



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Julie Walker

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

WALKER: ... lifetime resident of Capitol Hill, former employee of the US Bureau of Mines which has now been discontinued, it used to be part of the Department of the Interior.

THORBURN: And how long have you lived on the Hill?

WALKER: My family was actually domiciled on the Hill before I was born. I was born in Pennsylvania, they were up there at that time, but I've always lived on the Hill.

THORBURN: Ah! And what are your very first earliest memories?

WALKER: Well, actually bending over to look in the reflection pool at the age of about two and a half and falling in in the month of March. I'm not sure whether I remember this physically or whether it's because I heard the story told by my father who was in charge of the expedition so many times, but that's the first partial memory I have.

THORBURN: Uh huh, and where were you living at that time?

WALKER: Either in the 200 or the 300 block of Maryland Avenue Northeast, they lived in apartments on both those blocks before they bought.

THORBURN: Oh, yes, so you were very close to the Capitol?

WALKER: Yes.

THORBURN: Yes. Can you tell me a little bit about your neighborhood at that time?

WALKER: Well, not till we moved to the house [646 C Street NE], I don't really remember anything about the—at that time C Street NE was very nice, quiet street with the streetcar going down the middle of it, it was—the East Capitol Street Bridge would not be built for many years, and it was not a commuter route at all. There were nice silver maple trees on both sides, all of them approaching old age, but we would—we had the old fashioned lamp, street lamps same as, actually, what the kind we have over here now. And we would play hide and seek in the evening and my mother was very good at playing games with kids. We thought at the time she must be enjoying it, but I think she told us later she was really just doing it to be a good mom. (laughter)

THORBURN: I see. And then I guess the next big event in your life was maybe starting school?

WALKER: Yes, in the—I started out in the Carbery School, which is, you probably know, is now condominiums. And then, I forget why, probably something about class sizes or something, very briefly

down in the old Ludlow School, but that was, frankly, further away from my home than my parents were comfortable with and I ended up going to the what was then the Peabody-Hilton complex—Peabody is still there, Hilton is now that lot where they do community gardens, but at the time it was a school with a small playground on a—recesses the girls got the playground and they actually closed traffic on Sixth Street so the boys could have their recess on Sixth Street.

THORBURN: How extraordinary. Then what was the next school you would have gone to?

WALKER: Stuart Junior High School. That's part of, more or less the same pattern would be followed today. And then Eastern High School.

THORBURN: And the junior high school, where was that?

WALKER: Stuart Junior High is probably Stuart Middle School, or something now [ed: Stuart-Hobson Middle School]. It's on E Street in the Fourth to Fifth [Streets] block.

THORBURN: And what are your memories of that?

WALKER: Nothing in particular, shall we say some teachers that were distinctly rather more desirable than others. Of course, this was the first time that you had a homeroom and then went to other teachers for different classes. Teachers ranged from excellent to God-awful. (laughter from both)

THORBURN: I guess I don't know—about when would this have been? 19—

WALKER: Let's see, I was born—I guess the late 40s.

THORBURN: The late 40s. So was—were the schools segregated at that time?

WALKER: Not in my phase. In my phase they were still segregated, by time my brother came along they had moved on to desegregation which they started trying—started out by doing year by year then they decided it was taking too long so they, then I guess they did across the board—I could not give you dates on that.

THORBURN: When you were in school, about junior high school time, what was the mix of people on the Hill?

WALKER: Well, it was basically government workers, some a—that's why my family bought here actually. They were sort of equi-distant between their jobs. My mother was with the then Civil Service Commission downtown and my father was with St. Elizabeth's Hospital over in Anacostia, and she used public transportation and he drove and it worked for both of them. Basically I would say government workers and I suppose a scattering of whoever else there were. Of course, *a lot* more in the way of local

merchants than you have now. In our block of C Street there was a little grocery store right across the street and then a DGS which was a, I guess the independent chain; Safeway was here, but DGS was still fairly strong, right down at the corner. So there would have been more people who were locally employed in the mix in those days.

THORBURN: And what about Eastern Market? Was that a place where you shopped?

