



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Carol Mills Harris

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MINGO: This is an interview for the Ruth Ann Overbeck Project, with Carol Harris, who lived on Capitol Hill as a child. The interview is taking place in the docent lounge at the [Smithsonian Institution's] National Museum of African Art. Interviewer is Marie Mingo.

Thank you, Carol. Tell me what years you lived on the Hill.

HARRIS: We moved on the Hill—in fact we did not call it the Hill at that time.

MINGO: What did you call it?

HARRIS: Third Street! (laughs)

MINGO: Nobody called it the Hill?

HARRIS: No, they didn't really call it the Hill. I guess they called it the Capitol Hill area, I suppose. But we moved there in 1932, and lived there until 1944, the end of 1944.

MINGO: How old were you when you moved there?

HARRIS: Two. Just two years old.

MINGO: Now is Harris a married name?

HARRIS: Harris is my married name, Mills is my family name—Carol Mills Harris.

MINGO: How many people were in your family?

HARRIS: My mother, and five children. We moved there from Toldeo, Ohio. My mother thought it would be nice to live in Washington D.C. My parents eventually became divorced, so she lived there with her five children. My mother and her five children. I was next to the youngest child.

MINGO: Did she come to do some kind of work, did she have an occupation?

HARRIS: My mother really did not. She did go to the University of Iowa. There were very few women there, and she decided—and she lived with faculty, all the women lived with faculty or in faculty housing because there were so few women at the University of Iowa in 1915 when she went there that were no dormitories for them. My mother thought it would be nice to live in Washington D.C. because she thought there would be many many opportunities, and she really admired Eleanor Roosevelt. In fact she wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt and asked her help in getting her a job. And that's how she did get a job at the Department of Interior.

MINGO: Eleanor Roosevelt personally helped her, or had her staff help her?

HARRIS: Had her staff I suppose, I don't think she really talked with her. But they were in touch with her and that's how she got a job. And she worked at the Department of Interior and then after the Department of Commerce as a cartographer. And during the wartime she made many maps of the airports and lots of things that helped out during the war.

MINGO: And that was cartography done as an artist does, actually drawing the maps, not with technical assistance they use now?

HARRIS: No, they had these big light tables. They'd put this large piece of paper—they were made sort of with linen inside and covered. But she made many many maps.

MINGO: Do you have any of her maps still?

HARRIS: No, they belonged to the federal government and because she could not bring them home, although she could bring home maps that had not been worked on—just the paper. She would take the finish off and there was linen inside, it was made of linen, and she used to make us blouses with it.

MINGO: Very creative woman. Did her educational background lead her to cartography?

HARRIS: No, she did that here. She learned how to do that at Howard University.

MINGO: After she'd already finished her degree...

HARRIS: After... right.

MINGO: You say you were second youngest. Were the children all in school? Although you weren't—did you have a babysitter while she worked, or what?

HARRIS: Well, my oldest sister took us to a nursery right around the corner at the community house, and we stayed there while she went to school and came home early to take care of us.

MINGO: And of course, not too long after you were all in school.

HARRIS: Right, we were all in school.

MINGO: Do you remember your address on Third Street?

HARRIS: It was at Third and G Streets Southeast.

MINGO: So you were very near to Giddings School, which is where you probably went.

HARRIS: We were near Giddings School and that's where we went to school—I can't remember the exact address. But we lived there until 1944.

MINGO: And then you moved to another area here?

HARRIS: (Overlapping) It must have been 1933 that we got there. I think I must have been almost three years old, and my brother was two. We were a year apart.

MINGO: That was pretty much still the Depression times. Was it very hard?

HARRIS: That was the Depression time, but my mother told us we were not poor, so we just really believed we weren't poor, although we thought we were poor and then when we became older we knew we were poor when we looked back on those days. But my mother did not seek any help. We didn't know anyone in Washington, we had no relatives, no aunts, cousins or friends. But my mother just thought being in Washington was just so wonderful.

MINGO: And she did—she shared it—

HARRIS: She did. She shared it. We did *so* many things when we were young. On Capitol Hill. That was our playground.

MINGO: You say you didn't know anyone. Did you get acquainted in the neighborhood and have playmates and friends there?

