

Eugenia Payton March 31, 1993 Interview

"I" stands for interviewer

"EP" stands for Eugenia Payton

Tape marked "Eugenia Payton" -B 1993 Oral History

I March 31, 1993, time is 1:30 p.m., the location is at 211 Fountain Street, and my name is Ranger Toni Cooper, and today Bill Black and I are interviewing Mrs. Eugenia Payton. How are doing today, Mrs. Payton?

EP Nicely.

I Mrs. Payton, which bath houses did you work in?

EP The Pythian and the Baptist Bathhouse.

I What occupation, what was your job?

EP A masseuse.

I How did you get started in the bathhouse industry?

EP Well, I lived in Little Rock, that was my home, and I taught school there. But I married a Hot Springs man, so going backwards and forwards, it was a little too much and we were young, so I gave up teaching. And came to Hot Springs. And took...I didn't like the school system, I mean they didn't pay as much as Little Rock, so I gave that up. Years ago they used to have examinations, and we would go and take the examination for the bathhouse.

I Did some of your husband's family work in the bathhouse?

EP Yes. My first husband, and second husband, both worked in a bathhouse.

I What was their names?

EP Buckner Eaton, and Albert Payton.

I You were married to Albert Payton?

EP Uh huh.

I We interviewed him just the other day.

EP Is that so?

I Yes, ma'am. Did you make more money being a masseuse than a school teacher?

EP At that time.

I At that time you did? Were physicals required for being a masseuse? Did you have to take a physical every so often?

EP Every month. One day, I decided, Mr. Bolton was the assistant manager, and I came up to where he was. No, I was helping a girl, I had taken an examination of a bath attendant, and I came up--she was a bath attendant, she asked me would I come up and help her. And I gave hot packs. But while I was there, I used to sit and watch the masseuses. They were all white, and giving massages, and they would bring their books. They brought their books to me, and so one day I decided I would go down and ask Mr. Bolton about working. I didn't know what to do, how to go about it. So I went down to the Department of Interior, and Mr. Bolton said, "Young lady, what do you want?" So I said, "I'd like to be a masseuse." He said, "My God, you would! He jumped up and hugged me, because they didn't have any bl ... they had two old men that was working at the Pythian. And if they went to school, I don't know. But they didn't have a masseuse. So, he gave me the application, see you'd have to go away. They didn't have anybody to go to here at that time. So I had to fill out an application and the school that they recognized was in Chicago. And I filled out the application. Mr. Puckett and I filled out applications. And I left the week before he did and went to Chicago. I'm trying to think of the name of the school. It was a Swedish school. And they loved me. They were so happy to have me because I was the first black that had been sent there.

I Do you remember what year that was?

EP Oh my lord, that's been many a year, many a year.

I And then when you were a masseuse, where did you work?

EP When I came back, I worked at the Pythian.

I Did you work any other place after that?

EP The Baptist. They asked for me at the Baptist. Then everybody got interested in being a masseuse, you know.

I You started the first...

EP Started the ball rolling.

I The first black being a masseuse. What kind of pay did you get?

EP Well, if I can remember, I remember 95 cents a person.

I And what type of tips did you get?

EP Well, different. It's according to individuals.

I What was the highest tip you every received that you remember?

EP Oh lord, I just...

I You don't remember...

EP I'll say twenty dollars.

I When you had physicals, what were they checking for?

EP Everything.

I Okay.

EP We used to have to take a physical once a month. We used to go out, I guess in the Gorge, we'd go out there.

I Do you remember the doctor you saw?

EP They were army doctors. Even when I took my examination to be a masseuse, they brought in an elderly lady, the army, and I had to take my examination in a army doctor.

I You stated Mr. Bolden's name...he was the inspector...

EP No, he was the assistant...

I Of the Department of the Interior.

EP He had charge of the bathhouses. I can't remember the other man's name.

I He made the inspections?

EP Yes.

I Did you always pass when he made the inspections and watched your techniques?

EP Yes, I certainly did.

I Once he entered the building, did you know he was in the building?

EP Not all the time, but most of the time.

I What was he checking for when he came through the building?