WALKER: No, in those days Central Market was downtown on K Street between Fifth and Sixth, and I think the whole block is still a vacant block to this day. Central Market took up the whole block and that was where the Walkers shopped. Eastern Market was definitely something we went to after they closed Central Market (laughter from both)

THORBURN: I see. And down on Florida Avenue where there's a market there?

WALKER: That we never got really too into, to know what part was wholesale and what part regular people were welcome in, course I know it's there but I've only very rarely been there.

THORBURN: Uh huh. And then tell me about high school. You went to Eastern?

WALKER: Eastern.

THORBURN: And what was that like?

WALKER: Well, I guess—you know, well like high school everywhere they had, I think, an academic track and a business track—I was in the academic track—and I guess it was a three year thing then because we did three years of junior high school and then three years of senior high school right—grades ten, eleven and twelve. My father would drop me on the way to work and then I would either walk home or we had these tickets to get on the—I think it was still streetcars over there at that time. Three sets for your school ticket.

THORBURN: Terrific! Now tell me about the streetcars. Those seem very romantic to people who have just moved here.

WALKER: Well, in—I guess there are a couple of streets in Georgetown where the tracks can still be seen. And actually on C Street they were not removed, they were just paved over and every once in a while they would re-emerge. But the streetcars followed more or less the same routes that the busses do today, and they had—most of the modern ones were sort of streamlined shaped, there were a few of the older boxy ones still around but the modern ones were the streamlined rounded-off shape. They were a very good form of transportation *except* the ones in the downtown areas all had the underground lines and when you had snow or when you had the melt from the snow I think it tended to create short circuits

down in the electrical workings down there and I think it happened once too often and people made the decision that busses were the way to go.

THORBURN: So you actually remember wartime Washington. Were there particular aspects of that that come to mind?

WALKER: Well, my first awareness we were at war and the Japs and the Germans were very definitely the enemy, we bought savings stamps at school which when you had bought the right amount then became savings bonds and in due course matured and were [unintelligible] whatever it was, and we invested in the war twice, whatever. But my father, of course, was in the Army, he—I think—my brother was born in 1944, my father had actually reported for basic training about a month before my brother was born and I think he could have got deferment but thought it was his duty to go for his country. My mother did not exactly see things this way since there she was at home with two small children, but anyhow. And we had blackouts. Now, mature consideration, even with technology of the day I'm sure any enemy flyers had they managed to get here, could have found Washington just by the convergence of the rivers, but we had blackouts, blackout curtains and course massive shortages on the food front.

Things were rationed of course but also they were not in the stores to be bought and if you happened—as I mentioned, Safeway was here at that time but it was much more a neighborhood chain of stores. I remember one time my pal Nancy, who lived two or three doors up the street and was a couple of years older than I, were out on our on bicycles, went by the Safeway in the block between East Capitol and A Northeast, realized the shipment of soap had just been received and went zipping home to get our respective family and then *everybody* came back to stand in the line because with their—I don't remember if there were coupons for soap or not but you could only have so many per person, but the more people you could get in line the more soap could be liberated and believe me, soap was hard to come by! (laughing)

THORBURN: Ah! And did you have a victory garden or anything like that?

WALKER: No, my grandfather did out of—they lived out 2412 Monroe Street NE, and where Fort Lincoln New Town is today, I think on the crest of the hill was some kind of boys reformatory, but the slopes of the hill and on the flat land at the bottom was made available for victory gardens and my grandfather had one out there.

THORBURN: Ah. And then, I guess you graduated from high school and what happened then?

WALKER: Well, I had skipped the 5A's [school class ?] so I graduated mid-year and I worked for Acacia Mutual Life insurance company till fall and then I went to Goucher College.

THORBURN: And after Goucher?

WALKER: After Goucher, actually I majored in foreign relations and I passed the written examination for the Foreign Service, but then I got this job in government with the Bureau of Mines and I decided I liked that so I never took the orals.

THORBURN: So did you come back to Capitol Hill then?

WALKER: Yes.

THORBURN: And you lived with your family?