HARRIS: Yes. We were right next to the school, so it was easy to make friends.

MINGO: Were those racially mixed groups of friends, or did there tend to be a difference...?

HARRIS: It was sort of a mixed racial neighborhood, but the school was for black, African Americans.

MINGO: The schools were still segregated?

HARRIS: The schools were segregated. But the neighborhood was racially mixed at that time.

MINGO: The kinds of things that she took you to do, what were those?

HARRIS: Well my mother thought Washington was just her playground, also. Every Saturday, first we went to the library, which is on 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue. We walked. And children could get three books each at that time, we were limited. And my mother could get as many as she wanted. So we got all of our books and came home on Saturdays. And then we walked to the Mall almost every Saturday in the spring and in the summer and in the fall. We would walk. We never rode. We would just walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, and we would go into the different buildings. We went to every museum and into

the Capitol and to the Library of Congress, all the way to the Monument. Sometimes we would walk to the Monument—

MINGO: The Washington Monument?

HARRIS: The Washington Monument. Walk up those stairs to the top, walk down, and walk back home. Many times we did that. My mother loved being on the Mall, she thought it was exciting, and it still is. And she loved the museums. She was a real history buff, and we went to the Archives, we went everywhere. All summer. And then in the summer time, we always went to the Sylvan Theater on Tuesdays, evenings. They had Shakespearean plays. We went to the Watergate—not the hotel or the apartment building—but down on the waterfront. And they would have concerts and different activities. We always went there also during the summer. And we also on Sunday nights, we went to all the band concerts on the Capitol steps. They had the Air Force band one week, and the Navy band another week, and the Army band, the Marine band. And on 8th Street on Wednesday evenings they had...taps or reveille...

MINGO: Oh, at the Marine Barracks.

HARRIS: At the Marine Barracks, We always went to the Marine Barracks on Wednesdays.

MINGO: On Wednesdays? Now it's on Fridays in the summer.

HARRIS: Oh it's on Fridays? Well Wednesdays we went there to the Marine Barracks, and that was something she loved to do. And then there were ships there so often from a lot of different places. I remember going once when they came from Brazil. And my mother was trying to speak Spanish, I remember that—not Spanish. I guess they spoke Portuguese, but she was trying to speak to them in Spanish to see if they could understand her, because some of them did speak some Spanish. I remember my mother talking to them, introducing us, all of her children, to the officers on the ship. And having them take us around.

MINGO: This was a trading ship of some kind, not a tourist ship?

HARRIS: I'm not sure—it came into the Navy Yard.

MINGO: Oh, it might have been military then.

HARRIS: It was military ship. They were officers—in the Army. I guess it was part of the Navy Yard, but I don't know if we went there with the Marines—I don't know if they were going there to parade or something like that. But it was open to the public. If it was open to the public, we were there.

MINGO: Yes.

HARRIS: And one of the things my mother loved was that none of this cost anything. You could go to the concerts, you could go to the Sylvan Theater, you could go to the museums, everything was free. So we really didn't know we were poor—we didn't realize my mother took us all these places because they were free. Now my sisters and my brother talk about that now—we realize why we went all those places. Because there was no charge and we walked. And so a whole day on the Mall cost nothing.

MINGO: But your mother appreciated that, and no doubt enjoyed all the things she took you to also...

HARRIS: Oh, she *loved* them, she tried to make us love them as well. We never missed a parade. We went to every inaugural parade.

MINGO: Oh, whose do you remember?

HARRIS: I remember Franklin Roosevelt. President Roosevelt. I was to all of his—I'm not sure how many times he had—

MINGO: I guess through that span though, he was the one.

HARRIS: He was *the* President. And we went to all of his inaugurals—activities that they had. The parade first...

MINGO: So at least you saw Eleanor Roosevelt.

HARRIS: Oh yes, we *always* waved. My mother loved to wave. "Wave, wave to..." So we always did that.

MINGO: At that time—of course Franklin Roosevelt was handicapped so maybe he didn't get around so much. But might you encounter somebody like a President or someone just on the street?

HARRIS: We went to the Capitol a lot. We saw a lot of senators and congressmen. We went in there a lot.

MINGO: Security wasn't was it is now...

