



Interview with Ada Bryan

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
125 Symmes Drive, Manalapan, N.J.
Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

Date of Interview: October 17, 1999
Name of Interviewer: June West
Premises of Interview:
Ada Bryan's home, Asbury Park, NJ
Birthdate of Subject: January 12, 1908
Deceased: April 10, 2003



Ada Bryan

Ms. West: Were you born here in New Jersey?

Ms. Bryan: I was born in North Jersey in Maplewood. There were four of us, and then my youngest sister was born in Asbury Park once we moved here.

Ms. West: Do you recall in what year you moved here to Asbury Park?

Ms. Bryan: It had to be around 1921 or 1922. Our family visited the shore frequently before moving to Asbury Park. Excursions ran from Newark to Long Branch, and my parents availed themselves of this service. During this time, my mother met a lady on the beach in Long Branch who lived in Asbury Park, and a friendship evolved. She told my parents about the town of Asbury Park, and what a nice place it was. When my parents decided to move to the shore they chose Asbury Park because of all the good things their friend had told them about the area. It was a snowy night in February when we moved. Our possessions were back in the house where we once lived, because the weather was so bad and the movers would not go back to pick them up. We also had a big disappointment; we thought we were going to live near the beach. When we arrived in Asbury Park, we found out that the realtor had someone else living in the house we were supposed to live in, so we had nowhere to go. My mother's friend knew a family that owned several houses in Asbury Park and they rented one of their houses to my parents. The realtor did not inform my parents that people of color were not allowed to live near the water unless they were live-in domestics.

Ms. West: You mentioned that some of the youngsters who came up from the

South were college students. So if they were able to get employment here, why couldn't the young fellows who were on the street corner get employment in the hotels?

Ms. Bryan: All of the young boys and girls who were coming up from the South were getting free board and lodging in the hotel, so, when the thirtieth of May would come around, they were assured a job for the rest of the summer, and that is how they made their tuition to go back to school. Well naturally, they would have to be paid more money. They would leave Labor Day or a few days later, and the young boys who lived in Asbury Park couldn't live there like that. Their lifestyle was so different. Here you had to have warm clothes. You had to buy fuel for the people for their homes. There were bitter cold winters back in those days. Well naturally, they would have to be paid more money. It happened to me one time. I saw an ad in the paper for a nursemaid to care for a child, and I called the telephone number. This place was in Long Branch, I think. Domestic employment was just about the only kind of job that people of color could get at that time. Men in some places could be waiters, but most of the waiters, waitresses, and chambermaids in the hotels were all white. One particular hotel in Asbury Park would not hire anyone of color except as the cleaning people, and that particular place is still standing, but the tradition that they used to have has changed now. I know I used to have friends of color who worked there, but they didn't know it. I had friends that were of color, but the people who hired them did not know that. So, that is how I know what goes on. When they came back home, they would tell what was going on in the hotel.

Ms. West: What is your most prominent memory of Monmouth County?

Ms. Bryan: When we went to the beach on afternoons or whenever, and you wanted you could go up to the stands where they were serving hot dogs, hamburgers, and all the other things on the boardwalk, and you were not waited on. I used to go up and stand for ten minutes or more at a time. We would ask, "A hot dog, please... May I have an ice cream cone, please," and the workers ignored you.

Ms. West: Are you saying that you had to bring your own food when you went to the beach?

Ms. Bryan: Well, yes. My mother always had a picnic basket, and we ate our food on the sand. We'd only want ice cream or soda, and there was a man of color, who had a stand where all the people of color went to get ice cream cones. Anything we wanted he had. But you were not welcome to go up and down the boardwalk and just walk in and buy hot dogs or ice cream.

Ms. West: Besides the social climate, is there anything else that stands out in your mind as far as the county is concerned?

Ms. Bryan: Well, you were not hired for jobs that were paying well. My father happened to make a good living for us because he had contracts to paint the outsides of three hotels in the summertime and he did the inside of the hotels during the winter months when they were closed.

Ms. West: So, the only area in Monmouth County where you lived, or are the most familiar with, is Asbury Park?

Ms. Bryan: Well, yes. My father had a car, but he couldn't drive it. He'd always have to hire someone to drive him to visit friends or go other places...I never tried to attempt to have a job other than in Asbury or Neptune.

Ms. West: Do you remember anything about World War I?

