Monroe Fordham: An Autobiography in Sections

I. Memories of My Early Life in Parrott, GA
II. The Orlando, Florida Years
III. Undergraduate College Years: The Transformation of Monroe Fordham; An Autobiographical Sketch of my Undergraduate College Years
IV. Why I Left Wichita, KS and relocated to Buffalo, NY
V. Post-Script: After College; A Biographical Sketch of Monroe Fordham's Post-Undergraduate Years

Memories of My Early Life in Parrott, GA

I was born in Parrott, Georgia on October 11, 1939. My mother, Arie D. Oxford, was a single parent. Shortly after my birth, my mother went to live with my Uncle Otis in Orlando, Florida to get a new start. I was left with my grandparents, Mance and Sarah Ann Oxford, on their farm in Parrott. My grandparents were lifelong residents of Parrott (which was located in Terrell County). They had been married since the mid 1890s. They had nine children. All of their children, except four, had left Parrott in search of economic opportunities in other places. Some went to Atlanta, Georgia; others went to Orlando, Florida; Hartford, Conn.; Philadelphia, PA; or cities in the North where they had found jobs. Only my Aunts Ozie and Martha, and my Uncles Dock and Jess, and their families, still lived in Parrott. Uncle Dock and Uncle Jess were sharecroppers, and lived on farms that were about a mile from my grandparents’ farm. My Aunt Martha and her husband Uncle Willie Whaley sharecropped on a farm about 2 miles from my grandparents.

My Aunt Ozie B. Carter and her three sons (Loverature, Reggie, and Robert) lived with my grandparents. My Aunt Ozie had married in the late 1920s and moved to New York with her husband Wade Carter. However, after separating from her husband in the mid-1930s, Aunt Ozie and her boys had moved back with my grandparents. Thus, for most of the 1940s I, along with my Aunt Ozie’s family, lived with my grandparents.

Unlike most of the black farmers that we knew, my grandparents were not sharecroppers. They owned their farm, with a modest farmhouse and a barn. The farmhouse was located about 300 yards from the “big” road (a main road that went to Parrott and connected with other roads that connected the county). Our house had four small rooms, a hallway, and a kitchen. A hallway ran through the center of the house and connected the front and back porches. There were two rooms on one side of the hallway, and two rooms and a small kitchen on the other side. The front room on one side of the hallway served as a bedroom for my grandparents and me. There was space for two regular sized beds and a small bed that a local black carpenter had made for me. Behind that room was a dining room with a large handmade table and handmade chairs. Next to the dining room was a small kitchen with a wood burning stove. On the other side of the hallway was a front room that was always locked, and next to it was the room that was
occupied by my Aunt Ozie and her family. Each of the four rooms had its own fireplace, which was the only source of heat in the winter.

Behind the house was a small shed for repairing plows and farm equipment. Next to the shed was a well. Also behind the house stood the barn where the two mules were kept. On one side of the barn was the hog pen and on the other side of the barn was the smokehouse. My grandparents also raised chickens, and had about a dozen fruit trees (peaches, pears, and plums). The outhouse was located about one hundred yards behind the house on a downhill incline. If someone had to use the restroom at night or during inclement weather, they used a “metal potty” that was kept in the house.

My grandfather raised cotton and peanuts. Most of the farm work was done by my grandfather, my cousins and occasionally a “hired hand.” Because of my age, I was exempt from farm work. I spent most of the day helping my grandmother with household chores. I also accompanied my grandpa whenever he “walked his fields,” or left the farm. I was his “eyes and ears” because he had vision and hearing problems as he got older.

Our household was always a very religious environment. My grandfather was a Deacon at Macedonia Baptist Church and my grandmother was one of the "mothers" of the church. In addition, my Aunt Ozie was a very religious, almost puritanical, woman. She took me, and her sons, to many church programs, and taught me to pray, and used to read the Bible to me. Most of the members of the Oxford extended family were members of Macedonia Baptist Church. Most of my uncles, aunts and cousins who lived in Parrott worshiped at Macedonia. I have vivid and fond memories of life at Macedonia during those years. I remember that Macedonia’s membership was made up of four or five extended families. In many ways Macedonia was like one big family. The church was central to our lives.

Most of the black farmers in Parrott came to town on Saturdays. Most of the children spent the day walking from one end of the town’s short main street to the other end, and sitting on the edge of the big loading platform by the highway counting cars. Sometimes the young men would play baseball games in nearby cow pastures against teams from other towns.

Most of the adults spent some time at the church, which was located about a ten minute walk from Parrott’s one street business district. Women worked on the inside of the church—cleaning, dusting and getting things ready for Sunday. Men did maintenance jobs around the church and did landscaping projects in the church cemetery. Everyone helped to keep the church and grounds clean and in good repair. The church was our collective and most prized possession.

On Sundays, everyone either walked to church or rode in wagons pulled by a team of mules. During the church services, the mules would be unhitched and tied up to the side of the wagons. I remember that sometimes, my grandmother Sarah baked the bread for the First Sunday Communion Sacrament. Some Sundays, when we had a minister, we spent the entire day at church. We only had a minister one or two Sundays per month. The Deacons conducted services on the other Sundays. I remember that my Uncle Willie Whaley, and Cousin “Flick” Oxford could set the church “on fire” with their prayers. Mr. Sapp and Uncle Henry Gunn could “sing the church happy.” Our pastor was Rev. J.E. Brown he was a legendary figure. I was less
than seven years old and I still remember several of his sermons. I remember that he always called me “Samson,” after the Biblical figure.

On Sunday, we began the day with Sunday school, which was followed by devotion and, on the Sundays when we had a minister, the main church service. When we spent all day at church, families brought box lunches and in the afternoon they would spread the food out on tables for a pot luck picnic. After the meal we would have a final church service. In the late afternoon and early evening, we would make the long wagon-ride home, arriving home after dark.

Our lives lacked many of the creature comforts that our modern culture equates with progress. However, we felt loved and valued because of our strong sense of family and community. Moreover, we were armed with a value system that was passed down through the church. In spite of our “shortcomings,” we felt truly blessed.

When I was old enough to start school, my grandpa enrolled me in Helen Gurr School, the Parrott “colored” school. I was supposed to be in the primer grade class. However, since I didn’t know any of the other students in the class and started crying because I was afraid, the teacher allowed me to sit with my cousin, Adolphus Oxford, Jr., who was in first grade on the other side of the room. Because I was able to do the class work of first graders, the teacher allowed me to stay in first grade. The school was located behind Macedonia Baptist Church and was about four miles from the area of the country where our farms were located. All of my cousins who lived on farms near my grandparents’ farm also attended Helen Gurr. I remember that we all walked to school together. We walked through woods, across fields, along unpaved roads, and crossed swollen creeks on logs that the older people had placed there for us.

My earliest recollections of Christmas are about life with my grandparents, my Aunt Ozzie and her three boys. I remember tagging along behind my older cousins as they went hunting for a Christmas tree in the woods near our house. Once the tree had been cut and mounted, it would be placed in the "special" room in my grandparents’ house. I thought of the room as "special" because grandma never allowed anyone to go in the room unless she was present. It was the room where she and the other older ladies did their quilting; it was the room where she kept "special" things. It was also a room where the pies and cakes were kept during the Christmas season. Whenever other relatives and friends would come by and yell "Christmas Give!!" Grandma would unlock the room and share some of her baked goods and exchange presents with them. Gifts were always simple--a package of fish hooks for Grandma, a cake of "Brown Mule" chewing tobacco for Grandpa, and a piece of peppermint candy for each of us boys.

I can still remember the smell of the "special" room at Christmas time. The aroma of fresh baked goods; cakes, pies, and crispy peach turnovers (made from dried peaches), merged with the strong scent of freshly cut pine. Sometimes Grandma would forget to lock the room and when no one was around, I would slip into the room and take several deep breaths (and grab a few slivers of coconut from one of the cakes).

My grandfather had a cane mill which he operated in the fall during sugar cane harvesting season. (When sugar was scarce during WW II, many farmers used cane syrup as a sweetening agent). Local black farmers who grew sugar cane would bring loads of cane to my grandfather’s mill. In exchange for pressing their cane and making their syrup, the farmers would five my
grandfather a few gallons of syrup. The syrup making process began by feeding the stalks of cane between two large stone rollers which pressed or squeezed the juice from the cane. The cane pressing machine was powered by an old mule that walked in a circle. The mule was hooked up to a long wooden pole which caused the two heavy stone cylinders to rotate. The cane juice was collected and poured into a large vat where it was boiled until it became cane syrup. The syrup would then be poured into metal containers and would be used by the farmers for table syrup and a sweetening agent during the next year.

One of the by-products of making syrup came from the foam that was skimmed from the boiling cane juice. The "skimmings" from the boiling juice was placed in a large oak barrel. Yeast would be added to the barrel. The barrel of skimmings was left at the cane mill after syrup making season ended. By Christmas, the "skimmings" had fermented and turned into a strong alcoholic beverage called "bulk." Most of the men visitors who came to our house at Christmas time would be invited to take their fruit jars down to the cane mill to get their annual jar of "bulk."

Christmas during those years was truly a time of giving and sharing. The things that I remember most vividly were lots food, and lots of visitors giving and exchanging simple (sometimes homemade) gifts. And of course there was the long day at Macedonia church on Sunday (sometimes the Sunday before Christmas, and sometimes the Sunday after). To me the food and sharing were the highlights of the day long fellowship that included two religious services, sometimes a children's program, and a potluck afternoon meal. The conclusion of the Sunday service was followed by the long ride home in the wagon. During the ride home, my Grandma would wrap me in a quilt and I would fall asleep with my head on her lap.

Early springtime on the farm was a time for burning the fields, plowing, planting, and constantly weeding the young crops. It was a time for cleaning out barns and spreading manure over the fields. It was a time for doing repairs to farm buildings and equipment. There was always work to do, as soon as the fields were hoed and weeded, it was time to start over and weed the same fields again.

The summers were especially hard. Late July thru September were months for "shaking and stacking" peanuts, and picking cotton. The days were long, the sun was hot, and shaking peanuts and picking cotton was back-breaking stoop labor. And the summer nights didn't bring much relief. The nights were hot and humid, and the doors and windows of farmhouses had no screens to keep out the hordes of mosquitoes and biting black flies. Sometimes farmers would use “smoke pots” (pots filled with smoldering rags) to ward off biting insects. The flying tormentors made life miserable for humans and farm animals alike. The workday was usually from sun-up to sun-down, Monday thru Friday, with a three hour rest period in the middle of the day. Some farmers worked a half-day on Saturday.

Saturday afternoons and evenings were usually spent in town. Black farmers usually went to town on Saturdays to buy supplies on credit from one of the "company" stores. Saturday afternoons in town were also times for important social gatherings. Young men and young women could often spend the time courting. Children played games, or walked back and forth
from one end of the main street to the other, or just sat on the freight platform by the highway and counted the cars that went by. Older people would socialize in various activities or spend some time working at the church. Pick-up baseball teams from nearby towns would come to play our home team on make-shift ball fields in nearby cow-pastures. Saturdays in town were the only opportunities for large social get-togethers other than through the church.