HARRIS: Security was not a problem, Because we also skated all around the Capitol. There was no restriction at that time. I guess there were police guards out there, but they did not restrict you at all.

MINGO: Course quite a few of the buildings weren't there at that time—

HARRIS: Right, true. But the Castle was there. The Castle was there—that was our favorite.

MINGO: The Smithsonian Castle.

HARRIS: That *was* the Smithsonsian.

MINGO: Was that the only museum when you were a child?

HARRIS: Well the art museum was there.

MINGO: Arts and Industries was there

HARRIS: And the Castle. We would go to the Botanical Gardens.

MINGO: Oh, the conservatory. And Natural History was probably—I don't know my dates on the museums, I'm sorry to say. But I think Natural History is one of the older ones.

HARRIS: I think so, because I think we had seen that big diamond when I was a child.

MINGO: And that was in Natural History, the Hope Diamond.

HARRIS: Yeah, we saw that, I know.

MINGO: So otherwise the Mall was pretty open?

HARRIS: The Mall was open, and we could walk, sometimes we would take a picnic basket. I think most of the time we took a picnic basket. With sandwiches and—it was open, yes, you could just walk everywhere.

MINGO: Because there just weren't that many museums. So the spaces where they are now were just all open spaces. And there were a lot more trees I think at that time...

HARRIS: It was very comfortable, in terms of having trees so you weren't out in the middle of the sun all the time.

MINGO: You went up the stairs in the Washington Monument?

HARRIS: Many times, many times.

MINGO: So what was the view like from up there?

HARRIS: It was beautiful.

MINGO: Was it pretty much country in Virginia when you looked across?

HARRIS: Well, we could see the Potomac River, and we could see all of Washington, and it was good exercise I guess. I'm not sure why we went so often, but I can tell you we used to count the steps. I

remember the 555 feet, because that was on the wall. We would try to see how many feet we had gone. They had it all the way up.

MINGO: The uh...

HARRIS: The neighborhood? Well I can tell you that Providence Hospital was there...

MINGO: ...was there at 3rd and E, between D and E.

HARRIS: ...and it was a Catholic Hospital, and the nuns wore their habits, they had these big white hats that had something sticking out on the side...

MINGO: They look like bird's wings, very graceful...

HARRIS: And they were so nice to us. There was a playground across from us—a park, rather, it wasn't a playground. So if we fell and hurt ourselves, we would just go to Providence and the nuns there were so nice to us, they always cleaned up our scratches and gave us—put a bandaid on, and told us to be careful, but we would be right back again with another scratch or cut on our legs or whatever. They were very nice.

MINGO: You were not actually hospitalized?

HARRIS: Oh no, no, no. We'd just go in and tell them you'd got a cut on your leg and they'd fix it for you. They weren't crowded or anything. They told us to come any time, so we always went there.

MINGO: Did they actually know you by name?

HARRIS: Well, they knew who we were—Mills' children. The family. I think they just treated the whole neighborhood, anybody who got hurt or anything. They would just treat you and might make a little note of it and tell you to be careful. Come back if you got hurt again. They were so nice and gracious to us.

MINGO: What was the neighborhood like at that time? The house you were living in—was that a house that your mother owned?

HARRIS: No, actually she started out renting the house. Then she got the opportunity to buy it at a later time. The houses were—the red brick houses that had three bedrooms upstairs, then living room, dining room, kitchen. It had a basement, that's where the furnace was. We had coal. Consumers. I remember dumping all that coal out in the street, and then we had to shovel it. And take down—there was an entrance to the basement from the front, and you had to walk down the steps and put the coal in this big bin.

MINGO: Wow. How many times in a winter would you have to do this?

HARRIS: I think they would give you so many tons, at a time...

MINGO: So it would be more than once through the wintertime though.

HARRIS: Yes. I don't know why they dumped it all out in the street in front of your house.

MINGO: And the pollution from that—was pollution a problem at all then?

HARRIS: There weren't any cars. I think only two people in our block had a car. Early on—I don't remember anyone having a car.

MINGO: Did you ever have a car?

HARRIS: No, we did not have a car. We had, we used—I think it was called Capital—DC Transit or Capital Transit—Capital Transit. Which is now Metro.

MINGO: Buses and trolleys...