EP Well, I guess different things.

I Do you remember what he checked a masseuse for?

EP Well.\

I You didn't have hot water or hot towels.

EP No, no, I didn't. See, after their bath they'd send them up stairs, and if they had bought a ticket, you know.

I Mrs. Payton, do you have any pictures of the National Baptist or the Pythian Hotel?

EP I don't know. You see I am moving, see, I moved from where I was living up to the retirement home.

I So a lot of your stuff could be misplaced now.

EP Yes.

I What time in the morning did you have to report to work?

EP Well, I was usually there at 6:30, quarter of seven.

The bathers...

I By the time the bathers were through the bathhouse, it was what, 8 o'clock or so before you saw them?

EP Well, 7:30, I'll say.

I Did you take baths there?

EP Yes, to clean myself up. (laughter) Well if I wanted to during my lunch period.

That was the best time. You'd be going home in the afternoon.

I Did many clients come here year after year and ask for you?

EP Oh yes, I had a lot of them. And then I was invited to their homes when I had a vacation.

I Did you go?

EP Sure did.

I And they sent you Christmas cards?

EP Cards...I still hear from people. I still hear. A lady called me the other day.

I Did you remember her name?

EP You know what? I hated so bad, and I know where she stopping to, I know her well, and I can't think of her name to save my life.

I Where did most of the people travel from?

EP Honey, I used to have lovely people from New York, Michigan, Chicago.

I Many people from the west coast?

EP Yes, we had people from all over the United States.

I Did you have any famous people that you can remember...movie stars, presidents?

EP I don't know.. they were sporting people, you know, and business, in business, you know. I can't think of the names.

I Did they come here for conventions? Were there different groups?

EP Yes, now we had conventions, groups to come.

I Different church groups?

EP Yes. Had church groups out of Chicago, other places.

I You said you worked at the Pythian and the National Baptist. Now those were the two black bathhouses, right?

EP Um huh.

I Is that where the black people would bathe?

EP Yes. And then, later on, if they needed anybody at any other bathhouse, I went.

I If somebody didn't come in, would they call you and you'd go over?

EP Oh yes.

I Can you name one of those bathhouses?

EP Well, I had patients from the Arlington, but not in the, but private, like in the room, you know.

I You did private masseuse, and go to the room?

EP Sometimes...I had a table set up.

I Did they ever come to your home?

EP No.

I But you went to their homes, or

EP Yeah, their hotel.

I Did you ever work at the Majestic Bathhouse?

EP Yeah, that's the last place I worked, as a masseuse.

I About how many years did you work up there?

EP I didn't work too many years, but I worked up there. That's when I hit my leg. I got up to get my paper, and I hit my leg against a piece of furniture, and cracked the bone.

I You had an accident at the bathhouse?

EP No, no, at home.

I But you were working there at the time you had the accident?

EP That's right, I was helping.

I What year was that?

EP You keep after me about them years...(laughter)

I Did you ever see attendants give the mercury treatments, Mrs. Payton?

EP No.

I Can you think of any dramatic cases of healings that you've seen yourself?
People getting healed by the hot water?

EP Yes, I've seen a lot of people that got better, a lot of people, honey, was helped.

I They would come in using a cane or using a wheelchair...

EP Yes, yes.

I And the 18 or 21 baths helped them.

EP Yes, helped them. I've seen a lot of people that was helped.

I Did many people come in with doctor prescriptions?

EP Yes, ma'am, they certainly did, because we used to put it on the spindle, you'd have to hang it up in the bath department. And the doctors would write out, you know, the prescription for them, the type of bath...

I Did the doctor tell you how long they stayed in the bath or how hot?

EP Yes, yes, yes, they did. Now, that was very important, but I notice they don't do that anymore.

I The doctor's don't prescribe...?

EP Well, I haven't, well, I don't think so. Not like they used to.

I Did you think the inspections would be continued and done on a regular basis?

EP With the doctors, you mean?

I Yes, with somebody from the National Park.. to go in and see the bathhouses?

EP Yes.

I See that the patients are treated the way they should be?

EP Oh yeah, we had...