There was a one room canning facility on the Macedonia grounds next to the church. The building had tables, stoves, pressure cooking pots, and equipment to seal metal cans. In the summer, black farmers could schedule days when they could bring vegetables and fruits from their gardens to preserve in cans so that those foods could be stored and eaten during the winter months. In the summer my grandmother would use the facility to can beans, peas, okra, peaches and other things from her large garden. She also dried large quantizes of peas and beans. She would also dry peaches and make pear preserves at home. My grandfather took home grown corn to the grist mill near our farm to be ground into corn meal and grits. In the fall of the year they killed hogs and cured and preserved the meat by packing it in salt or hanging it in the smoke house. They also raised chickens for meat and eggs. They had two cows that provided milk and butter most of the year. Farmers raised most of their food. Usually they only had to buy flour, salt, coffee, and sugar (although they sometimes sweetened with syrup). We also made sassafras tea from roots which we dug from underneath the small sassafras bushes. We also raised sweet potatoes which could be protected from frost and stored during the winter by placing them underneath the house and covering them with a layer of dirt. My grandparents also had two large pecan trees on their property. We would store pecans in sacks, tie the sacks with wire and suspend the sacks from the ceiling on the porch or in the house. All in all, in good weather years when the harvest was good, there was enough food to last through the winter.

During WWII, some food provisions were rationed. Provisions such as flour, sugar, and a few other commodities required ration tickets. Quite often black farmers couldn’t get rationed foods even with the ration ticket. White merchants would hold the items for their white customers.

In spite of good times which resulted from family life, the sense of community, and the presence of the black church, the South was a dangerous and hostile place for a black people. Even if blacks were careful and stayed in their prescribed "place," they were not necessarily safe. White men could rape or abuse young black girls and women (even married women) without any fear of punishment. White merchants could openly cheat black customers without fear of even being challenged. Whites could take advantage of blacks in almost any way, and blacks could expect no justice, or even expressions of concern, if they complained. The weekend sheriff could brutalize young black men with night sticks or billy clubs, or even kill them, on a whim. The lives of every single black southerner, every single one, was touched directly and substantially in some way by the demeaning and dehumanizing practices of "the southern way of life."

No matter how brutal and oppressive the racism and discrimination, or how physically draining the work schedule became, black farmers always maintained a faith that their omnipotent God was leading them to a better day. Life was tough, but through it all they put their trust in God and continued to lift up his name. No matter how many setbacks they experienced or how bleak their circumstances, upon waking up each morning, they thanked God for another day. No matter how skimpy the food might be, they always blessed the table and thanked God for what they had. During times of drought they prayed for rain. They prayed for relief during hard
economic times. They prayed for protection in a violent and savage land. They prayed for better times for their children.

During the long hot summer months, my grandmother and I spent many hours down on the "branch" at our fishing-hole. I think that she went there primarily to escape the oppressive heat. The fishing-hole was located in a narrow creek deep in the woods. We reached it by following a winding footpath through the swamp. The creek was almost completely shielded from the sun by thick undergrowth and tall trees. It was always a cool and pleasant place.

After baiting and setting our fish hooks, we would sit on a log next to the creek. It was there that my grandmother gave me some of my most memorable lessons about life. There were two or three "lessons" that grandma would teach over and over during the years that we went fishing. Basically, I think the lessons were intended to convince me to be a "good boy," and to guide me and help me "stay out of trouble" in a dangerous world. I think she was trying to help me to understand conceptually what I was going to be up against as I embarked on my life's journey. At least, that is how I think of it now.

The lessons that she taught me were always rooted in the Scriptures. Those lessons were simple, but they had a profound influence on the way I would look at life as I grew older. In one of the lessons, she explained that the world was simply the setting in which a great universal war was being fought between good and evil. The forces of God and the forces of Satan were in a life and death struggle to gain dominance over the world. In the end God was going to win, but in the day to day conflict anything could happen. She said that Satan and the forces of evil were out to destroy and consume everyone and everything that was unprotected. She told me that if I always kept my hand in God's hand, God would protect me from the forces of evil in the world. (By that she meant that I should always do what was right or what was pleasing to God). After explaining that context, she would teach me about good and evil--right and wrong.

During our days of fishing on the "branch," I began to understand the difference between "right" and "wrong." I learned to fear "the devil" as a real and powerful force in the world. As I grew older and began to realize more fully how dangerous and vicious the world could be, I always remembered my grandmother saying that "God was the only sure source of protection from the evil of the world." "Keep your hand in God's hand," she would say.

My years with my grandparents were happy and carefree. Those times began to change around 1946 when my grandmother became very ill. In addition, my Aunt Ozie and her boys moved away. My grandparents were in poor health and were unable to continue caring for me, and I was sent to live with my cousin Adolphus "Flick" Oxford and his family in an adjacent county. Cousin "Flick" and his wife, Cousin Annie Lee, were sharecroppers, and they had four or five children of their own. I think they lived in Webster County. I don't know how long I lived with them, but two things stand out in my mind about those times. One, I really missed my grandparents. I recall that once cousin "Flick" took me to town in Parrott (on a Saturday, when black farmers went to town) for a visit with my grandfather. I remember that it was a very emotional meeting. I don’t recall ever seeing my grandmother during my stay with my cousins.

Secondly, I remember that cousin "Flick" and cousin Annie Lee always treated me like one of their own children. Their oldest child ("Brother") was a year older than I, and their next oldest
(Cessie) was the same age as I. Like most sharecroppers, they were economically poor. But they were hard working and resourceful Christian people, and always got what was needed to get by. They lived in a modest farmhouse and all of us children slept on pallets in an unfinished and unfurnished room that was being added to the house. I remember being cold at night, and feeling the wind blowing up through the cracks between the floorboards, when we went to bed. "Brother" and I would get up before dawn every morning to do farm chores before breakfast. After breakfast, those of us who were school aged would walk to the school. At the beginning of my 3rd grade year, I was abruptly told that my mother was coming from Florida to get me and that I was going to live with her.

I think that it was it was in October of 1947 that cousin "Flick" took me back to my grandparent’s farm in Parrott, and I was re-united with my mother who took me to Orlando, Florida to live with her, her husband and their three younger children. Eventually, my grandparents sold their farm and moved to town in Parrott. My grandmother Sarah died in 1952. My grandfather died in 1955. The remains of both were buried in the Macedonia Church Cemetery.
The Orlando, Florida Years


My mother, Arie D. Oxford, moved to Orlando from a small farm community in southwest Georgia in 1940, shortly after I was born. She was a single parent and she came to live with my Uncle Otis in Orlando to get a new start. I was left to live with my grandparents in Georgia until my mother could get established.

After arriving in Orlando, she eventually married and started a second family. Her husband, James “Jabo” Fordham, was a laborer who worked for B.F. Goodrich changing tires. By 1946, she had three other children. The following year, she brought me from Georgia to live with the family.

I arrived in Orlando in 1947 as a third grader. I was enrolled in the Holden Street Elementary School. We lived in the Griffin Park Federal Housing Development (“the old projects”) (812 S. Division St., Apt.3). The “old projects” consisted of scores of one and two story buildings, each building with ten separate family units. There was a large playground in the center of the complex. There was also a multi-purpose building in the playground area. People in “the projects” could use that building for meetings, birthday parties and other affairs.

Our Boy Scout troop was headquartered in the multi-purpose building. That is, we held all of our meetings and activities there. Our camping equipment was also stored there. Our scoutmaster was a Mr. Henry Owens. Mr. Owens was also the projects’ utility/maintenance man. He lived in one of the units across the street from the multi-purpose building. I have fond memories of Boy Scout activities. Most of the members of our troop were boys from the projects.

Our meetings were always filled with fun activities—games, practice for merit badge exams, planning for outings, and planning neighborhood projects. Every summer, our troop went on a one-week camping outing to a place called Camp Howard. During our camping trips, we would sleep in pup tents down in the woods. Other troops from other cities were also camping there. There was a common building and area where all of us took our meals and went swimming in the lake. Boy Scout activities enriched our lives.

Once per week, on Wednesday after school, some White Christian women held a children’s Bible study in the multi-purpose building. Fifteen or so children were always in attendance. The women would tell Bible stories, using flannel board visual aids. They would occasionally reward those attending by giving out children’s religious books, toys, and other things. Every week they ended the meetings by serving punch, baloney sandwiches, and cookies.

I loved living in the projects. There were always lots of friendly people and fun things to do. It was within walking distance of school and church, and most of our friends lived there. While living in the projects, I kissed a girl for my first time, a neighbor and classmate—Gladys Pitts.
Our family was forced to move out of the projects in 1951 because the management discovered that my parents were buying a lot in an Eatonville development. My parents dreamed of owning their own home, and buying a lot seemed like a small step in that direction. My parents were told that they could not own property and live in the projects. They never did finish paying for the lot. We moved to a very small house on Lee Street in an area called “The Sands.” It was called that because there were no paved streets or sidewalks—just sand.

My father only had a fourth grade education, but he was a hard worker. He was not my biological father, but he was the father that I looked up to and respected as “daddy”. After leaving his regular day job, he would come home and get cleaned up and make his rounds to collect money from his “numbers” customers. He “wrote numbers” so that the family could make ends meet financially. In addition, sometimes the B.F. Goodrich dealer that he worked for would call him in the evenings to go on the road to do extra work. I remember the work motto that he tried to teach to me; “Take pride in every job that you do, and try to do it better than anyone else.” That was just one of the “sayings” that he would share with me in our many “heart to heart” talks. During my elementary school years he would take me to the Lincoln Theater every Friday night. He loved “cowboy” movies and the Lincoln Theater feature two “cowboy” movies every Friday and Saturday.

My mother was a “stay at home” mom, at least while my father was alive. My father died in 1955. My mother took a correspondence course and earned her license as a practical nurse (LPN). She worked as a nurse’s aid, then as a practical nurse. As a young woman, back in Georgia, she completed the 11th grade, but had to drop out of school after I was born. She was a smart woman and was always “on top” of our school activities. She visited our school and knew all of our teachers, some of whom lived in our neighborhood. She made sure that we had access to all of our school activities. She would always find money to pay our registration for camping trips, school outings, and any other education activities that would cost money. Sometimes we did not have money to buy food, but she found money to buy me a shiny new trombone so that I could be in the Jones High School band.

There were not many jobs for black youngsters. I did all kinds of odds and ends to earn money. I would usually give part, or all, of my earnings to “Mama” to supplement our family’s food budget. Sometimes I would think up ways to earn money. Some Saturdays (or summer days), I would go up to Datson Dairy and try to hire myself out to the milkmen as a “hop boy.” That is, I would take the bottles of milk from the milk truck to the customer’s porch. This enabled the milkman to stay in the truck and drive to the next house. On a typical day I would earn 50 cents and a quart of chocolate milk. Raking leaves paid better. In the fall and winter I would take my rake and go to affluent white neighborhoods and offer to rake leaves at a price they could decide. On a good day, I would earn about $2 or $3 dollars.