HARRIS: Buses and streetcars. And so no one really had a car, in the early 30s.

MINGO: As your mother knew, there they could do a lot without a car. You could get around pretty well.

HARRIS: On Sunday people would buy a pass—you could buy a pass for the week. A dollar or two. On Sundays three people could ride on one pass. So on Sundays when the lady next door came home from church we would borrow her pass, and my mother had a pass, so six of us could go on two passes and we would go all over the city. Just ride. All the way to the end of the line. And then get on another streetcar and ride to the end of the line. We would go to the zoo. And places like that that we really didn't want to walk.

MINGO: Were there other places of entertainment that you went to?

HARRIS: The community house. It was in the neighborhood, it was very large...

MINGO: Is it still there?

HARRIS: They had all kinds of activities. No. No. They tore it down for the highway. There were no theaters nearby.

MINGO: The community house had games, or...

HARRIS: A lot of activities. Ping pong tables. Different kinds of clubs, and a playground in the back.

MINGO: Is that what is now Garfield Park, or was Garfield Park already there?

HARRIS: Garfield Park...

MINGO: It's right next to the freeway and it's quite a good size.

HARRIS: Garfield Park was also where we played.

MINGO: Of course where Providence Hospital used to be is now a park too.

HARRIS: And there was a school there right near Providence called Brent Elementary.

MINGO: It's still there.

HARRIS: I went there for two years. I'm not sure why—they selected about six or seven people in my class to go to Brent School, and I don't quite remember why, except that it was a special program and it was for sort of like the gifted...

MINGO: A gifted program, yeah.

HARRIS: They didn't call it that at that time. But I know that we had a lot of difficult work.

MINGO: But that was still a segregated school? Or was it mixed at that gifted level?

HARRIS: Well there were different kinds of people—it was sort of mixed but I don't think it was what is now called an integrated school. I think they were just getting students who could do work at a higher level and we went to Brent. And we came back to Giddings for the last part of the sixth grade. And I'm not sure why they sent us except they had some special program and I guess they thought those who could do it should be in it.

MINGO: You were qualified for that. Well, now that you're a docent at the National Museum of African Art, which wasn't on the Mall when you were a child—it's only about 12 years old itself—you give tours for children from Brent. It's called a Museum magnet school. So how do you feel about that?

HARRIS: Well, I think I guess the reason I am here is that I want to give back for all those years we ran up and down the Mall and played and enjoyed everything and went to everything there was to see. That we could possibly go to. Which was free.

Another thing in the neighborhood was that Sherrill's Bakery which I remember so much about. Because we became very friendly with Mr. Sherrill as I called him. Because at the end of every day he would tell us we could come up and everything he didn't sell that he'd baked—liked doughnuts, which were the

things that we liked a lot—and pastries, he would give to us free. He would just put them in a big bag and send them home to our family.

MINGO: How did you get to meet him?

HARRIS: Well we were always going in there...

MINGO: And looking at the doughnuts...

HARRIS: And buying *a* doughnut...

MINGO: For six people...

HARRIS: Right. And so after he got to know us pretty well he'd say well come back around 5, because everything I haven't sold you can have, because I'll be baking for tomorrow morning.

MINGO: So that was special for your family, he wasn't doing that for everybody.

HARRIS: Oh no, not for everyone. Of course, we had become very friendly with him because everything always smelled so good—also when you walked past the bakery. Of course we'd have to stop in and see what was baking.

MINGO: It's just been a couple of years that it's been closed. Sherrill's was there for a very long time.

HARRIS: Right. I think his daughters took it over after the parents could no longer do it.

MINGO: Right. It was a real landmark on the Hill until just very recently.

HARRIS: Right. I read a lot about it in the paper at the time. I started to go over, and talk to them but I did not.

MINGO: Well they would be interested in your recollections, I would think, you know.

HARRIS: I can tell he did make good pastries. And doughnuts. That's what I remember most because that's what we liked. Muffins too.

MINGO: That is a loss that they're not there any more. Were there—there are a lot of different churches on the Hill. Was a place of worship important to your family? Was that part of your...