Ms. Bryan: Oh yes, I can remember how frightened we were because we thought my father would have to go off to war, and well we just didn't know what to do about that. We were so frightened all the time. And, of course, he was not accepted to go to war, and we were relieved of that. Soon after that, when we moved to Asbury Park, we felt a whole lot better because he didn't have to go off to war and he and mother, was working. My mother used to be a cook. We didn't know the word "caterer" then, but that's what she was. People would call her up and say they were going to have a dinner party and what have you, and was she available for such and such a date, and my mother would say yes. That would happen. Also, we lost a sister, my oldest sister passed away before we moved to Asbury Park. My mother had a beautiful flower garden, and my sister was out getting flowers, picking flowers one day when something bit her on her finger and she probably didn't tell that day. The next day her fingers began to swell. We took her to Orange. That is where there was a hospital, but something happened and poison set in.

Ms. West: So she died as a result of the insect bite?

Ms. Bryan: Yes, she did. She was very young. Yes, she did.

Ms. West: Okay, going back to history, you were living down here in Monmouth County during the Depression. By this time, you had already moved here. How did you fare during the Depression?

Ms. Bryan: Well, it wasn't so good. My father worked all during the Depression, but he probably wasn't making the amount of money that other people made, doing the same thing.

Ms. West: He was employed throughout the Depression?

Ms. Bryan: Yes, he was. I think that was about when I started working in a dress shop. In the summer of 1969, when they had the riots in Asbury Park, the dress

shop was damaged.

Ms. West: Are there any people here in Monmouth County who had an influence upon you?

Ms. Bryan: Oh, I would say yes. My mother knew people who were interested in politics; they had formed a civic organization that my mother and my sister were both in. That made them very interested in what was going on, and they never missed a meeting.

Ms. West: Did you all have a political preference, party wise?

Ms. Bryan: Yes, we did. We grew up Democrats. My father and grandfather who were not treated right, had been Republicans, so they became Democrats. Today I am a Democrat who has worked in the Democrat organization for over thirty-five years. I think I was quite young when it was time for voting, and you would walk the streets and knock on the doors and say, "Are you ready to go vote?" and would insist that the person walk with you back to the poll. Of course, you don't do that today. When they stopped doing that, I began to work at the polls, and did so for many years until my eyesight began to fail.

Ms. West: Did you go to school in Monmouth County?

Ms. Bryan: No, I didn't go back to school. I only attended school in Maplewood, where I went to the eighth grade. I did not graduate. I saw these boys with high educations not getting decent jobs. The one thing I will never forget in my life is when my father said, "When does school start?" And, I said, "I'm not going back to school," and he said, "Why?" And I said, "All those guys out there on the avenue all are college graduates. They have no jobs. I'm not going back to school. I have a job. I work in a dress shop, and I make a nice salary for me."

Ms. West: Well even though you didn't go back to school, did you like to read or keep yourself in school?

Ms. Bryan: Of course. I have always been informed. I always could read. I could just do anything that I wanted to do about, and my father said one thing I will never forget. With tears in his eyes, he said, "Ada, go to school and get an education and you will do better!" I said, "Oh, no I won't. These people will not hire me. I am not going to go to school. I am already working. I am not going back to school." That was wrong. I realized that.

Ms. West: What type of literature did you prefer to read?

Ms. Bryan: Any kind. But I did not read what my mother called silly books like the "true stories" or those kinds of things.

Ms. West: Do you read novels?

Ms. Bryan: I read about things, and I do it to this day. I'm ninety-one. When I turn my television on, it is the Discovery Channel. I listen to lectures. Those are the things that I like, not the silly things of life.

Ms. West: Did you have any heroes or heroines?

Ms. Bryan: I have Colin Powell, I have Martin Luther King Jr., oh, yes, and all of the people who are not with us today who have tried to do something great in life. I would read all about Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, Dr. George Carver, and Madam Walker. Those were the people that I would read about. I can't read anymore, but I talk about them with my friends. My father tried to tell me about these people. He said that I would be able to have a job and do as well as they did, but I didn't listen. I really didn't, and now I am sorry because I am quite sure that if I had listened, I would have been able to do great things in this world.

Ms. West: Do you know anything about your ancestors?

Ms. Bryan: My grandfather on my father's side who lived with us told us all about the bad things of the South. That is how I learned. He told me to keep them in mind. I have no malice or hatred or anything. Thank God, I grew up without that.

Ms. West: Well, how old was your grandfather?

Ms. Bryan: Oh, my grandfather was probably in his eighties when he passed away.

Ms. West: Was he a slave?

Ms. Bryan: Oh, no he wasn't. I am sure his father and his father before and so on were. And that is how I learned all about the South.

Ms. West: What state in the South was he from?

Ms. Bryan: I think my grandfather was born in Virginia. My mother was also born in Virginia. My mother died at eighty-two.