Some days Lorenzo Reddick (my best friend), Lawton Williams, and I would go to the Zellwood muck farm. The muck farm trucks would stop at the “Greasy Spoon,” an open-air restaurant on Church Street across from the Lincoln Theater, at 4:30 or 5: A.M. looking for farm workers. They would hire anyone, and they paid cash wages at the end of the day. It was hard work—picking beans, pulling sweet corn, or whatever they were harvesting. We worked from sunup until near dark. You were paid according your production. On a good day we could earn $3 to $4. Experienced migrant workers could earn more.
I made the most money on jobs that I did with Lorenzo Reddick. We were like brothers. His father was one of the best waiters in Orlando. In addition to his regular job, his father was often called to work special parties and dinners with the “country club set.” On many of those jobs, he secured a job for his oldest son, A.J., as a bus boy, and jobs for Lorenzo and I as dishwashers. In addition to generous pay, the wealthy white people in attendance at those affairs would sometimes give us tips. We would also be allowed to eat and take home leftover food. Lorenzo and I washed dishes at hotels and private parties all over Orlando. We were even on the dishwashing crew at the annual Tupperware gatherings.

I can’t even remember all of the things that I did to earn money. Some that I do remember included delivering groceries, washing dishes, raking leaves, cutting lawns, raking balls in a pool hall, shining shoes, picking beans, selling the Pittsburg Courier and Florida Sun (black newspapers), bussing dishes, cleaning fish in a fish market, delivering ice, washing windows, delivering the Orlando Sentinel newspaper, and delivering telegrams for Dr. Beverly’s Drug store and telegram office, which was located at the corner of Parramore and Carter Streets. I think that I inherited my father’s work ethic.

The year that my father died was probably the lowest point in my growing up years. He died in 1955. I was in tenth grade and my mother had four other children. We lived in a small four-room house on Lee Street. We actually lived in an alley. Our house was behind a house on Lee Street, but we used a Lee Street address—425½ Lee Street. My father had been terminally ill with cancer for most of the year. He had to give up his job at B.F. Goodrich but the company continued to give him part of his salary. My mother took a job as a nurse’s aid. She earned less than $20 per week. I had two jobs—a newspaper route, and delivering groceries on weekends at Cox’s Grocery Store.

During the final weeks of his life, my dad was hospitalized in the “colored ward” of Orange Memorial Hospital. I visited him every other day or so. I remember the last time I saw him alive. It was on a routine visit. During our conversation, he informed me that he was thirsty and asked me to get him a bottle of Coke from the soda machine. I left the room as though I was going for the Coke. But I didn’t have a nickel (the price of a bottle of coke). I felt so ashamed and confused that, after all he had done for me, I couldn’t comply with his simple request. I paced up and down the corridor outside his room, not knowing what to do. I didn’t have the heart to go back in the room and face him, so I just went home. I cried all the way home. That was the last time that I saw him alive.

On the morning that he died, I got up at 4 A.M. to deliver papers on my newspaper route. My mother called me to her room and informed me that she had received a phone call from the hospital stating that he had passed. We didn’t talk; I just went ahead and delivered my newspapers. My youngest sister Evelyn and brother Mancefield were too young to understand what was going on. Life went on with our family, but life without my father was hard.

My mother used the leftover insurance money and settlement money from B.F. Goodrich to make the down payment on a house. The house was located way out past the evolving housing development in Washington Shores. It was literally “out in the country.” There were only half-dozen or so houses in the area. The area had electricity, but did not have city sewage or water. We had a septic tank, and a well that produced sulfur water. We had no hot water and we had to
haul our drinking and cooking water in 5-gallon jugs from Jackson’s Service Station in Washington Shores. However, the house had more space than any house we had ever lived in. It had a huge back yard with orange and grapefruit trees. There was even enough space for a basketball goal. That was the beginning of a new era in the life of our family.

In the early 1950s, roller skates seemed like the gift of choice at Christmas time. It seemed like most black kids in Orlando got roller skates for Christmas. Moreover, it seemed like most of them came to skate on the miles and miles of sidewalk and concrete in the housing projects where we lived. There were always long lines of skaters hogging our sidewalks. Like caravans of truckers, sometimes the lines were as long as the length of a football field. They roared up and down the sidewalk, their skates making a deafening noise as they went by. The very good skaters wore “rocket” skates; they made a special noise. There were always skaters dropping out of the line, kneeling on one knee in the grass to tighten or re-attach a skate.

The “playground” in Griffin Park had a large concrete area on which water sprinklers were sometimes set up during the summer. At Christmas time the concrete area was the private domain of the skaters. It was entertaining to watch the large number of very good skaters go around and around on the oval shaped concrete area. The skaters always drew a large crowd of spectators. They performed daredevil stunts, had skating races, skated backwards, and generally showed off. The kids that received bicycles, cowboy pistols or dolls for Christmas had to ride in the street and play on their porches.

My mother was always big on education and Christian values. We were required to attend Sunday school every week. If we were sick and unable to attend, we had to spend the rest of the day in the house. My sisters, Vera and Evelyn, and my brother Lawrence and I walked to Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church, then located at the corner of Parramore and South Streets. The Rev. L.J. Jenkins was pastor. I looked forward to going to Sunday School because my mother always gave each of us an extra nickel to buy an ice cream cone, across the street from the church at Dr. Hankin’s Drug Store, or a “snow ball” at a “snowball” stand up the street, after class.

We were also active in BYPU (Baptist Young People’s Union). The BYPU met at the home of a Mrs. Wilcox about one afternoon per month. We would read and discuss Christian stories, sing Christian songs (Mrs. Wilcox had a piano), play games, and have snacks. In addition to our family, about four or five other kids attended BYPU on a regular basis.

My mother would also send my sister Vera, brother Lawrence, and I to a Negro branch public library about two Saturdays per month. (The library was housed in a small house that was located about a block or so north of Church Street. I can’t remember the name of the street on which it was located; it may have been Terry Street). The librarian would have story time on Saturday afternoons. The small number of children in attendance would sit on the ground under a large tree behind the house and listen to the librarian read stories. After story time, we would go into the house and select books to check out. On the way home we would stop at the “Sugar Bowl,” a black owned drug store located near the intersection of Church and Terry Streets, and purchase the store specialty—a cherry-Pepsi fountain drink and a bag of potato chips.

Even though our house had a Lee Street address, it was really located in Glenn Alley, the narrow dirt road that ran behind our house. There were two Lee Street houses in front of our house. Our
house was located in a low-lying field that flooded with about 6 inches of water after every hard rain. My Uncle Otis and his family lived in one of the houses in front of ours. The other house was a large two-story frame house. It was a “boarding house” owned by a “Miss Ruby,” who lived on McFall Street, the street behind us.

During the winter and spring, Miss Ruby rented rooms in the boarding house to men who “followed the seasons,” that is, they came to Orlando during the winter and spring months to pick oranges and harvest spring crops at the Zellwood muck farms. During the summer and fall, they went north to work in the fruit orchards and on the farms in Western New York and the surrounding states.

Many of the men could not read and write, and once they got to know our family, they would ask me to write letters to their loved ones and families. We would sit on the huge front porch of the boarding house and they would dictate the letters to me. They would pay me a nickel for each letter that I wrote. When they received mail, they would ask me to read their mail to them. Usually, they would want their incoming letters read to them five or six times. They were always friendly to our family. We had a wooden orange crate on our porch, and they kept the box filled with oranges that they brought from the groves where they picked.

The things that I remember most about the summers of my growing up years in Orlando were the oppressive heat and humidity, and being hungry and without money. There were very few places to hide from the stifling heat. My home, and the public buildings in our community with summer recreation programs were not air-conditioned. It was even hot and humid sitting under the shade of a tree. We could go to the “colored” Gilbert McQueen beach way out in Washington Shores, but that posed two problems: one, the problem of getting to and from the beach. That problem was manageable, since I had a bicycle. But, it was a long hot ride.

The second problem was more difficult to overcome. Swimming and playing in the water worked up a humongous appetite. Being broke, I had no money to buy anything to eat after the swim, and usually there was no food at home between meals. I was always willing and eager to work, but there were not a lot of jobs for black teenagers during the summer. Being broke, hungry, and having no place to hide from the heat were major problems during the summer months.

Fortunately for me, because of Lorenzo Reddick and his big brother Alzo, I was able to get a morning paper route delivering the Orlando Sentinel. The paper route enabled me to sometimes have access to small amounts of money that I could collect from customers. That was a remedy for my hunger problem. I could usually collect enough money to buy a loaf of bread, baloney, and kool-aid, which I usually took home to share with my family.

During the heat of the day, I sometimes paid the 35 cents admission and stayed in the “colored” Carver Theater all afternoon. The theater was not air-conditioned, but the huge fans kept it cool. There were numerous other people who apparently did the same thing. Regardless of what movie was showing, the same “regulars” were there everyday. We just took an afternoon nap in the cool theater. Most of the movies were “low” budget films anyway—“Tarzan,” “Lash Larue,” “Sabu,” “Jungle Jim,” “The Bowery Boys,” “The Cisco Kid,” and the like. However, the Carver Theater did feature a better selection of movies on Sunday and Monday. Monday night was the
night when many of the Jones High kids went to the Carver Theater. For many of them, that was courting time.

Growing up black in Orlando, We were always conscious of racial prejudice and discrimination. Almost everywhere we went there were reminders that we were two societies. School itself was the most constant reminder. All of the black children in the city went to the Holden Street Elementary School, and from there to Jones High School. Regardless of where we lived in the city, we all walked to school. We knew that white schools got more and better services than we had. We got their old books and we could read in the newspapers about their programs and services that we never saw. Everyday in the newspapers we could read about white school’s sports teams—Boone, Edgewater, and the white junior high schools, but our schools were never mentioned. There was a period, after the mid 1950s, in which the Orlando Sentinel published a green insert that was distributed with the Monday edition in the black community. That was the only print news that we ever got about black Orlando.

Whenever we went to downtown stores, and some grocery stores in our communities, they were white owned and white run. I never knew of a black adult that worked downtown, except as a waiter, busboy, or dishwasher in a restaurant. In all of the years of my growing up in Orlando, I never saw a white person work behind the cash register in a white business, I never saw a black fireman, or a black bus driver—not one. I can only remember one black policeman, and one black mailman. I only remember one black on the radio. The white people that I came in contact with always exuded an air of superiority when they talked with me. It was expected that we would say “sir” and “mam” when addressing whites. Yet they routinely showed disrespect to us, even to our elders.