HARRIS: Yes, actually we were Presbyterians and so we went a long way to church—in Northwest Washington. But we went to Sunday school in the neighborhood a lot. Because we could do that early. And all my friends went to some of the churches in the neighborhood. So I went to the Baptist's Sunday

School some years, the Methodist's Sunday School some. But actually we were Presbyterian and we went to the services mainly in Northwest.

MINGO: So that took you out of the neighborhood. Why did you move? When you left there, what was the reason for moving from the Hill?

HARRIS: Because they were selling a lot of places in the neighborhood, and my mother really wanted a place without that furnace...

MINGO: Ah, without the coal. Shoveling the coal.

HARRIS: Because the furnace would not, the fire would not stay on all day all the time. Sometimes we'd come home from school and it was cold and we'd have to start the furnace up again. Tried to do that and it was too difficult. So we moved into a new place.

MINGO: A more modern...

HARRIS: A more modern place. Then after that of course they made—later years, they made the freeway, came through that area.

MINGO: Did that take out the house?

HARRIS: It took out the community [center] and the house...

MINGO: The house you lived in is no longer there.

HARRIS: It's no longer there. It was good looking from the outside.

MINGO: But unreliable in temperature on the inside.

HARRIS: Well, when we were there it was fine inside. But if we'd all gone to school sometimes the fire would go out in the furnace and it was cold in there. That's another reason we used the community house a lot. We would go there if—my mother said if the house is not warm you can go to the community house. And she would be on her way home.

MINGO: Now of course she had some vacation time, did you do anything special when she was not at work?

HARRIS: (pause) Well, when she was on vacation, we had a grandmother who lived in Virginia, in the western part of Virginia, near Roanoke, and a lot of times in the summer, part of the times we went to visit my grandmother and to help her and my grandfather. To help them—they had a little farm, and I

think they wanted us because we had many hands and could help get all those vegetables canned and on the shelves before we left. Because they canned everything, and we all helped to do that.

MINGO: And then shared with your family, no doubt, with all that produce...

HARRIS: That's right we would bring some home of course.

MINGO: What was shopping like? Aside from Sherrill's, which was obviously was a favorite place. Do you remember shopping at all?

HARRIS: Yes—they had the A&P, which is now I guess Super Fresh, I think. On 8th Street. 8th Street was a shopping area for us. They had shoe stores and little clothing stores, and they had the A&P. So we would walk to the A&P, about five blocks, and do most of grocery shopping there. Now around the corner on 4th Street there was a small grocery store.

MINGO: It's still there, I think. The one on 4th and E?

HARRIS: Yes.

MINGO: Right across from Marion Park—Marion Park is another small park. And then up from Marion Park is the police station. Which may or not have been there—was it there when you were...?

HARRIS: Yes.

MINGO: Now the precinct station...

HARRIS: It was then.

MINGO: So some of those things are still there.

HARRIS: Fifth Street. It was there when we were there.

MINGO: Now you didn't go to movies, because there wasn't any movie theater in the area. [ed: that African Americans could attend]. Of course you read a lot, obviously. So that was your entertainment—was mostly that community house, and your own devices, and of course all that Washington offered. Now the Watergate you were speaking of, that's that actual watergate, where the steps go down to the river?

HARRIS: The steps go down—

MINGO: And there was no highway along there at the time?

HARRIS: No.

MINGO: Cause now there is. And I understand that the orchestra used to come up on a barge?

HARRIS: The orchestra...

MINGO: Or was put on a barge.

HARRIS: Was put on a barge, right, right. We rarely missed that in the summer. Because my mother loved that, she just loved to go and sit out there and listen.

MINGO: Was it more classical music they were playing? What sort of music?

HARRIS: Yes, more classical music. But you must understand that the reason we did all these things, was because that was free also.

MINGO: Yes, yeah.

HARRIS: And she just felt this was so great for all of us. To be able to go and hear all this music. And see these plays and concerts. So that was a lot of entertainment for us.

MINGO: Your mother is not living anymore I gather.

HARRIS: No, but she lived till she was 96.

MINGO: Really?

HARRIS: So the walking didn't hurt her either! (laughter).

MINGO: She inaugurated a lot of museums then, during her lifetime, because most of it was developed after you came here.

HARRIS: And in the neighborhood, I guess segregation didn't touch us the way it may have touched a lot of people, because everything was open in terms of public buildings.