WALKER: With my family. I briefly owned over in Virginia but I cannot say that I particularly lived there, so basically I lived on the family homestead all throughout.

THORBURN: Uh huh. And how long did you live in that house?

WALKER: My parents bought it in 1939 and I sold, let's see, in 2000 the Holladay Corporation, as you probably know, is building over there and the house had a separate city lot with it which is why my family had bought it, they had wanted it for gardening. And when I inherited the house, the garden was much given over to bamboo and wisteria, and after parting with \$1970 to have things clipped back to some semblance of civilization, but realizing I did not want to go out in it, I started thinking about moving and guess talked to a couple of realtors from Pardoe. And then it occurred to me the Holladay was doing this thing across the street and maybe they would like to come look at this vacant lot which would save a lot of trouble and I called up and asked to be put in touch with whoever was running the project and they gave me Rita Bamberger. She came and saw it and—I have a lawyer who's also in the animal rescue movement, and he pro bono [unintelligible] and he said "This does not look like a real estate contract," but he said "If you all, if both parties sign this, it is a contract; don't do anything you will regret later." And anyhow, he had plugged in one price vastly inflated and she counter-offered and what was still a very good price by the standards of the three years ago, they—and anyhow we both signed and as a result which I'm still looking for houses and this was the first one I saw that was half way suitable, so that's when we moved.

THORBURN: So this is 223 Ninth, is that right?

WALKER: Yes, Southeast.

THORBURN: Southeast, yes, you have to remember that. Well tell me about the post-war Hill. You know, well I guess you were at Goucher, maybe the end of the 40s?

WALKER: No, I was class of '58.

THORBURN: Okay. So, when you came back it was in the 60s.

WALKER: Yes.

THORBURN: What was the Hill like then?

WALKER: By that time sort of the phase where everybody was being worried about black people living next door had come and gone. And we were all settled in again having our nice middle class routines, and then, of course, in 1968 we had the assassination of Martin Luther King. Well, I read the reference in *The Voice of the Hill* several issues ago when they were talking about that house over on East Capitol Street that said the Hill was a shambles after the riots. The Hill was *not* a shambles after the riots. H Street was—H Street NE was a shambles after the riots, and I guess our Eighth Street [SE] over here didn't fare too well, but the rest of the Hill after the long weekend, everything was back to normalcy. I remember the guy next door who had roots in Hagerstown loading up his automobile heading for Hagerstown as safety, and my mother who was watering plants in the front yard, he said, "The world is coming to an end and you're just watering your plants," and she looked at him and said, "My world is not coming to an end!" (laughter) So, like I say, if we can correct this record in any way about the Hill being a shambles after the 1968 riots, I would like to contribute to correcting it.

THORBURN: I think you've done that. Was there heightened anxiety though, after the riot?

WALKER: There was plenty of heightened anxiety *during* the riots but I would say after, no, I mean there was very much a police presence. We had just acquired a poodle puppy and we were not allowed out after curfew, which was at some daylight hour, to walk him on the sidewalk, but—her on the sidewalk, it was [unintelligible]—but I would not say there was any particular heightened anxiety once the period of riots was over with.

THORBURN: What were the stores on the Hill like during that period?

WALKER: Well, we had a lot more grocery stores than you have today. Nobody drove to the groceries. There were—by the time I was grown up grocery stores were essentially all that you had except over here and on H Street, which was down for the count after 1968. H Street has always been sort of—I mean, you didn't go there for major shopping, but if you didn't mind the hike down and the worst hike back which was mostly uphill, you know, you could go down there for five and ten's, hardware stores, fabric stores to a certain amount of, you know, there wasn't an awful lot of selection, but that kind of thing was there. Not so after 1968. After that you went shopping downtown or, due course, you went to suburbs.

THORBURN: Yes.

WALKER: And of course, as you know, downtown was very different in those days too. Four major department stores, not to mention Jelleff's and Garfinkel's.

THORBURN: Were there organizations on the Hill that you were active in? I mean garden clubs, or, I guess you said you didn't do gardening, or churches or anything of that sort?