We knew that most movies, recreation centers, swimming pools, beaches, restaurants, lunch counters, dressing rooms in clothing stores, sports events, advertised entertainment, and recreation activities were off limits to us. When the fair came to town, we could attend on our special day. I still remember the “white” and “colored” drinking fountains in the downtown Kress department store. The only black professionals that I knew were teachers, and a few black doctors and lawyers.

Yet, we were not overly preoccupied with segregation and racial discrimination. Prejudice and discrimination were simply parts of the landscape, and we made adjustments and went on with our lives. For me, the routine nature of those restrictions changed in 1955. That was the summer of Emmett Till’s brutal murder. For years after, even into my adult life, I was haunted by a photo, that Jet magazine published in the summer of 1955, of Till in his casket. It was a grotesque photo, his face was bloated and deformed from the savage beating that had been inflicted on him. It was an image that I will never forget.

Till was 14 years old, I was 15. Like Till’s mother, my parents routinely sent my brother Lawrence and me to spend the summer months on my grandparents farm in southwest Georgia. Some summers my mother would take all of her children to live with my Aunt Martha and Uncle Willie in southwest Georgia. They raised peanuts and cotton and we would usually work in the fields and assist them in harvesting those crops. Aunt Martha would always lecture to us about how to act around the southern white farmers that we would encounter in town. We took her
warnings seriously and were always cautious and never acted “haughty or uppity” in the presence of local whites. That was apparently Till’s crime, he got “out of place.”

The Till murder shocked me; it also made me realize how vulnerable I was as a young black male growing up in the South. Mama always cautioned and warned me about the special dangers of being a young black man in the South. The Emmett Till murder caused me to see her warnings in a more urgent light.

I attended at least half-a-dozen funerals of schoolmates during my growing up years. Interestingly, all of them were drowning victims. During the summer and fall, the heat and humidity in Orlando could be almost unbearable. There were hundreds of public and private swimming pools, and scores of supervised beaches and picnic parks where white youth could go to find relief from the heat. But during most of my grade and high school years, black kids had only one supervised swimming facility. That one “Colored” facility, with a lifeguard, was Gilbert McQueen Beach, located way out in Washington Shores. On most days, McQueen Beach had only one lifeguard. Some days there was no lifeguard. Some days the beach would be so crowded that you couldn’t even swim.

Then too, there were probably 300 lakes in Orlando. It was fairly commonplace for black youth to “cool off” by going swimming in an unsupervised and secluded “swimming hole.” Add to that, the fact that most local black kids of my generation, who could swim, learned to swim by trial and error. Other than one or two Scout troops, there were no organized swimming classes for black youth. Trial and error is a dangerous way to learn to swim. Many, perhaps most, of the black youngsters who went into the water in unsupervised locations couldn’t swim at all. Sometimes the result would be tragic.

I was in 5th grade when a girl in my class was a drowning victim. I can’t remember her name but that was the first time I had experienced death in my age group. In high school, John Albert Walker drowned at McQueen Beach. I had swum at the beach on the same day that John Albert drowned. Moreover, John lived on Holden Street, about a block from me, and was also a fellow trombone player in the high school band. I also remember going to Smith and Brinson’s Funeral Home to view the bodies of Amos “Lumpy” Parrish and his friend (I can’t remember the friend’s name). Both were drowning victims. “Lumpy,” an especially good student, and his family had been my next-door neighbor when we lived in the projects.

During my growing up years, there were two things that my mother warned me never to do; never allow myself to get in an isolated and compromising situation with a white female, and never swim in an area where there was no lifeguard.

I was part of a close-knit extended family in Orlando. Most of my local relatives had migrated from Parrott, Georgia, a small farm community in southwest Georgia. Actually, some of our close friends (and non-relatives) had also come from the Parrott environs. They had all experienced the grinding poverty and exploitation of sharecropping. They had come to Orlando in search of work and opportunities to better themselves. In a sense, whether related or not, the Parrott emigrants were all like family. They helped each other find jobs. When someone “caught the number,” or experienced some other form of prosperity, they would share the fruits of their good fortune with others. Sometimes they reached back into Georgia and helped other
relatives and friends to relocate to Orlando. My Uncle Otis had helped my mother, my mother, in turn, reached back several times to help two of her other brothers and a sister, and two of her cousins. They all lived with us for a short time until they found jobs and were able to make their own way.

Orlando was just one of the destinations of our southwest Georgia clan. My mother was the youngest of nine children. Some of the Oxford 9 and their descendants relocated to Jacksonville, Florida; Hartford, Connecticut; New York; New Jersey; Philadelphia; and others went to Atlanta. Some eventually moved to urban areas in southwest Georgia. In the first half of the 20th century, life for my extended family was hard, but they had faith in God and a quiet hope in the promise of America. They were driven by the belief that a better day was coming.

**Memories of the Holden Street School**

When our class entered the first grade at the Holden Street School, our larger 1st grade class was sub-divided into smaller self-contained classroom units or home rooms. For the first six grades the sub-unit classes remained together throughout the school day in self-contained classes. When we entered seventh grade we remained together as a homeroom and went to other classrooms and teachers for the specialized subjects.

Thus, our sub-unit class of twenty-five or thirty students spent the entire school day together in grades 1 – 6, and we spent at least one hour per day together in grades 7 – 12. Consequently, in many respects, our sub-unit was a close-knit family. There were a few occasional changes in our class roster as new students came in and as families relocated. Even to this day, I can name almost every member of our sub-unit. With every name, there is a story that I associate with that person.

In the fifth grade, our teacher was a Mrs. Booker. I remember one day after our lunch recess, a lady stood outside of our classroom door and motioned for Mrs. Booker to come to the door. It turns out that the lady was a parent. It was the mother of Joe Louis Leonard, a boy in our class. Apparently, not knowing that our lunch hour was over, Joe Louis’ mother had brought him some lunch. Being a very sensitive and considerate person, Mrs. Booker invited the lady in and allowed her to give Joe his lunch. Mrs. Booker even gave Joe permission to eat his lunch in the back of the room.

Since the lunch was in a round metal pan and included a fork, the teacher invited Joe’s mother to stay until he finished eating so that Joe’s mother could take the plate and fork back home. It seems the entire class had their eyes on the metal pan, which was covered with newspaper. When Joe uncovered his lunch, he was clearly embarrassed, and we were embarrassed for him. His lunch was a pan of cold black-eyed peas and corn bread. We all liked Joe and no one teased him, we all showed respect to him and his mother. Years later, we would laugh and joke about that day.

Many members of our sub-class lived in the projects. Shirley Ann Williams lived with her mother and sister in the same building that I lived in. Gloria Williams (no relation) lived with her mother and father in the building next to my building. Jewell Phillips and her mother lived in the building behind our building. At least half-a-dozen other classmates lived within a two-
block radius of me. We would often walk to and from school together. In addition, we often played together on the playground. Our parents knew most of the neighborhood kids by name. At recess and on the way home from school, there were fights almost every day, but there were never fights between members of our sub-class.

At recess time on rainy days, sometimes our class would be allowed to have classroom talent shows. This was a practice in all of my elementary school grades, so it may have been a school policy to allow talent shows at recess time when the weather was bad. In all of my elementary grades, the same people always did the same things in our talent shows. Shirley Ann Williams always sang “Summer Time” from the Porgy and Bess show. James Berkins always recited the poem about the man who complained about not having new shoes until he met a man who had no feet. One student would always recite a Paul Lawrence Dunbar poem, and another student would sing “Mule Train” and pop his belt to imitate the crack of the muleskinner’s whip. In spite of the sameness, all of us looked forward to rainy days and talent shows.

Another feature that broke the monotony of academic subjects was the practice of allowing each class to have a garden. All of the gardens plots were located together in a field near the north edge of the campus. Every day after the lunch period, three or four boys would be selected to do weeding and cultivation of our class plot. Good behavior or outstanding classroom performance in morning classes were selection criteria. In the garden we raised tomatoes, carrots, radishes, beets, etc. I liked to work in the garden, especially on days when I didn’t have a lunch or lunch money. I would eat vegetables from our class garden. Other boys on our garden crew would do the same. We almost never harvested a crop to bring back to the class. In retrospect, I suspect that our teachers must have known what was going on. Maybe that was the plan behind garden plots.

Memories of the “Old” Jones High

The “old” Jones High was housed in a large two-story brick building, located at the corner of Parramore and Washington Streets. According to a local history, the building was built in 1921. Behind the school was a dirt schoolyard, which served as our gymnasium and athletic fields. The basketball team practiced on a dirt basketball court that was riddled with mud holes and low spots. The “football field” was much smaller than regulation size.

The one building housed grades 7 – 12 and an auditorium. All of the black high school aged children in Orlando attended Jones. To say that there was overcrowding would be an understatement. When the class of ’57 started our 7th grade year (fall 1951), there were double sessions. Some of us attended the morning session, and others attended in the afternoon. Our class was the last class to enter the “old” Jones High. In our 8th grade year, everyone was shifted to the new school on Orange Blossom Trail.

What I remember most about my one year at the “old” Joes High was my 7th grade homeroom teacher. His name was Mr. Felix Cosby, he was my homeroom teacher and he taught one of my classes. I don’t even remember the subject that he taught; I just remember that he would often give inspiring talks to our class. You could almost feel his passion for the ideas that he conveyed to us. You could also sense that he loved us like his own family. He would often quote from Shakespeare, and Langston Hughes, and other great writers. He tried to inspire us with the
philosophy behind the song entitled, “We are climbing Jacobs ladder.” Even today, more than half a century later, I still remember the words to all of the verses of that song.

The “old” Jones High did not have a cafeteria. At lunchtime, some students went home for lunch. Others sat outside on the ground and ate from bag lunches. There were several stores across the street; in front of the school, some students went there. I remember the small restaurant across the street on the side of the school. A lot of us would go there. I don’t remember the name of the place, but we all called the owner “Stew.” His lunch specialty was a meatloaf sandwich. The meatloaf was a mixture of shredded white bread, ground beef, and seasoning. It was baked in a large flat pan and cut in squares and put between two slices of bread with lots of hot sauce. It was almost like eating a bread sandwich because the “meatloaf” was mostly bread. But it was hot and tasty.

After lunch, the 7th graders would board school busses for the trip across town to Carter Street Park. (Sometimes we would walk). That is where we had our physical education class. Two senior students taught the physical education class. The class session usually consisted of calisthenics and foot races. After class, we were free to walk home.

Memories of the “New” Jones High

All of my teachers at Jones were special. In addition to what I learned about algebra, science, history, or geography, my teachers at Jones taught me many lessons and values that would be invaluable in my life’s journey. My English teachers, Miss Jackson (who later became Mrs. Dudley), and Mrs. Reddick helped me to discover that I enjoyed writing essays and that I was pretty good at it.

In addition to teaching the principles of algebra, Mrs. Braboy’s strict Puritanical demeanor helped me to learn discipline and personal responsibility. As bandmaster, Mr. Wilson’s selection of music for the concert band helped me to gain a lifelong love and appreciation for classical music, (even though I was not a very good trombonist).