MINGO: Oh really? But how about—were there cafeterias, were there places you could eat in a public building? You carried your lunch—was that because it was cheaper to carry your lunch, or were there places where you could have gone to eat?

HARRIS: (overlapping) It was cheaper. We really didn't have restaurants that I knew of in those buildings. Where my mother worked at the Commerce Building—we would go, I would go there to meet her at different occasions and have lunch in the cafeteria. With her. If we had a holiday from school and she had to work or something like that, we would go and have lunch with her.

MINGO: That must have been fun. And you could just go in?

HARRIS: Yes, all the public buildings were open to us. We went to the Library of Congress a lot. To do homework.

MINGO: To actually do research-type homework or just the space?

HARRIS: You could go in and get books. They would bring them to you and we would write papers and do our work in the Library of Congress a lot, because they had all sorts of books...

[Tape 1, Side 2]

MINGO: This is side two of the Carol Harris interview, and we were talking about doing your work at the Library of Congress. Did you go into that beautiful big reading room, is that where you actually did your work? With all those wonderful desks?

HARRIS: Yes, yes, yes.

MINGO: Oh, my goodness, what a wonderful memory.

HARRIS: You would fill out a little form for the books that you wanted and they would get them and bring them to you.

MINGO: That was a help with your homework.

[tape turned off for a moment. Indistinguishable statements.]

So you lived on the Hill during the Second World War.

HARRIS: Yes, I was there. Started in 1941, so I was still there. Until 1944.

MINGO: And you had a role in security during that time?

HARRIS: Oh, yes, I was a junior air raid warden. And that was a lot of fun. Because you had to practice turning the lights off, all the lights had to be off.

MINGO: In houses, on the streets, everywhere?

HARRIS: In the houses. And so as a junior air raid warden I was helping the warden in that whole area. And I had an armband, and a flashlight that he had given me. And when we had air raid warning, horns would go off, big sirens outside. Then I would put on my armband and run out with my flashlight. Because everyone had to turn all the lights off in the house.

MINGO: Did they get to be pretty good about doing that?

HARRIS: Well, that's why you had the air raid warden...

MINGO: It was your job to enforce it!

HARRIS: You'd go up and knock on the door if you could see a light in the house. So we would walk all around, several blocks up to Pennsylvania Avenue, and over to Fifth Street, and down and back. And make sure that all the lights were out. Until the siren would go off to say it was over. But during the time that it began and ended—there were just several of us who were designated junior air raid wardens.

MINGO: Were you the only one in your family?

HARRIS: I was the only one on my street.

MINGO: I get the picture of you being a good student and a reliable young woman.

HARRIS: I guess the school recommended—I'm not sure how I got selected.

MINGO: Were people cooperative?

HARRIS: Very cooperative. Sometimes they would say, "Well I just turned it on for a moment just to get something," and I'd say, "You can't turn it on at all."

You have to keep it off until the siren goes to say it's all clear. They would have some kind of sound system too, they would ride around in police cars to say this is an air raid drill. And all the lights have to go off. And all the lights on the Capitol, all around, were all turned off.

MINGO: Now they were kind of routinely off, weren't they? During the war they didn't have many lights.

HARRIS: Right. I think they called it browning? It was dark. But all the lights had to go off.

MINGO: Do you remember the end of the war? V-E Day? Were you still living here then? Do you remember what happened, the parades?

HARRIS: The parades, we were there. Yes, uh huh. It was exciting. People were so happy, and so excited. Thinking about people coming home from the armed forces.

MINGO: Did you personally have close family that was in the war?

HARRIS: No.

MINGO: And then, they had a special relighting of the Capitol? Were you there when they did that?

HARRIS: (Pause) All the lights were turned up again, is that what you—oh right. But during that time they would have it at night, of course, because the lights were on in people's homes. I felt very good about that, about being in the area. That was so exciting to me.

MINGO: Well. Yes you should! I think so. Do you still have your armband?

HARRIS: No, I think they took the armband.

MINGO: Oh, ok. It was an official position and you had to resign your badge of office.