WALKER: No, I've never been much of a church go-er, and this was before my volunteer period with the Washington Humane Society. I was briefly a member of Capitol Hill Restoration Society at that time, but at that time it was very, very focused on maintaining property values and this was not what those of us who lived here for a while were coming to hear. We just wanted to make our neighborhood a better place to be. Later I was in Stanton Park Neighborhood Association, which was much more the "let's make our neighborhood a better place to be" type of thing.

THORBURN: Uh huh. What do you think have been the major changes over your lifetime on the Hill, which spans a lot of years?

WALKER: I was thinking about that in anticipation of this interview, because I figured the question would arise. And I think the whole, basically the whole property value business, going back to what I just said about CHRS, I see the current President was talking about let's try to get some affordable housing around here, I don't know how that went down with the membership (laughing) but I do remember his editorial on the topic. This basically, I would say stream-up—well, let's put it this way, I paid 419 for this place two and half years ago, and we're now being re-assessed for 577-something or other; not to mention some re-assessment they tried last year and that I appealed. The whole thing has gotten ridiculous.

THORBURN: Yes, yes. What kinds—obviously the population of the Hill is changing and apart from house valuations, what changes have they brought with them?

WALKER: Well, there were a lot more neighborhood kids running around in my time, of course I would presume the absence of neighborhood kids now reflects the flight to the suburbs. And of course, some have come back. There are youngsters next door, but you do not see the number of kids running around the neighborhood that you did in those days, you just plain don't.

THORBURN: You said you had anticipated some questions in thinking about this interview, were there other things that you wanted to tell us?

WALKER: Not in particular to go on the record that way; I was hoping that you would, you know, do questions that would enlist the stuff because, as I said, do remember things—somebody came up the other

day with, saying in amazement that she had been told that Constitution Avenue use to be C Street. I said, no it didn't but it used to be B Street. (laughter from both) Independence used to be B Street Southeast and of course, I did tell her that all that probably reflected that post-war plan to extend the Mall and the government buildings east of the Capitol as well as west of the Capitol.

THORBURN: I don't know about that.

WALKER: Oh, yeah. I couldn't put dates to it anymore, but somebody in this project probably does. Fairly soon after World War II they came up with thoughts about, and I don't know whether this was in L'Enfant's plans for the city, I've never been interested enough to, you know, go look at the original maps, but to extend the Mall from the Capitol eastward and then to have government buildings lining it on the two sides, the same as takes place west of the Capitol. Well, of course that was the heart of Capitol Hill as far as housing would have been concerned, and my family was antsy enough, they were one block north of the scene of the action. But they were quite wondering what this was going to work out to. Well it died. I don't know if it would have died anyway, or if died from local opposition. I was too young to be interested in that type of thing, but I do remember this being brought forward and of course, we would have a very different Capitol Hill today had it taken place.

THORBURN: Were there other plans to change the Hill that neighbors opposed or that they supported?

WALKER: No great ones that—all that this is about the routing, the road system out Barney Circle, that was really too far away to have much resonance in our part of the world. And I'm not sure that we realized just how much of a change it was going to make in our neighborhood when the East Capitol Street Bridge opened and commuter traffic started streaming down the street from 6:00 AM to 9:30 in the morning five days a week. So those two things come to mind, but beyond that I'm really not sure.

THORBURN: You've touched on this a little, but can you talk about the changes in race relations on the Hill over the years?

WALKER: Well, I guess, initially at least—I'm talking over 646 C Street now—I guess the whole block was initially pretty white. My family were both from Pennsylvania and my mother said she actually didn't have thoughts of race until she came to Washington, DC. I do remember—we'll have to get back, this is an aside—she took me and my brother, who is several years younger, down to Norfolk one time—there use to be a steamer that went down the Potomac and arrived in Norfolk in the morning, and we got off some bus to go to somewhere and we wanted to sit together; we looked for three seats together, the locals seemed to be getting quite upset. It was only later that we realized we were sitting on the wrong side—end—of the bus for being down there. It just was not in my, you know, my mother's frame of reference at all.