Listening to Mr. Mclendon (my homeroom teacher) was like listening to my late father talk to me about the challenges and opportunities of life. Mr. Smith (my chemistry teacher), who once lived across the street from me, looked on me as family. And most importantly, Mr. McAfee (our basketball coach) offered me my first real hope of going to college. In retrospect, I think that my teachers were conscious of the kind of world that we would be up against, and they were trying to prepare us with survival skills.

Shortly after our move to the “new” Jones High, my mother attended an informational meeting sponsored by The Jones High School Band Association. She informed me that a Mr. Wilson, the recently hired band director, was recruiting new members for the band. They even had a local business that would allow families to buy instruments on an installment plan. She asked if I was interested in learning to play an instrument.

That was a question that we would discuss as a family since it would have financial implications. Right off the bat, my father was against the idea. He thought that it would be a waste of money. My father was a very practical thinker; he reasoned that since family money was always in short
supply, purchasing a band instrument would be a frivolous expense. My mother, on the other hand, was more calculating, and was more likely to see the “big picture.” She reasoned that being a member of the band had potential benefits that could not be predicted, or even envisioned, in the short term. In the end, my father gave in (as he usually did) to my mother’s more persuasive arguments.

They told me to decide what instrument I wanted to play, and they would buy it. At first I had no idea about what instrument to play. That problem was solved one Saturday morning as I listened to a children’s show called, “Big John and Sparky.” They had a program in which they were introducing the various instruments of the orchestra. They would name an instrument then have that instrument play a few bars. I liked the sound of the trombone, so that is what I decided to play.

I went through the long period of learning to play the trombone. It was a fun period. During that period, I met many new friends that were also new to the band. Cornelia McGowan, Herbert Barnes, Cornelius Blackshear and numerous others became some of my dearest high school friends.

I was so excited the day we were issued our first green and orange band uniforms. We were preparing for our first parade. I think that my family was more excited than I. My father was proudest of all. I remember that he took me with him when he made his weekend rounds collecting from his “numbers” customers. He had to show me off to all of his friends. He boasted to everyone in the neighborhood that his son was in the Jones High School band. In our first “Santa Clause” parade, I watched him cheer and wave his arms with pride as our band marched past the place he was standing at the corner of Church and Division Streets.

In retrospect, the band experience shaped my life in many ways. For one thing, the experience led to a lifelong love and appreciation of classical music. I like horn concertos and horn music best of all. My preference for horn music began one day when I arrived early for band practice. Beverly McGowan, our horn player, was practicing. She was a gifted musician and she was a couple of years older than I. She and I were the only two people in the room and I was enthralled by the horn music. There was something about the smooth, mellow tone of the horn sound that touched a deep emotional cord.

I was so captivated by the horn sound that on a couple of occasions, during our regular band class period, I asked Beverly’s permission to sit with her in one of our practice rooms and listen to her practice. She was always courteous, but she probably thought that I was a little strange. A couple of years ago I heard that Beverly had died. Today, whenever I hear a horn concerto, I think of her.

I remember as a 9th grader I learned a valuable lesson about the connection between self-confidence and defeat. You should be on guard against allowing your self-confidence to be destroyed by isolated defeat. Sometimes in life we may not get some of the things that we think we deserve. When that happens, we can’t allow our competitive spirit and confidence to be crushed. We should simply get up, “suck it up”, and go on to the next challenge.
Even as a 9th grader, I was tall for my age and I already had the audacity to think of myself as a future basketball star. On the playground basketball courts I could burn most of the boys in my age group. It was the fall semester of 1953, and my short-term goal was to make the high school varsity basketball team. That was a daunting challenge because Jones was noted for its outstanding basketball players. Some of the players were playground idols to some of us young upstarts—Alvin Jackson, Carl Evans, Willie Cooley, George Robinson, and Willie “Snake” Martin would eventually be recognized, by some, as one of Jones’ all-time best basketball teams. And there were numerous backup players that were also good. But I was overflowing with confidence.

In those days the players on the team had to buy their own sneakers, the school didn’t furnish shoes. Several weeks before tryouts, I went to Mr. Levain (at that time the basketball coach) and informed him that I intended to try out for the team. I also asked him what brand of basketball shoe I should buy. He seemed unimpressed and looked at me for a moment before replying. Then he said, “The team members will decide that question after the tryouts, when we know who will be on the team. Don’t buy your game shoes until after the tryouts.” I said OK and thanked him for the information.

That same day I went to the sporting goods store and bought a pair of white “Chuck Taylor Converse All-Stars,” the shoe that the team used the previous year. Several days later I brought my new sneakers to school, still in the box. Filled with excitement, I rushed to show them to Mr. Levain. I found him in his office in the gym. “Is this the kind of shoe that the team will wear?” I asked. He gave me his usual stare and pause before replying, “That may be the kind of shoe that your team will be wearing, but my team hasn’t decided yet.”

After the tryouts, I learned that I did not make the team. Elijah “Baby” Rogers was the only 9th grader to make the varsity basketball team that year. I was so disappointed about the outcome, but that setback motivated me to work even harder at developing my skills as a basketball player. In retrospect, I think that the lesson that I learned was worth the disappointment.

One of the most popular social activities at our high school was dancing. There were at least two or three dances, or “parties,” somewhere every weekend. Sometimes “parties” were held in the community center in the “new projects,” sometimes in the Jones High gym, or maybe in the large dance hall/multi-purpose room at Carter Street Park. House “parties” could be held anywhere. School clubs, or homerooms sponsored many of the “parties”. They were fundraisers. Admission was usually 10 cents. Music was provided by a record player that played the latest hits on 45 rpm records. Our favorite artists included The Platters, Ray Charles, Chuck Willis, The Coasters, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, the Cadillacs, Johnny Ace, Fats Domino, Mickey and Sylvia, Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers, and a host of other rhythm and blues performers.

Several businesses tried to capitalize on our dance craze. Hundreds of teenagers would congregate on Friday and Saturday nights around the “Bun,” a drive-in restaurant in Washington Shores. The latest records were played on a pay-per-selection “juke box.” The music loudspeakers could be heard for miles. Patrons danced in the large parking lot. The “Bun” also sold burgers and fries and soft drinks.
Someone even put a “juke box” in an abandoned one-room structure, that we called the “Chicken Shack.” The “shack” was located over near the “new projects.” There was no attendant, just a pay-per-selection “juke box” and a small room. On Friday and Saturday nights, and sometimes on weeknights, the small, stifling-hot room would be packed with teenagers who were wet with perspiration. Someone even created a dance called “the chicken shack”.

It seems that every week, there would be a new dance. There was “the mash the potato,” “Chica Boo,” and many others that I could never do and don’t remember the names. There were a number of really good dancers. I was always amazed at the creativity of good dancers. I was never very good at “fast” dancing. I was one of the tallest boys at Jones, and I was always self-conscious about dancing. I attended dances, but I seldom got out on the floor. There were only two or three tall girls that I would ask for dances. In addition to being tall and self-conscious about my height, in terms of boy/girl relationships, I was a “late bloomer.” In high school I was more interested in basketball than girls.

During some of my high school years, after my father’s death, we lived on Vineland Road. Our house was about a mile or so out past the Washington Shores development, across the road and near the Washington Shores Cemetery. It was three or four miles from Jones High School. We rode a school bus to school, but I seldom took the bus home. I was usually involved with after school sports or band practice. When after school activities ended, I would either walk or hitch hike home. Living out that far, posed at least one major disadvantage for me, I always had to walk home after varsity sports and other after-school activities. Usually, I would even have to walk home when we returned to school after out of town games—often way past midnight.

Along the roads and highways between my house and the school, there were no streetlights or sidewalks. It was a long and lonely walk home, and in pitch-black darkness. Walking home could be especially hazardous on rainy nights. Moreover, I could always count on being attacked by dogs when I got out beyond the Washington Shores development. I usually carried a big stick to ward them off. When I couldn’t find a stick, I used my belt to keep the dogs at bay. Fortunately, a dog never bit me. Interestingly, the obstacles and difficulties that I faced in participating in after school activities strengthened my resolve to prevail and succeed.

Some of “the boys” that loved basketball would often get together to play pick-up games on the outdoor courts at Carter Street Park or some other playground with basketball courts. Sometimes we would sneak into the gym at Jones High if someone would leave a backdoor or window unlocked. While we played games in the gym, someone would stand watch and signal when a car turned into the front gate. On signal, we would all run into the girl’s locker room and escape out the back door if the car came down to the gym.

On occasion, a young airman and basketball player, who was stationed at Pine Castle Air Force Base, would pick us up and take us to their base gym for pick-up games with other young airmen. We were basketball fanatics and we played whenever and wherever we could. Our bunch of regulars included Harry “Bevo” Ervin, Tim “Big Tim” Duhart, Willie “Dusty” Cohen, Lawton Williams, Lorenzo Reddick, Hezekiah “Zeke” Richardson, and sometimes one or two others that I can’t recall.
After two or three hours of hard fought pick-up games, it would be story time. Exhausted, we would all sit around and listen to Harry Ervin tell stories, tall tales, and off colored jokes. The “Signifying Monkey,” “Shine O Shine,” and his many stories about Coach Merrill Levain were my favorites. Coach Levain was an icon at Jones High. At one time or other, he probably coached every male sport at Jones. Harry Ervin’s imitations and stories about Coach Levain were so funny that we would often literally laugh until we cried. One of my favorites was about Mr. Levain as the baseball coach.

Jones was playing a team from Ocala. Lynwood “Smokey” Huggins was the catcher for Jones. One particular player from Ocala laid down a bunt at the plate but he beat out “Smokey’s” throw and was safe at first base. The Ocala player then stole second and third bases. “Smokey’s” throw was late both times. The player tried to steal home and “Smokey” dropped the throw to home plate and the runner was safe. Jones lost the game. The Jones players were on the bus to make the return trip home. Mr. Levain stood at the front of the bus and seemed exasperated and at a loss for words. He finally addressed “Smokey”, who was sitting near the front seat. “Damn ‘Smokey’, that boy stole everything but your glove.”

I remember our high school graduation day, it was a warm June afternoon in 1957. I remember the exhilaration that I felt, and there were my mother’s tears of joy. I remember taking lots of pictures with my new Polaroid camera (a graduation present from my mother). It was a happy time.

Today, in the twilight years of my life, the memory of that scene only evokes sadness. For more than a decade, our class had spent most of our waking hours together. We had laughed, and cried, and dreamed, and planned, and literally grown up together. After graduation we would scatter in many directions as we embarked on the pursuit of our individual destinies. Most of us would never be together again.

During my senior year at Jones, I received a blessing that would alter the course of my life. Emporia State University (Kansas) offered me an academic scholarship and an athletic grant-in-aid, my first real hope for a chance to get a college education. I remember leaving my home and family, and the only world that I knew, in the late summer of 1957, to enter college a half-continent away. I was just a 17-year-old kid from the housing projects and a stranger in a new world. Success or failure in that new world would be dependent on whether or not I was able to make the college basketball team, and whether I was able to compete academically with students who had come from more privileged backgrounds.

