

Iola Bedford 1993 Interview

"I" stands for person doing the interview

"IB" stands for Iola Bedford talking

Tape marked "March 25, 1993, Iola Bedford Bathhouse Industry"

I Good morning, Mrs. Bedford.

IB Good morning.

I My first question: which bathhouse or bathhouses did you work in?

IB When I first began I worked at the Majestic for a few months. Then I went to the Maurice, and this was in 1947, January.

I What was your occupation, what was your job title?

IB At that time I was called a pack room girl, um huh.

I How did you get started in the bathhouses?

IB Well, I had a friend, we called her Mama Sheets, and she knew that I always wanted to be off on Sundays so I could go to church, and she got me started.

I Oh. What about your husband, did he work in the bathhouses as well?

IB Yes, he did. He worked at the Hale for thirty years.

I Could you state his name, please.

IB Alfred O. Bedford.

I Okay. What about children? How many children do you have?

IB Three.

I Did any of them work in the bathhouses?

IB I had two daughters work for a short while on the elevator.

I Okay. Running the..operating the elevator?

IB Yes.

I Let me ask you a question. When you switched from the Majestic to the Maurice, that was so you could have Sundays off?

IB Yes. And that was, at that time, they had just began to get Sundays off when I first began. Cause before that they worked Sundays, seven days a week.

I What time did you usually start working in the morning, and what time did you get off in the evening?

IB Seven til eleven forty-five, and from one thirty til three.

I Did you get out of the bathhouse at exactly three, or did you...?

IB Not always. Sometimes it went over.

I What was the routine like as a pack girl? What exactly did you do?

IB You had to heat the hot towels in the mineral water and apply them to the affected parts of the body.

I You heated them in the water and then you wrung 'em out?

IB And applied them to whatever parts was affected. Um hum. Arm, leg, knee, back.

I What temperature were those packs?

IB Oh, bout as hot as the water came, you know, came out 147 degrees Fahrenheit. And you just packed 'em in that water.

I Did you wear gloves or anything to protect your hands?

IB No.

I Your hands just got accustomed to the...

IB Accustomed to the heat. Um hum.

I Were physicals required for that job; did you have to take a physical?

IB Oh yes, we had to pass...we had to go to school and pass. And you couldn't be an attendant until you did. So, I was a pack girl, and then I went from a pack to an attendant. I've forgotten what year I start [to bathes].

I How long did you have to go to school? How many days a week?

IB It really...if you passed the first course, then that was it. But if you didn't, you had to keep going until you...

I Until you passed?

IB Um huh.

I As a pack girl, what type of wages did you get?

IB What? Oh. What did we get? You know, I've sorta forgotten there, but it was real low, like 10 or 15 cents a ...

I Person?

IB Um huh.

I Did you depend on tips?

IB Oh yes. Oh yes.

I What was the largest tip you ever received?

IB Oh, now I wasn't one of those that got those big tips, no, no, no, no. From five to ten was about the average for me.

I to a quarter?

IB (Laugh) Yes. I mean, uh, about five or ten dollars.

I Oh. Did many bathers return year after year and ask for you?

IB Year after year after year, um huh.

I When you said five to ten dollars, was that for a series of 18 baths?

IB Yeah. Twelve or eighteen, depending on the person. Some would give more, some would give less.

I Whatever their doctor prescribed on his prescription for them?

IB Pardon me?

I They had a prescription from the doctor?

IB Some. Some did, and others didn't. Um huh.

I What were some of the ailments people was coming to get healed?

IB Mostly arthritis. Mostly arthritis.

I Did you find them going out pretty well healed?

IB A lot of them.

I After how many baths?

IB Oh, sometimes after about 18. They gave 12, 18 or 24, and you would see results in a lot of 'em.

I One bath a day?

IB One bath a day. Um huh. That was what was recommended.

I Where did most of the bathers come from?

IB All over the world. All over the world. New York, we had a lot from New York. Chicago, Wisconsin, and like I said, all around.