But, as time moved on, there did become a crime element that was somewhat associated with blacks, and I think you'd have to do a head count to say—I have actually been assaulted. [stammers a while] The city, you know, let's put it this way, your chances of being hit on the head were probably larger by it being a black person but also with the demographics statistically, there were going to be more black persons around, so whether it reflected a greater desire to hit people on the head on the part of blacks or whether was just that statistically your chances of being hit on the head, it was going to be a black person because there were *more* blacks, I do not know. But the person that did assault me was black, so ...

THORBURN: What about politics on the Hill? Have you any observations on politics over the years?

WALKER: Well, of course, we couldn't vote at *all* in my earlier days. It was very exciting when we finally got to vote even, I guess first Presidential primary, or whatever that we did. Our vote didn't get us very far because, of course, the city has always been very Democratic, but it was certainly very exciting to be able to do so.

THORBURN: Uh huh, uh huh. But what about politics right on the Hill? Through the Council elections and so forth?

WALKER: Well, I was a David Clark fan and I did do a little poll work and that kind of thing in his period. Since then, I do think that Mrs. Ambrose is doing a very good job for us. But David Clark was the person that I came out for.

THORBURN: You don't recall these political things when you were younger mostly because the city didn't have any stuff—

WALKER: I think mostly because there really wasn't anything, you know, we certainly were not tuned into it and as I said, we didn't get to vote for *anything*. I think probably the Eisenhower election was the first time we even had a primary here. And again, you will have to check that for factual accuracy, it was a very long time ago. (laughter from both)

THORBURN: Yes, quite. It seems to me that one of the most important changes in the last decades is air-conditioning. What was it like on the Hill when you were young without air-conditioning?

WALKER: Hot! We probably didn't realize quite how much we were suffering without television to tell us so every night. And I do think that possibly—you know, when they give those record heats and record colds they're all over the map for a century and a half as to when your highs and lows were, so people must always have suffered, and of course we got to look at the 19th century; look at what people were wearing. They must have suffered *unbelievably* in the 19th century. But your windows were open, there

was not—you know, going back to the pre-riots [uncertain of word] there was not that fear of crime. You left windows open, you didn't worry about—you caught a breeze. You endured the summers.

THORBURN: But in this area, would people have left there doors unlocked?

WALKER: We did over there until the night that somebody came in one night and said he was coming up to kill us. Now this was fairly soon after World War II and the people next door did have a relative who I think had come back from the war with what they called shell shock at the time. We rather thought that it had been the relative in question. My father, who was rather a gun enthusiast himself, did have a pistol in his hand and said, "You come up those stairs and when you are in range, I am going to shoot you." And the person went on back out the door. But after that we started locking the door at night.

THORBURN: Yes, I should think so. You have pets now, have pets always been a part of your life?

WALKER: Always. My parents, when they were in their two rentals they had a fox terrier who was walked off the leash and got—they were walking across the mouth of some alley and she was killed by a driver coming up through the alley. He probably never saw her. He may or may not have been proceeding too fast. God knows they come too fast out of that alley.

THORBURN: Yes.

WALKER: And after that they had a bulldog. But my mother was really a cat person and when she moved—in those days people did not spay and neuter their animals. I mean, it really wasn't a thing that was done and the first summer we were there the people who were kitty-corner across the fence in the alley, the cat had kittens and they held what was our first cats, and we had cats ever since; that was Frankie and Johnnie.

THORBURN: Okay. But not dogs?

WALKER: Oh, that is a cat law where but they tend to disregard it. [uncertain what was said]

THORBURN: Oh, dear! I hope the interview hasn't done that too!

WALKER: I think it's probably—he was eating that rose may have gone upstairs and eaten a spider plant or something, I'll mop it up after a while.

THORBURN: Okay. Going back to when you were a young adult on the Hill, house prices were obviously a lot less and what about taxes then?

WALKER: Taxes, I don't know, but I presume they were in line with the evaluations and stuff. We didn't have DC sales tax at that time. My parents incidentally—that house on Sixth Street—646 C Street NE—\$6,500.