In retrospect, it was a chancy venture, but strangely, the thought of failure never occurred to me. I had been taught by my parents and teachers to have confidence in my ability, and to believe that all things are possible through God who strengthens me. Jones High had given me the tools to open doors and overcome obstacles that I would encounter on my life’s journey. I was absolutely confident that, with opportunities, my possibilities for achievement were virtually unlimited. And so, I set out.
Undergraduate College Years: The Transformation of Monroe Fordham
An Autobiographical Sketch of my Undergraduate College Years

My prospects for the future began to improve in 1955 when Mr. Arthur McAfee was hired to be the Jones High School basketball coach. It was the first week of the fall semester, 1955, and we were playing pick-up basketball games in the gym, and he saw me play. After our pick-up game ended, he came over to where I was seated and asked me if I intended to try out for the varsity team. Of course I did, and I told him so, even though I had tried out before and had not made the cut. My father had died and my mother had moved the family to a house way out past Washington Shores, to an unincorporated part of Orlando, Florida. Even though our house didn’t have city water or a city sewage connection, the house had a huge back yard. During the week or so after my conversation with Coach McAfee, Lorenzo Reddick (my best friend) helped me to put up a basketball hoop in our back yard. Everyday after school and most of the day on Saturdays I would practice shooting, or play one-on-one with Lorenzo. I also played pick-up games at Carter Street Park or some other playground whenever I could. That fall I made the team and had a successful year. During the next year, I continued to work at improving my game. I also had many encouraging talks with Coach McAfee. Sometimes he would give me a ride home after games or practice.

By my senior year, several college coaches had contacted me. Florida A&M University had sent a representative to our school to talk with me about their program. During my senior year, Coach McAfee took the varsity team to Bethune Cookman College to see a game between Bethune Cookman College and Florida A&M. After watching that game, I was absolutely confident that I could play at the college level. Mr. McAfee was a graduate student during the summers at Emporia State University (Kansas), and he informed me that Emporia’s basketball coach was willing to offer me a basketball scholarship if I was able to pass an entrance exam. Emporia State’s Athletic Department sent me copies of all the previous year’s basketball game programs. The school even sent me college catalogs, maps of the city and campus, and other promotional material.

During the basketball season of my senior year, I submitted an application to Emporia State. The school sent the entrance exam to the Jones High guidance department. I remember that I took the exam one Saturday morning at the home of Ms. Annie Feldman, one of our high school guidance counselors. Several weeks later, I was informed that I had scored in the top 20% of students who took the exam and that I had been formally accepted by the college. Someone from the athletic department informed me that between an academic scholarship, an athletic grant-in-aid, and a job that the college would provide, I would be able to make my own way financially without needing any help from my family. That marked a major turning point in my life.

During the summer after my senior year of high school, I worked at several dishwashing jobs to earn money to buy clothes for college. I did not have the kind of wardrobe that was suitable for college, and I knew that I could not depend on any help from my mother, who earned less than the minimum wage and had four other young children to provide for. I also worked harder than ever at improving my basketball skills. I was invited to play in the annual Florida North-South All-Star game, a game that showcased the best graduating senior basketball players in the state. I was selected to be on the North team. In preparation for the game, the North Florida team practiced together for a week at Bethune Cookman College. I was selected to be one of the
starters, and our team won. It was a tremendous confidence builder to play well against, and with, some of the best players in the state of Florida.

As I prepared to leave home for college, I purchased a large trunk. While I didn’t have many clothes, I put all of my worldly possessions in that trunk. I felt that I was leaving home for good. I intended never to live at home again, except on visits. My family had been good to me and I loved them more than words can say, but in my mind, I had spent 17 years preparing to face the world on my own. Now the time had come and I intended to go forward and embrace whatever the future held for me.

I left home for college in the late summer of 1957 on a Greyhound bus. The incident that I remember most about that trip occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas. That was the year of the Little Rock High School integration crisis. My bus pulled into the bus station late at night. There were no lights in the “colored” waiting room and someone had flooded the floor with water. Because of the conditions in the “colored” waiting room, the African American bus riders who needed to wait on connecting busses, stood outside of the station in a drizzling rain. One black woman was traveling with several small children who were half asleep and crying. Sympathetic black passengers assisted her by holding the sleepy crying children. I was happy to be leaving the South.

I arrived in Emporia on a hot afternoon in late August. I had $28 and lots of hope. Emporia was a small town and the bus station was the back room of a small restaurant on Commercial Street. My trunk was taken off the bus and stored in the small waiting room. I had studied the maps of the city and the college campus that had been mailed to me in Florida, and I knew exactly where most things were located. Consequently, the first thing that I did after arriving was to take a tour of the college campus. The college was located across the street from the bus station and I walked through the sunken garden and went straight to the gym and the basketball court. After touring the campus, I found a telephone and called Coach “Gus” Fish, the basketball coach. He was expecting me. He met me in the gym and arranged to have a black football player (Autry Calloway) with a car take my trunk to Mrs. Eva Slade’s boarding house at 816 Congress Street where I had reserved a room.

Coach McAfee had recommended that I live at Mrs. Slade’s boarding house. He knew all of the people who lived there, and he felt that it would be a good family atmosphere. Moreover, it was a ten-minute walk from the college. Mrs. Slade turned out to be an excellent “housemother”; she was more like a surrogate parent. (Sometimes on special holidays she hosted elaborate gourmet dinner parties to which she invited her four of five boarders and a half dozen relatives or long-time friends. Mrs. Slade and Margaret, an E-State student and fellow border at Mrs. Slade’s boarding house, would prepare the meal. Margaret worked for Mrs. Slade. They would serve the food on Mrs. Slade’s expensive dishes and food service ware. I guess Mrs. Slade just liked to host dinner parties. They all treated me like family).

The day following my arrival, I was scheduled for a workout with Ron Slaymaker, who would become one of the college’s all-time best basketball players. Slaymaker was wiry and about 6’ tall. He had long arms and the perfect physical build for a guard. I later learned that he was a perfectionist and basketball fanatic that worked out all year. He was friendly and easy to talk with, but I felt that he intended to take a measure of me as a basketball player. We played one-
on-one for about two hours. He was a complete package as a player. He was quick, a good shooter and ball handler, and he was physically and mentally tough. He was easily the best player that I had ever seen, let alone played against. He won most of the games, but we gained respect for each other and eventually became the best of friends. After our workout, I was certain that I had come to the right school.

I had arrived at school a week ahead of regular fall orientation and enrollment. The football players were the only other students on campus. It was good that I had come early; it gave me time to find out about my entire financial package. During that week I was taken out to meet Mr. Glen Pennington, owner of the Ranch House Motel. Mr. Pennington would be my employer. In my visit with him I learned that he was the benefactor for some of Emporia State’s best athletes that needed financial aid. I was informed that my work schedule and job assignments would be tailored to fit my class schedule and responsibilities to the college. I was also informed that I would earn more than enough money to cover all of my financial needs. During my years at Emporia State, Mr. Pennington was like a surrogate father. In all of my years at Emporia, I never had a financial worry. I was even able to earn enough money to send some home to my mother and family.

Things went well for me during my first semester. I made lots of friends with white and black students. Coming from the segregated South, this was the first time that I had ever interacted as an “equal” with white people. However, I adjusted well. My parents and high school teachers had taught me to work hard and have confidence that I could compete with anyone. I ended the first semester with about a B average academically. I was also doing well in basketball. The school had recruited another outstanding freshman basketball player from Long Island, New York—Jim Fraley. Jim was about 6’3” and was a scoring machine. Jim and I both made the varsity team and were starters with the JV squad. He was the leading scorer with the JV team, and I was the defensive “stopper” and leading rebounder. In the early part of the season, the JV squad was undefeated.

During the first week of the Christmas break of my freshman year, I suddenly fell ill with a mysterious illness. I had a sharp pain in my upper abdomen, and I could hardly walk. Jim Fraley and I both went with the team to a game in Oklahoma that week. I was so sick that I couldn’t warm up with the team. Even laying down was painful. Upon returning home from the trip I went straight to bed with my coat and shoes on. I stayed in bed all weekend. When I didn’t show up for practice that Monday, the coach came to my room to check on me. I was hospitalized and the diagnosis was hepatitis. Needless to say, my basketball season was over. A college representative called my mother in Florida and told her that I was in the hospital and that they would take care of me. Mr. Pennington assured my mother that he would take care of my financial obligations during my recuperation period. I was hospitalized for about a week, and when school started in the second semester I was able to go back to school. All during that period, and throughout the spring semester, I received a paycheck every week—even when I didn’t work.

As the winter began to wane, the track team began to prepare for the 1958 outdoor track season. I was gradually regaining my normal strength after my bout with hepatitis. One day, the track coach, Mr. Fran Welch, came to see me and asked me to consider coming out for the high jump event in track. He stated that it would be a good way to condition my body for basketball. I had
never high jumped, but he stated that he had watched me play basketball and that I would be a natural high jumper. I decided to try it. After about a month of training, I began to master the technique.

During the early outdoor season, the track team took a two-week swing through the warm weather South (the time coincided with the college spring break). The team participated in the Oklahoma State and Texas Relays. I was not ready to compete at the college level in the high jump, but Coach Welch decided to take me with the team so that I could watch the experienced jumpers and work out in the warm weather. It was an invaluable experience. Watching the nationally ranked high jumpers at the two meets stimulated my competitive juices. I was always motivated by a challenge, and the thought that I could participate against such competition inspired me. During the remaining spring, I watched film of the jumping style of the great Olympic champion Charlie Dumas, worked hard to master the jumping technique, and trained with a zeal that had earlier been reserved for basketball. By the end of the spring track season, 1958, I was beginning to earn recognition as a high jumper with the potential to be a national competitor.

After one year of college, in spite of my health setback, I had shown that I could compete academically and in sports with my peers. I was overflowing with confidence and optimism about the future. The college had petitioned the athletic conference to allow me to reclaim the full eligibility of a freshman basketball player since I had missed most of the basketball season with hepatitis. The petition was granted. Mr. Pennington offered me a summer job, so I decided to spend the summer in Emporia. I planned to save and send money home to my family, and work out everyday in the gym with Ron Slaymaker. I went home to Florida for a week at the end of the summer. When I went home to Florida, I gave most of the money that I had saved over the summer to my mother. (That became a regular pattern. I spent every summer in Emporia and went home for a week at the end of the summer).

