camp.

Whitelaw: Girl Guide, or do you mean CGIT?

Oliver: I had been a lieutenant in the Girl Guides and the CGIT.

Whitelaw: You'd also been a Girl Guide?

Oliver: Yes. But we didn't organize Girls Guides because they were more - I didn't have the money to get them into uniforms. It's cheaper to buy a blouse. And the only reason I didn't organize the Girl Guides, it's a more complex program for them, and I knew they'd never be able to get the money to buy the Girl Guide -

Whitelaw: Girl Guides was expensive.

Oliver: Yes, so I stuck with the CGIT.

Whitelaw: These girls were mostly the girls from that terrible slum area in the center of downtown Halifax.

Oliver: Oh, yes, downtown and Creighton Street. Do you know they write me? They're all over the States today. After Doctor Oliver died, I'll tell you this, I kept the letter, I've got all that. This girl said, "Do you remember me? I want to tell you" - she heard, you know, and she expressed it to me - "I want to tell you what you meant to me." And she began to tell me what I meant to her, and how I was her model. She said, "I want to be just like Mrs Oliver", and all of this. She did - she became a nurse too. She was one of the girls that trained, and went to the States and nursed in the States. Now, this is what she said: "I have a daughter, and my daughter now", she said, was grown up. But she said, "I've often said - used to sit my daughter down, and tell her about you, and about what you taught me. And how I would have gone wrong had you not been there. I only wish to God", she said, "I had had something like this for my daughter when she was growing up. I remember the camps." And gee I, I just sit here and the tears came out of my eyes, and I thought, "Well, one letter like that" -

Whitelaw: It means a lot, doesn't it?

Oliver: She said - she told her daughter - and she was passing it on, said, if she had only had - And at that time, I didn't think I was doing anything, just doing, you know. That was my work. Now, the women, I had to organize -

Whitelaw: You organized the women.

Oliver: No, they were pretty well organized, but they were down. I had to get in there and give the programs and get going. Then, I did the organizing about '53, so I organized Cornwallis Street, Beechville - We had these two little churches, I worked with the women there. 1953, I think it was, I organized, called all our auxiliaries all together at Halifax, and organized an

institute, the Womens Institute, with the help of the other women, of course.

Whitelaw: Now, is this connected with the - There's a provincial and a national organization of womens institutes.

Oliver: No, I wasn't familiar with them when I - at that time - this was about 1953. There was quite a few institutes around in the university, thinking institutes, you know. They were calling themselves institutes. And so, I wanted to use the word, institute, because this was to be - "What are our problems? How can we better ourselves? What can we do? Are we making progress?" It was to be once a year. And I wanted it to be that kind of an institute. And it wasn't until after I gave them the name, the Womens Institute of the African Association, and whatnot, that I began to hear about these other institutes. I said, "Well, what the heck! There's institutes all over the place. And they don't have any copyright on the word, institute."

Whitelaw: No, certainly not.

Oliver: No, not that kind. We talked about family.

Whitelaw: I want to go back a minute to Dr Oliver. Now, he had been a part time padre in the army, three days a week, and this would augment his income too.

Oliver: Oh yes, that put us on our feet financially. We never wanted for bread. We were only getting \$15 a week, that was for both of us. We never had a hungry day.

Whitelaw: Was that at Cornwallis Street?

Oliver: Umhmm, when we first came there. Then when we left after 25 years, we were only getting \$75 a week.

Whitelaw: Really!

Oliver: Yes. Not a week, really, we were paid on the first and the fifteenth, so if there were five weeks, five Sundays, we weren't paid according to Sundays. So, when we left, he was just getting \$75, and that was my work too. But we never, never wanted for a piece of bread.

Whitelaw: In those days, you didn't hire a minister, you hired a couple, the minister and his wife.

Oliver: Well, if you were fortunate enough, if you were fortunate enough to get a wife - Now, Mrs White, and then she married a Seeley and then she married a Johnston - fortunate enough, she had music, see. She had a beautiful soprano, and as for her children, she really had a beautiful - She could have gone places, but - So, she worked on the music, the choir, but the choir was made up 99% of her own family.

- Whitelaw: So, you worked in another direction.
- Oliver: I went with the grassroots because I was from the grassroots, and I knew growing up in New Glasgow, what racial prejudice was, what it would do to you. I knew that we were people of God, and I had to get the answer of why. I didn't know too much in the beginning about slavery, and I found the answer. Then I knew we weren't to blame.
- Whitelaw: So what, what - By this time, was Dr Oliver - I'm puzzled about Beechville, you mentioned Beechville a moment ago - Now, this is in the fifties, you're in the fifties by now. He's finished in the army, of course, when did he begin - Did he do supplementary preaching in Beechville?
- Oliver: When he took over Cornwallis Street, all these little churches had no clergy, no minister. There were pastorless. Little Beechville out there, they just had people coming in once and a while. Then there was another church up on the Cobequid Road, the Cobequid Road Church. So, he had his afternoons free. Morning and evening, he preached at the city, but the afternoons - and he was young, so was I. I used to go with him, take the babies and we'd go. So Beechville, first of all, we came to Cornwallis Street in May. By September - the first baptism he had out in the lake, in these places, he had to take them out in the lake and baptize them. In Beechville, according to his records, was September, 1937, so he had been going out to Beechville preaching to them and he was ready to baptize. In September, he took them down to the Lake. Now, they had had a church before that, and they're all old slave churches, see, these? And ministers come and ministers go, and when - they're lucky when they get an ordained minister. When they don't, they get a licentiate, or they depend upon a white minister to come in, if it was to baptize or something. So, they were - they had no minister, these two churches, so on first and second Sunday afternoon he'd come out to Cobequid Road - the first and third to Cobequid Road, the second and fourth, he would go to Beechville. The fifth, he'd have off, if there was a fifth Sunday, that afternoon he took it off. Then, I'd go with him. That started in '37.
- Whitelaw: And you must have got to know the women up there too.
- Oliver: Oh gee, and I've never left - we never left Beechville.
- Whitelaw: I know you're still the organist there.
- Oliver: Yes, yes. And family, I mean, they treat me like family. Beechville people are different. They had it really tough, really tough, really tough. They had all been slaves - really tough. But they've got a love -

Whitelaw: Now, I've got to talk to you about this slavery business, because I don't altogether - I'm not in a position to say I don't agree with you -

Oliver: He was there until he died, helping them.

Whitelaw: Umhmm. We've come to the end of the tape again.

Oliver: Gee.