Ms. West: When you were growing up do you recall any prominent newspaper stories?

Ms. Bryan: There would be headlines of people committing suicide because of the Depression. I remember when Wall Street went down. I was listening to the radio because it had just passed. I know when the German airship Hindenberg crashed just seconds before landing.

Ms. West: Do you recall what town that was?

Ms. Bryan: That was over Lakehurst. Just as it was ready to be pulled down and when the ropes were being dropped for them on the ground, I think that is the way it came down, and all at once it burst into flames. I can still hear the reporter's voice in my ear. He was so, so upset. Everybody in my house was crying. Anytime a disaster hits, it hurts all of us, not just the people in the disaster. I remember some of the very bad things that happened with Charles Lindbergh's baby who was kidnapped. Those were big headlines in the paper. I still look at it on television when it comes on and I remember the man who did the kidnapping: Bruno Hauptmann. I also remember when Lindbergh flew to Paris, (Laughs) and that was a big thing in our lives. We were glued, we were really glued to the radio. And I remember my father bought our first radio. I think you called it a little crystal whatever it was, and we all sat around the table and he put it on. My mother had a glass bowl and he put the radio in the glass bowl and that made the sound louder. We were absolutely stunned when we heard Kate Smith sing *America The Beautiful*. Oh boy, we thought that was great... It was. I saw my first television program at the World's Fair. You were escorted into a little room that would hold maybe fifty or more people and then, he turned the box on, which became the television, and the picture was being broadcasted a few doors away. We thought that was pretty wonderful. In fact, the very next day, I went back with my girlfriend, so we could see it all over again.

Ms. West: Do you recall the symbols at that particular World's Fair?

Ms. Bryan: Perisphere and Trylon. I stared at that almost half the day.

Ms. West: What else do you recall?

Ms. Bryan: I think it was the first time I was on moving steps. I saw the World Tomorrow which still fascinates me when I see cars going to the left, the right, the west, the south. I still can't get over that.

Ms. West: What games did you play as a child?

Ms. Bryan: Hide and seek, hopscotch, jacks. I had a disappointment in a little game that I played. I think when I was twelve years old, I was playing a little game, and they were fixing a sewage or water pipe, and I fell in and didn't tell my mother for two or three days, and I think that is why to this very day I can hardly walk.

Ms. West: Did you have any hobbies?

Ms. Bryan: I liked ice skating in the winter and I could play some tennis where I lived there at the country club which, of course, we didn't belong to. In the afternoons some of the youngsters would say, "Come on, let's play tennis," and of course, I did. And in the wintertime, I ice skated. But when I moved to Asbury Park,

it was sleigh riding. There was a place where there was a pretty big hill called Sand Hill, and all the kids at the school in the early evening would go up on the hill and come down with their sleighs. I liked being out in the cold and I would sleigh ride and come home so cold my mother would have to unbutton my coat, that is how cold I was.

Ms. West: What would you say has been your greatest achievement in life?

Ms. Bryan: I think after I was married for maybe three years or so, one day my husband and I talked it over my and said, "Why don't we adopt a child?" And I think of getting my Lorraine, who is now taking care of me. I don't know what I would do without her. I think that was my greatest achievement. I also think that as long as my mother and my father were alive, they were taken care of by my sister, myself, and my brother. I also say the life I lived while I was married; I was in church every week. I worked very, very hard in my church doing anything that was asked of me. I think that was the joy of my life. Now I can't get to church. Some of my members come and give me communion every Sunday, every Sunday.



Ada Bryan and family on her 89th birthday

Ms. West: In what way is your life different than how you thought it would be?

Ms. Bryan: Well, I didn't expect to be here at this age. I worked on the job for twenty some years and when I went to work, a person said, after a couple of days, "We are going to get along fine. So will you bring me your Social Security Card because we have to pay taxes?" I said, "Oh no.. I'll never live to be sixty-five years old." She said, "Ada, bring it anyhow," and I did take it, and here I am at almost ninety-two.

Ms. West: Is there anything else that you think you would like to do?

Ms. Bryan: I've been to Europe for two weeks. I went to Rome. I've been to the Vatican. My priest, Father Gunning, who is still alive today, took nearly twenty-eight of us for two weeks. We went to many places and he was able to explain a lot and be our guide because he had lived there. We were also welcomed by the Pope and we were able to have an audience with him. This was in 1972.

Ms. West: Well, I just want to thank you so much, Mrs. Bryan, for giving me the time to hear some of your stories, so thank you again. It has been my pleasure.

Ms. Bryan: It has been so nice talking to you, thank you.