During my second year of college I continued to do well (in basketball, eligibility wise, I was still a freshman). I kept my grades up and I continued to develop as a basketball player and as a high jumper. The athletic department recruited some new black athletes. Noel Certain, and several other track performers came from New York. The college also added a few other black students to its roster. Emporia State was a great place, but black students had few social activities. While there was no official bar from participating in the entire range of campus social events, most black students stayed to themselves. On weekends we would congregate at “Steve’s,” a Mexican tavern, or gather in the basement of the student union and listen to Harold “Poor Jim” Thompson play the piano while Roxy Whitaker sang jazz songs. There were too few black college students for a dance. Sometimes we would be invited to dances by blacks that lived in Emporia. Most of the black college students also went to church. Some of them sang in the church choir. By the end of my second year there were rumors that the college was trying to attract more black students.

At the beginning of my 3rd year, the black student population swelled dramatically. The college had recruited a large number of black students. Most of them came from Kansas City, Topeka, and Wichita. One of the new students was my future wife—Freddie Mae Harris, a junior from Kansas City, Kansas. Freddie was a graduate of Kansas City Junior College and an education major. During my first two years at Emporia, I had focused most of my attention on being a
good student and competing as an athlete. I had only been on one or two dates and I looked on most of the girls that I knew as friends. My mother had always taught me to never lead a girl on if I did not have a genuine interest in her, and if my intentions were not honorable. She told me over and over to treat all girls with the same respect that I would want for my sister. My mother was a single parent at the time of my birth, and I guess that she didn’t want me to do to some girl what was done to her.

I didn’t meet my wife-to-be until about three weeks into the fall semester. Actually, a male friend from Kansas City was a matchmaker. Harry Reynolds kept telling me that there was a girl that wanted to meet me. I didn’t show much interest, but he kept reminding me. Apparently, he was telling Freddie that I wanted to meet her. Neither Freddie nor I had ever even seen each other, but Harry was determined. I had known Harry as a fellow student for about a year, and he and Freddie had grown up together. Finally, after about two weeks, he got the two of us together. After being introduced, we exchanged pleasantries and talked for a brief time and went our separate ways. During the next week or so, we spoke to each other on campus several times, and on at least one occasion held a brief conversation. Freddie lived in a rooming house about two blocks from where I lived (I had moved from Mrs. Slade’s house). I often saw her walking to campus, and sometimes we walked together. One day I asked her to go with me to a movie—that was our first date. By the end of the fall semester we were good friends.

That year, the basketball team was scheduled to play in a Christmas holiday tournament in Quincy, Illinois. A teammate, Richard Goodseal from Kansas City, invited me to spend a night with him before going to Quincy. Goodseal was another matchmaker. Arrangements were made for me to visit with Freddie and her family during my stay at Goodseal’s. I only visited with her a short time during that meeting, but I thought about her a lot during our stay at the Quincy tourney. Freddie returned to campus after Christmas. College was not in session and we spent a lot of time together in spite of the fact that both of us worked everyday. During the second semester, we dated regularly and our relationship took a serious turn.

By the spring of 1960, I was in my third year of track. I had become an accomplished high jumper. My 6’8” jump at the Emporia Relays set a meet and school record. I had already won the high jump at the Oklahoma State Relays, and placed second at the Texas Relays. I won the high jump at the Kansas Relays and placed third at the Drake Relays. The four aforementioned meets featured some of the top college athletes in the nation. I placed third in the high jump at the National Intercollegiate Athletic Association (NAIA) Championship meet, and won the Missouri Valley AAU event. I earned an honorable mention on the 1960 All-America Track and Field Team. I even qualified for the Olympic Trials, which were held on Randall’s Island in New York. Noel Certain, a teammate, also qualified in the long jump. Noel and I competed in the Olympic Trials in the summer of 1960. I flew to that meet with Coach Fran Welch. It was my first trip on an airplane. At the meet, I made the qualifying cut but was later eliminated. Even though I didn’t place, competing in the Olympic Trials remains one of the high points of my life as an athlete.

By the end of the spring semester, 1960, I had given Freddie an engagement ring. In the early summer, we decided to get married before school started the next fall. Relatively speaking, we had not known each other for very long, but we had discussed all of the pros and cons of the step that we were about to take. We were both convinced that our final decision was a decision of the
head as well as the heart. In planning for a married students’ apartment, we located a vacant three-room house across the street from the back of the campus (210 E. 14th Street). Students had formerly rented it, but no one had lived there for several years. Moreover, the roof leaked, and some of the windows were missing, it was not in good shape. The owner informed us that he was considering selling the lot to the college to become part of a parking lot. However, he would rent the house to us for $35 per month and would buy all the roofing materials, paint, and other supplies if we agreed to fix it up. We made a verbal agreement. Freddie, myself, and a friend, Edward “Little Cal” Callaway, spent most of the summer making repairs to the house. We patched the roof, replaced windows, cleaned and painted the inside, put down linoleum in the kitchen, cleaned up the lot, and secured the front and rear doors. We worked in the house every day after we left our regular jobs. After we repaired the house, we began to buy used furniture.

By mid-August we had the house ready for occupation. We had set August 28 as our wedding day. We planned a simple wedding at Freddie’s house. Actually the wedding was more like a block party. All of the neighbors were invited and some of them came in their regular street clothes. Freddie’s family minister married us. It was a neighborhood of common people; many had migrated from the southern plantations. There was plenty of fried chicken, and dishes that neighbors brought, watermelon, lemonade, and you name it. Several of my track and basketball teammates were there, including Ron Slaymaker and his wife. After the wedding, Freddie’s father and a neighbor drove us back to our little house in Emporia.

Early the next morning, there was a loud knock on our door. We were about to receive the surprise of lives. It was the landlord, and he informed us that he was increasing the rent because the house was worth much more now that it had been fixed up. He asked us to bring him the balance of the rent when we got up. This was our first crisis as a married couple. He had quadrupled the rent and we could not afford to pay that much. After I got dressed, I walked out to his house, which was located about two miles away in a suburb of Emporia. My plan was to try and reason with him and convince him to lower the rent to a figure that we could afford. When I knocked on his door, his wife answered. She said that he had not gotten back home, and asked if I would like to wait. I said that I would wait. While I was waiting, I told her the entire story. To my surprise, she seemed visibly upset. When the landlord returned home, he entered through the back door. I could not see him or his wife, but I could hear her telling him off. When he came to me on the front porch, he said that he had made a mistake and that we could have the house for the original rent price of $35 per month. Being a religious person, I thanked God and walked back home.

Surprisingly, as a married couple we didn’t see a lot of each other once school started. Freddie was in her senior year and was in class or the library most of the day. Moreover, she worked three nights a week from 5 P.M. until 1 or 2 in the morning. Between basketball practice, classes, and my job at the Ranch House Motel, I was tied up most of the day and sometimes at night. We were often home at different times. We had a habit of leaving each other notes. When we were home together, we usually spent the time studying.

Our first year of marriage coincided with my fourth year of basketball. That year we had the best team of my tenure. We won our conference, and several members of our starting team were selected to the All-Conference team. We won our playoffs and earned a berth in the NAIA tournament in Kansas City. In our first tournament game, we led our opponent most of the first
half. Near the end of the first half, I suffered a badly sprained ankle. I was sidelined for the remainder of the game. We lost the game. Over the years I’ve often thought of what might have been. That was the year of our best team. I had been given another year of eligibility in basketball because of my freshman year bout with hepatitis. However, it would be a while before E-State would have a team like the one we had in 1960-1961. My sprained ankle prevented me from participating in track during most of the outdoor track season of 1961, and I would not be eligible to compete in track the following spring.

During my final year, 1961-1962, we had a good basketball team but we missed players like Fraley and Slaymaker, both of whom had graduated. I had used up my eligibility in track. In addition to basketball, I got involved in campus politics during that year. Some of my friends suggested that I run for president of the senior class. I didn’t think that I had much of a chance to be elected, but I agreed to run. Emporia State had a very active Student Government and the senior class president was a part of it. Harry Reynolds offered to be my campaign manager. Harry was an art major, and he made my campaign signs and placed them all over the campus. Much to my surprise, I won. Involvement in student government was time consuming, but it was a rewarding experience. I gained a new respect for the large number of students, men and women, who give time and energy to represent the college in ways other than sports. Some of the students that I got to know in student government went on to gain prominence and recognition in state and national politics.

Freddie had graduated in the spring of 1961, and she was pregnant with our first child, who was born in December 1961. We had already begun to think of job possibilities for the next year; I was scheduled to graduate in the spring, 1962. The placement office informed us that the Wichita Public School System would be interviewing at E-State in January 1962. We were urged to sign up for an interview. We lived across the street from the back of the college, and our neighbor had a young daughter who agreed to baby-sit our infant daughter while we engaged in the interview. To our amazement, the Wichita Public Schools agreed to hire both of us.

A lot of other things happened during my final spring semester, but it all pales into insignificance when I think of how far God had brought me in 5 short years. In the spring of 1962, I graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in the Social Sciences, I had excelled as a college athlete in two sports, I had married a talented young wife, we had both been offered our first professional job contracts, and we had a healthy baby daughter. College and my experiences over the five years after high school had completely transformed me. At the end of the semester, we bought a car and made plans to move to Wichita. We also made plans to visit my family in Florida in late summer. I would go back to Florida almost 5 years to the day that I left. I had taken the first giant step toward embracing the future and preparing to engage the world on my own terms.

-Monroe Fordham, 2006
Why I Left Wichita, KS and relocated to Buffalo, NY

In the fall of 1968, I began my 7th year as a teacher in the Wichita, Kansas Public Schools. I taught U.S. History, American Government, and a seniors’ class in “current issues” at Wichita East High School. The East High social studies department had allowed me to develop and introduce a course on African American History. (At that time it was the only such high school course in the city). I was an assistant coach on a team that had won the Kansas High School State Championship in track and field. I was a tenured and respected teacher. My wife, Freddie, was a tenured elementary school teacher. We both knew the Wichita school superintendent personally. Before becoming superintendent of the Wichita Public Schools, Dr. Alvin Morris had been one of our professors at Emporia State University, and he had asked us to come to Wichita. With three children, we had completed our family. Moreover, my wife and I had both earned our Masters Degrees from Emporia State, and I was taking additional graduate history courses at Wichita State University.

We had two new cars and had just moved into a split-level home in a newly integrated neighborhood that was located one block from the Wichita State University campus. Both my wife and I had come from poverty backgrounds and our combined income was “more money than we knew what to do with.” From all appearances, we had achieved the American Dream. But the national and local social and political scene was characterized by a volatility and turmoil, which led to feelings of discomfort and guilt about relaxing and settling into a comfort zone. We had achieved our economic and career goals, but our lives were characterized by a restlessness that made us feel uneasy. We had even discussed the possibility of giving up our newly achieved economic comfort and security and getting back into the “rat race” of graduate school. (I believed that a doctoral degree would give me the skills and credibility to do more to help address our race related national problems).

For several years, urban riots had been a commonplace and an expected phenomenon; however, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Movement had shifted into a new level of strident militancy. “Black militants” were even invading and taking over white church services and making demands before the congregations. College students were causing disruptions on university campuses and were demanding change in national directions and priorities. The anti-war movement seemed to be merging with the Civil Rights movement and taking the latter movement in new, and (to some) scary and uncertain directions. And these developments were not taking place in some distant location.