HARRIS: And then I got a chance to work at the Department of the Army, Defense—I guess it was Army and Defense together. They came to our school and anybody who could type 40 words a minute could get a job typing after school from 4 to 7, and all day Saturday.

MINGO: You were only about 12 or 13?

HARRIS: No, I was 14. But they told us they needed some people because on D-Day—[interruption]

MINGO: The job you had was for the War Department?

HARRIS: It was for the War Department. They came to our school and asked for everyone who could type 40 words a minute, and so they gave us a test. You had to type 40 words a minute without making a mistake. And I had one year of typing and I could type 40 words a minute without making a mistake, and so I got hired! Because it was after D-Day and they had so many fatalities that they needed help in writing letters that had to be perfectly typed, no erasures could be made on a letter going to the families. I could almost remember the letter by heart.

MINGO: Could you tell us what it is?

HARRIS: Well, it would say Dear Mr. And Mrs. Brown, or whatever, we are sorry to inform you that your son, Private First Class and the name and the serial number, was either injured in action, killed in action, missing in action, a prisoner of war—those were the main categories. Severely injured in action, slightly injured in action. And we—and it would also say that someone will be in touch with your family. And it was signed by the adjutant general. And we had to type those from telegrams, they were just stacked up when we started. And we had to do so many an hour to keep the job. It was after school from 4 to 7 and all day Saturday.

MINGO: My goodness. What were you paid? Do you remember?

HARRIS: I don't remember the exact pay. It was like a grade 3 typist. Because it had to be so perfect.

MINGO: The people would already have received a telegram and this was a follow up?

HARRIS: This was a follow up. Right.

MINGO: Did it tell them where the wounded or injured son was, or daughter?

HARRIS: No, they didn't tell you that in this letter. They said that someone would be in contact with the family to give further details. But this was just a letter following the telegram.

MINGO: How long did you do that?

HARRIS: Well, I think I did it for three months, and it was summertime, and then I did it the next year. So, I made my money to go to college. And there was someone who would come by your desk and pick up the letters every hour. And you had to do a minimum—maybe 8 to 10 an hour to keep your job.

MINGO: So maybe the pressure, did that sort of relieve the solemnity of what you were doing? The fact that you had a deadline—and it seems like that would be a very, very sad and wearing occupation, you know.

HARRIS: Right, yes, when you thought about it. But the thought of the lady coming to pick those letters up, and you had to have so many without erasures. So if you made an error you just had to tear it up and put it in the trash and start again. So we had to keep it going. And this was a temporary building down—18th Street or something like that, and Pennsylvania? Constitution?

MINGO: Right. There were temporary buildings down there.

HARRIS: That's where we worked. They were very desperate for people. I think I was just 14. And I think I should have been 16. But they really didn't question me that much.

MINGO: And you were good at it so they were pleased you were there.

HARRIS: And they really needed people who could type.

MINGO: At that time, of course, having gone through the war—do you recall, did rationing affect your family that much?

HARRIS: Oh, yes,

MINGO: I would think with that number of children there must have been some great difficulties with rationing.

HARRIS: Yes, we had a little book. Particularly sugar.

MINGO: Sugar was difficult, yeah. Course you didn't worry about gasoline because you didn't need any.

HARRIS: Didn't worry about gasoline, yeah. But I remember sugar being hard to get. And my mother baked everything, cooked everything, and did use sugar in all of her baking.

MINGO: Do you remember ever actually being without? Food or—you say your mother had a wonderful spirit and didn't put yourself in the poverty group, but there may have been times that were pretty lacking.

HARRIS: Oh, absolutely. I don't think we ever actually missed any meals. But we had—my mother cooked a lot of dried beans, I remember. We had big pots of Navy beans. Navy bean soup. All sorts of soups in big pots. Vegetable soups. She cooked a lot of beans, I remember that. They must have been very very cheap.

MINGO: And a good source of nutrititon for a young family.

HARRIS: Had a hambone—I think she had ham in the big pot with the soup.

MINGO: And then you went on, you moved from there to—and where did you move to?

HARRIS: Actually we moved to some new houses that were in Anacostia.

MINGO: So not far away.

HARRIS: Not that far away.

MINGO: And you went to high school in Anacostia?

HARRIS: Our high school was in Washington, Dunbar High School.