I We had gambling going here in Hot Springs. We the town really booming with the people gambling at the clubs?

EP Yes, ma'am, and those were the people that spent their money.

I Did you ever work in any of the gambling halls?

EP Oh, no.

I Did the people that came to you for masseuse, if they took the baths religiously and stayed away from the gambling and the liquor, were they in better shape when they left?

EP Oh, I've seen a lot of people, a lot of people that was helped. And they just really thought we were "Houdini's".

I You were, weren't you.

EP Well, we tried to be.

I Do you have any children, Mrs. Payton?

EP No, I'm alone. I don't have a mother or father, no brothers or sisters. I have two cousins I hear from. See, I'm 85.

I Eighty-five years old. You look well.

EP If I hadn't hit this leg, you know, that bone, I cracked that bone, I guess I still would be helping them out. But I was working at the Majestic, but I felt though, kinda tired, and the evening before, the day before...see at the Majestic you drive up in the back and park. I said I didn't feel like it. And I remember the day before I felt tired, and I never felt tired in my legs, you know. So I put a little...my mother had a little cane, and I put that in the car and found a parking place in front of the Majestic, and went to work. And that evening it brought out my little cane, and they all laughed, and made fun of me. And, of course, I always hit the floor and go and get the paper, and then get ready for work. But that morning when I hit the piece of furniture, I went down. And when I tried to raise this leg up it did that...so I scooted back to my bedroom and called my neighbor. Then I called the ambulance myself.

I Did the management at the Majestic watch for people to park...that the places in front were for the patients?

EP Not necessarily. They were meters. I put my quarter in that meter... and they teased me when I was leaving. I had this cane, I hadn't had the accident, but they teased me when I didn't feel like climbing up that hill in the back.

I Who was the manager of the Majestic when you retired?

EP Blackwell.

I Who was the manager of the National Baptist? Was it Elroy Puckett?

EP Yes, but we had other managers before that.

I Do you remember the manager of the Pythian?

EP When I left, oh I can't think of it...it was a young woman, can't think of her name now, but see, they didn't want to give me up. They were asking for me because they had just opened the Baptist and they needed a masseuse, but see I think there was three of us was working at the Pythian at the time. And they were fighting not to let me go. You know. And so, I was so upset, I told a customer that I wanted to go to the Baptist. And she didn't say anything, but she went down and got all them old people and they marched to where Mr. Bolton was. They marched up there, and I don't know what they said to

him, and he called me, and he said, "Eugenia, do you want to go to the Baptist?" I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "I've never seen so many people, they all on the steps, in the lobby, and he said, now you can go, but do what I tell you." He said, "Do it right." Sol did, I did exactly what he told me to do. Because see, they had two other ladies that was giving massages, and the Baptist just opening didn't have anybody.

I So we can probably say that you were the first black masseuse in Hot Springs National Park.

EP As far as I know.

I That's great.

EP [President Clinton's] mother ...I waited on her.

I Oh, you waited on...

EP Yes, and he was down just one time, and she introduced me to her husband and to her son, but of course...

I Was his wife with him?

EP No. No.

I She wasn't here...

EP No. I don't know whether he was married then. He was a young man. I don't know whether he was married right then.

I Did he take a bath? To your knowledge?

EP Yes, oh yes.

I Do you remember anybody else famous like that coming through?

EP Oh, we had a lot of fine folks, yes. Her father was a minister...what was her name?

I From St. Louis?

EP Yes. From St. Louis. She used to...you know we used to have a musical every year, and she, she was over it. I can't think of her name.

I Another question. I don't know if you were here at that time, but didn't the National Baptist used to be the hospital for the black people?

EP Yeah.

I Because the blacks weren't allowed to go to the white hospital?

EP Yeah, that's right.

I So then you had your own doctors and nurses.

EP Yes, we had.

I On what floors of the building was that?

EP At the, at the...course that was at the Pythian they had the operating room and things like that.

I So the hospital was at the Pythian instead of the National Baptist?

EP That's right.

I And what floor was the hospital on?

EP Well, maybe it was the third; I'm going to say the third floor.

I may be wrong.