Students in my high school classes were becoming more militant and vocal, and expected their teachers to be supportive of their concerns. One of their favorite slogans was, “if you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem.” I was in a constant personal struggle with tensions posed by that dilemma. I wanted to be seen as being part of the solution. Institutions and activities that I came into contact with on a daily basis seemed to push me toward some level of involvement in social and political activism. Though I was consumed by a sense of urgency, this state of affairs had been building for several years.

On the one hand, I had long followed the news and developments of the national Civil Rights Movement. I had been inspired by the courage and commitment of the “freedom riders,” and the thousands of people who risked life and limb, and their means to a livelihood, to secure voting
rights for blacks in the South. Having lived most of my life in the South, I understood the dangers that involvement in the movement posed. I had a tremendous respect for the people who were making the personal sacrifices that led to the opportunities that I was enjoying.

I had read books, heard speeches, and had seen TV interviews of “Black Power” advocates. I was familiar with the philosophical debates that were swirling within the Civil Rights Movement. As a teacher of a class in “current issues” at Wichita East High, I had to teach about the events and issues of the day on a regular basis. As a social studies teacher, I tried to exude an open mind about the ideological conflicts within the Civil Rights Movement. However, it was hard not to take sides. My knowledge of, and interest in, the events and issues of the Civil Rights Movement, and my daily interactions with high school students, contributed to my feelings of restlessness and anxiety.

Back in 1965, my sister-in-law had given me a copy of the book, The Autobiography of Malcolm X. More than any other single factor, reading that book had a profound effect on my thinking. After reading Malcolm X, I began thinking hard about how I could become part of the solution to the race related problems in America. It would be a few years before I settled on a specific plan of work. However, reading that book represented the beginning of the intense searching process. In the short term, the book prompted me to get involved with local civil rights activities.

In Wichita in the 1960s, Chester Lewis and Jo Gardenhire were the leaders of the local civil rights campaign. They were members of the local NAACP. They organized and led marches for open housing, school desegregation, and equal employment opportunities. (I took part in numerous local demonstrations and marches). In time, “Chet” Lewis became known as one of the “Young Turks” within the national NAACP, and eventually became an advocate of “black power.” There were also numerous other local civil rights groups including the Urban League, Wichita State University’s Black Student Union, a local chapter of the Black Panther Party, a Model Cities group, and several other church groups. In 1968, in an effort to get all of the Wichita civil rights leaders “on the same page,” the Wichita Urban League organized the Wichita Black United Front. (I got involved with the Black United Front, and I also continued to work with the high school students at East High School).

The assassination of Dr. King sparked a “riot” situation among black students at East High. Students went on a rampage through the school building and into the surrounding community. Police were called-out and the school was shut down for several days. One of my colleagues at Wichita East High, Herb Ruffin (a fellow black social studies teacher and graduate of Wichita State University), and I had become confidants and unofficial faculty advisors to East High’s black students. We understood the concerns of black students and we tried to channel their activism in positive directions. We also tried to elicit a positive response to their activism from the community and school administration. We gave speeches and led discussion groups at church and community functions. My “current issues” class became a forum where students could express their views and concerns to each other.

By the winter of 1968-69, I had concluded that I could best help the “cause” by pursuing a Ph.D. in history and eventually writing and teaching African American History at the university level. Colleges were seeking African American teachers to teach the Blacks Studies courses that black college students were demanding. I had already earned quite a few graduate history hours past
the Master’s degree level, and had developed a high school course on African American History. In terms of teaching experience and educational preparation, I felt that I was a prime candidate to work and contribute at the university level.

The opportunity to make a career change came in the spring of 1969, when one of my Wichita State University history professors, Dr. Martin Reif, asked me to come to Wichita State and organize and chair a Black Studies program. By that time, I was ready to give up tenure, and the security of the Wichita Public Schools. The challenges and opportunities for making an impact at the national level were too inviting to turn down. In the spring semester of 1969, after many discussions with my wife, I resigned from my position with the Wichita Public Schools. We both knew that my new position at the volatile Wichita State University would be temporary at best. I did not have the terminal degree, which was essential for tenure on a university faculty. I intended eventually to get into a Ph.D. program, but that was not an immediate concern. Because of my move into higher education, our family’s outlook for the future went from stable and secure to uncertain. However, my wife and I both had strong Christian backgrounds, and we were convinced that we were doing the right thing. In our minds, we were giving up security and comfort, and we were “going out on faith.”

At the end of the spring semester of 1969, I began my job as Coordinator of Black Studies at Wichita State University. During the previous academic year, college students at Wichita State had followed the pattern of many other American universities. There had been student protests, student occupations of university buildings, and several other confrontations between students and university officials. Finally, University officials had agreed to implement a number of student demands, including the demand to develop a Black Studies program. Consequently, my first charge was somewhat open-ended: work with existing academic departments and identify existing courses that could be merged into a core of Black Studies courses. At the same time, I was to develop and propose new Black Studies courses that could be offered by existing faculty. A more long-range charge was to propose new courses and potential faculty hires to staff the new courses, and to negotiate with academic departments to hire faculty to teach those new courses.

In my first meeting with the Vice-President of Academic Affairs, it was made clear to me that the situation at the University was very unpredictable and that the administration would try to give me all of the support that I needed, but there could be no guarantees. I took that to mean that I was on my own. My first step was to learn the workings and procedures of the University political structure. I had to be able to identify and work with the power brokers of that structure. Fortunately, I had made some powerful friends among the history faculty, and there were numerous other influential faculty members who expressed their support for what I was trying to do. In addition, some of the most militant student leaders were former students from my East High School courses. And most importantly, most students and faculty in the University recognized that change was inevitable. During my first week on the job, the black students staged a massive sit-in that shut down the administration building. The students demanded a progress report on which of their demands were being met. I was called to meet with the students as a representative of the University. I gave the students an update of my work plan for developing a Black Studies program. That meeting with the students went very well and things settled down.
During the 1960s, the National Endowment for the Humanities offered numerous summer workshops to help prepare college faculty members to teach and participate in the newly formed Black Studies programs. Wichita State University reserved a space for me at a Humanities workshop that was held at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. The workshop featured an intensive week of classes, lectures, panels, films, literature handouts, and discussion groups around the Black Studies topic. One of the workshop participants was a faculty member from the History department at Buffalo State College, Dr. Norman Weaver. Participants at the workshop discussed and debated issues, reviewed problems and discussed solutions, and generally interacted with each other late into the night. The healthy and free exchange of ideas lasted all week. Because of our frank and open discussions, participants got to know each other well. At the end of the workshop I returned to Wichita armed with a new enthusiasm.

Things went well during the fall semester of 1969. We were able to put together a core of existing courses from the History, Anthropology, Sociology, and Social Work departments to form the initial Black Studies program. Moreover, other departments promised future cooperation as the program evolved.

Near the end of the semester, I received a letter from “Norm” Weaver (a fellow participant in the previous summer’s Humanities workshop). I was shocked by the letter’s contents. Weaver stated that he had been authorized by the Buffalo State College History department to offer me a teaching position in the department. (Several years later I learned that Weaver’s academic division had sent him to the Morgan State Humanities workshop to look for African American potential recruits for teaching positions in Buffalo State’s evolving Black Studies courses. Weaver had used the discussions and interactions at the Humanities workshop to take a measure of the individuals that he had an interest in recruiting. After reporting back to his faculty, he was authorized to offer teaching positions to two of the participants at the workshop. (The other person who was offered a position, a black sociologist, decided to remain at his present institution).

Weaver also assured me that I would be accepted into the Ph.D. Program in History at the across-town institution, SUNY at Buffalo. I was flabbergasted, but I knew what my answer would be almost immediately. I knew that in order to get tenure as a faculty member in a university, I would need to get the Ph.D. I was reluctant to leave Wichita State because we had made a lot of progress, and the institution offered so much promise. However, I realized that my job at Wichita State was only temporary without the doctorate. (Maybe I could go to Buffalo, get the degree, and go back to Wichita). In the summer of 1970 our family moved to Buffalo. In the fall semester, I began my new job at Buffalo State College. I also entered the doctoral program in the History Department at SUNY Buffalo.

The decision to leave Wichita was emotionally wrenching. My wife and I had come from sharecropping plantations, public housing projects, and the poverty of urban black America. Wichita represented our escape to the “good life.” Yet, the “good life,” with its prosperity and economic security, seemed empty given the existing national crisis and the fact that so many people were making personal sacrifices to secure the things that we were enjoying. The nation seemed on the verge of racial cataclysm, or maybe a breakthrough. In any event, it was not the time for a life of security and comfort.
Post-Script: After College
A Biographical Sketch of Monroe Fordham’s Post-Undergraduate Years

By Pamela Fordham

In the fall of 1957 Monroe Fordham enrolled in Emporia (Kansas) State University. He earned the BS (1962) and MS (1966) degrees from that school. He taught social studies at Wichita (KS) East High School from 1962-1969. During the academic year 1969-1970, Fordham was coordinator of Black Studies at Wichita State University (KS). He organized the school’s Black Studies Program. While in Wichita, Fordham worked with the Wichita Urban League, NAACP, the Wichita Black United Front, and other local organizations in writing grant proposals for community programs.

In the fall, 1970, he entered a doctoral program in history at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he earned a Ph.D. in history in 1973. He was a faculty member of the History Department at Buffalo State College from 1970-1998. He served as department chair in the 21-person department for 9 years. During his tenure as a faculty member at Buffalo State College, Fordham pioneered a number of initiatives aimed at preserving state and regional African American historical sources. He also worked with numerous community groups in developing records management and records preservation programs.

Fordham is the author of two books, Major Themes in Northern Black Religious Thought, 1800-1860 (1975), and A History of Bethel A.M.E. Church, Buffalo, New York (1977). Since 1977 he has served as editor of Afro-Americans in New York Life and History, an interdisciplinary journal that is published two times per year. He co-edits, with his daughter, Pam Fordham, The Oxford Family Newsletter. Fordham is also the author of numerous articles and book reviews in the field of African American History.

In 1993, he received the Emporia State University “Outstanding Alumni Award.” In 1995 he was inducted into the Emporia State University Athletic Hall of Fame. Following his retirement, and in recognition of his work in regional and community history, Buffalo State College established the Monroe Fordham Center for Regional History (2002). In 2001 he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters Degree by the State University of New York. In 2005, Fordham was the recipient of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History’s (ASALH) Carter G. Woodson Scholars Medallion. ASALH was founded by Dr. Woodson in 1915; the annual Woodson Award is presented to a scholar whose career is distinguished through at least a decade of research, writing and activism in the field of African American life and history.

Fordham currently resides in Buffalo, New York. For 46 years, he has been married to the former Freddie Mae Harris of Kansas City, Kansas, also a career educator. The couple has three children and six grandchildren.

-Pam Fordham, 2006