MINGO: Oh, you went to Dunbar.

HARRIS: So that was a long way, and to get there we had to use three or four buses. To get there. A streetcar, finally a streetcar, and walk. So, it was a long way.

MINGO: A long day, getting to and from school.

HARRIS: So that really brought segregation in the forefront of your thinking.

MINGO: Because you were probably passing other high schools...

HARRIS: Right, right. But before that, it wasn't like that. Because we weren't really thinking about it I guess that much. I think our life was full at that time, we were always going somewhere and doing something. And reading. We had to read those three books too, before Saturday.

MINGO: And probably a very solid family relationship.

HARRIS: We had dinner together everyday. We had—my mother believed in tablecloths. Freshly ironed. We set the table. You didn't get up from the table without asking could you be excused. It was that kind of setting every evening.

MINGO: Excellent background.

HARRIS: I didn't know everybody didn't do that. Until—high school. I thought everybody had to do that, and that everybody had a clean tablecloths everyday! My mother loved tablecloths. So I found out later. I just thought was what everyone did. But I didn't know that everyone didn't do that every day.

MINGO: But she had her standards.

HARRIS: She had her things that she liked. She liked nice tablecloths—nicely ironed also. She didn't like wrinkles.

MINGO: And after high school, you went...

HARRIS: I went away to school.

MINGO: Where did you go?

HARRIS: I went to West Virginia, that's where my mother went there also. West Virginia State College. [ed: At the beginning of the tape she said her mother went to University of Iowa; she went to both.]

MINGO: And then you came back to the Washington area right away?

HARRIS: I came back to the Washington area. And got married. And my first job was at the Library of Congress.

MINGO: There you were back at the Library of Congress! What were you doing there?

HARRIS: I worked in the personnel office. And actually, one of the things I did was to help people who came to study in the summer, professors. Find housing. So I had a little housing—a box of all sorts of people who lived in the neighborhood who wouldn't mind renting even a room or part of a house to someone who was studying at the library.

MINGO: Interesting. And now you're still in the area. Now here you are being a docent on the Mall.

HARRIS: Right, and I don't live near here. Anymore. But I enjoy being in this area. It still produces excitement. And memories.

MINGO: And wonderful to be sharing with this new group of youngsters what was so important in your childhood, and especially in this museum which has a special focus too, in African art.

HARRIS: I really enjoy being with the students, because I did teach and so it keeps me in contact with students.

MINGO: And there are many student groups that come to this museum so that's invaluable to the museum that you have that background. That's wonderful.

You had a comment earlier about security and that that was certainly not an issue when you lived on Capitol Hill. Were there any precautions taken at homes?

HARRIS: No, I really don't remember anything about anyone ever stealing anything from someone, or breaking into a house. We didn't have a door key—I'm sure my mother had a door key to the house, but we as children never had a door key, the house was never locked. The house was open, we could just go in. I know now they call the children who have keys around their neck, but we never had keys. I guess no one had anything to steal in their homes! (laughter) Because people really didn't have very much.

MINGO: And no getaway cars.

HARRIS: And no cars. It was a very safe neighborhood. I never heard of anybody having anything stolen from them, or breaking into a house. I never heard about it as a child. It didn't happen on Third Street. Or anywhere in that area. It was very very safe. We could go anywhere at night, we would go up to 8th Street to shop and come back, walk up to 8th Street and back. And I never knew of anyone...

MINGO: Play outdoors at night...

HARRIS: Play outdoors at night. Never heard of anyone being hurt in our neighborhood. It just didn't happen at that time. And there were not so many people in Washington as there are now.

MINGO: Yes, the population was considerably smaller. And not so much of Capitol Hill was developed at that time, I suppose. You lived in an area that was convenient to all these places you've described, safe, and you've made the most of it. Didn't you?

HARRIS: Yes, we made the most of it. Without realizing it—now, I do now realize it. But I never thought about it, I thought—I always thought that's what everyone did.

MINGO: I thank you for sharing what you and family did. As you've learned not everyone has these wonderful things in their background and that helps us to understand the history of how people have lived up on Capitol Hill. On behalf of this project I thank you very much.

HARRIS: Well, you're welcome I enjoyed sharing with you.

END OF INTERVIEW