THORBURN: And this would have been ...

WALKER: 1939 [ed: this is most likely what she said]

THORBURN: 1949 [probably hearing the date incorrectly]

WALKER: And they were both working at that point and they lived in one side and used the other to pay down the mortgage. It was paid off by the time my father went to the war in 1944. So they paid it off in five years.

THORBURN: That's pretty fast.

WALKER: Yes.

THORBURN: (long pause) I think I've pretty well gone through the list of things I had to ask you about. Are there—let me ask you once again if there are just things you would like to say or add?

WALKER: Okay, not knowing where this is going to end up, but as I just mentioned in those days about people not spaying and neutering. In those days it was quite a surgical expense. The first cat we had ever had spayed was done for medical reasons rather than, you know, to prevent additional animal births. And she was hospitalized for a whole week after she came out. These days when it's done you take them in the morning if it's one of the clinics, and you pick them up in the afternoon, and the cat's a little bit groggy, but she's normally fine the next day. Now my own vet would want her to stay overnight but they're always out the next day. But if this is going anywhere where people will see it, emphasize *all* involved should be spaying and neutering their animals. And it can be done very cheaply; it doesn't have to cost two or three hundred dollars. There are two or three quite functional clinics in the area. So put that on the record if we can.

THORBURN: Have there always been pet clinics and veterinarians on the Hill?

WALKER: No, that's a relatively new thing. Washington—at one time the DC animal shelter had a spay/neuter facility which I think there's legislation requiring it to do, but they have not had it for many years and it was de-funded years ago. Washington Humane Society, which runs the shelter under a contract to the DC—sort of worked with the situation for a while and then developed its own spay/neuter clinic out near its headquarters way out Georgia Avenue, practically in Silver Spring. Right now they don't have a veterinarian but they do at the clinic. Within the last 18 months or so, Prince George's SPCA

has opened a clinic in Forestville, which basically is straight out Pennsylvania Avenue and then proceed locally right before you get to the beltway. There's also a veterinarian up on Georgia Avenue, Dr. Thornburg, at the Petworth thing who will operate at clinic prices. There is no—and of course the Animal Rescue League, who for truly low income will operate dirt cheap also, but they do require means test. Everybody else just takes whoever walks in the door. Animal Rescue League has a means test. There's no reason why people should be having their animals reproduce—producing these 15,000 or so animals a year who are taken to the DC shelter; most of which will be put to sleep because there's not space for them or because there are not responsible homes for them. So that is my little message that I would like to convey.

THORBURN: Speaking of less friendly animals, have, in your time on the Hill, have rats always been a problem?

WALKER: Yes, rats have always been a problem. As I mentioned, my father was a gun enthusiast, but at one point he had this flashlight about this long and a rifle with which he was bound and determined he was going to shoot rats out his back window. Actually, after we got into cats, rats sort of started avoiding our particular premises. But in those days the alley back there was full of corrugated iron sheds and the rats, you know, would burrow in under them and so on. Well as I say, we finally got through rats here, but I have, saw a rat in this back yard over here this last winter and it was rather a small rat but he was not a mouse, he was a rat.

THORBURN: What about health care of humans, I mean were there physicians on the Hill and ...

WALKER: Well we were right across the street from what was originally Casualty Hospital, later Julia Rogers Memorial Hospital, most recently Capitol Hill Hospital and now part of the housing thing they are doing over there that I understand that the hospital put on hold because it's in bankruptcy. So, yes, we had hospital right across the street in those days and I—let's see, my mother while she was with the government was with a group health association, and I think most of their physicians were downtown. But we used to go see Dr. Gay over at East Capitol Street and Fourth. She has passed away recently. I think her obituary was just a year or so ago in the *Washington Post*.

THORBURN: But she was here for a long time?

WALKER: Yes, a very long time. I think she was married to two different doctors in succession and outlived them both.

THORBURN: I think I have pretty much come to the end of my questions, but thank you very much, Julie Walker.

WALKER: Okay. Well thank you and I'll look forward to seeing the transcript.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

END OF INTERVIEW