I Did you ever bathe anybody famous, or the president?

IB No, no, no, no.

I MOvie stars?

IB No.

I Were you aware of any of them being in the building while you were...?

IB I knew about...I heard them talk about some of the men, uh, well, as a matter of fact, I know President Roosevelt, they said, bathed there. And, now the men could really tell you about that, uh huh. But, I didn't know too much about the famous people.

I Well did the heat in the bathhouse ever bother you, or did you just get used to it?

IB I finally got used to it. AT first it really did bother me, but I got used to it.

I Did you ever take the baths yourself?

IB One a day.

I One a day.

IB Um huh.

I When did you take it, in the morning, after the bathhouse closed, or?

IB During noon time.

I Lunchtime?

IB Lunchtime. Um huh.

I One more question. At the Maurice Bathhouse, you worked at the Maurice and the Majestic, all the attendants that worked at the bathhouse, were they black attendants, or were they black and white?

IB Well, black and white. Well, in the bathing department, they were all black, but in the masseuse, they were white. Um huh.

I Okay. How did duties working at the Maurice differ from working at the Majestic? Were they about the same, or...?

IB Well, a little different because at the Majestic, I was what you call a "helper". I washed the tubs, I put the people in, I packed them, I showered them, I did everything but, you know, but rubs. Um huh. And at the Maurice, all I had to do was just apply the packs and give 'em a shower.

I So you had more duties at the Majestic?

IB At the Majestic. That's really why I changed.

I Well, which bathhouses did the black bath at? Were there bathhouses for the black people?

IB Yes, we had the Pythian and the...what's that bathhouse that's still down there? The house that's still standing on Malvern Avenue...Baptist Building.

I National Baptist?

IB Um huh. National Baptist Building.

I Well, do you remember when the blacks were allowed to bathe on Bathhouse Row?

IB I was working at that time, but I just don't remember the year. Um huh.

I Did you ever observe any mercury rubs or...?

IB No, I think that was a little before my time.

I What do you think of the government's involvement? Did the government come through and check the bathhouse and make sure...?

IB Oh, you had to do everything right, I mean right. AT that time everybody, each person had his own mitt. You was not allowed to let another person mitt touch nor use it on anybody else. It was strictly...they was strict with it, and we had to go by the rules.

I Where did the people get these bath mitts from?

IB Oh, they could buy 'em at the bathhouse, they could buy 'em across, you know, downtown, or wherever.

I Did you put your, their names on the bath mitt?

IB Yes.

I What would happen if the inspector come in and find that something was wrong, like maybe the water was too cold, did you get in trouble?

IB Well, we would get in trouble. They would, they could do what they want, send you home for a few days or whatever, so we was very careful about that that they didn't catch us, you know, doin' something wrong.

I How often did they come and check the bathhouse, do you remember?

IB Oh, once or twice a month, I think it was, but if they was lookin' for something you never knew, they'd just slip in on you, you know, sometimes come in through the basement, you know anything, they was just walkin' up, up on you.

I Did you all spread the word the minute someone...?

IB Oh yes, we, you talk about runnin'...

I Back on these mitts, you have used the mitt on, let's say, myself, then you hang the mitt?

IB Yes, they had a place for you to hang... They had in each bath stall, they had a rack for you to hang the mitts on.

I My mitt did not touch...

IB It did not touch nobody else's, and it did not, either.

I Cleanliness was the biggest thing...

IB Was the biggest thing they worked at. Um huh.

I In far as maintenance of the building, did, was there plumbers there constantly, working on valves?

IB Yes. Yes. If something went wrong, you had to notify them so they could come and take care of it.

I They were in house?

IB They were around the area.

I Now, your lunchroom was in the basement.

IB In the basement.

I And you had a locker down there for your...

IB Yes, we all had lockers.

I To change clothes, had your clothes in there.

IB Um huh.

I You ate in the basement?

IB Yes.

I At a regular time, or did your lunch hours vary depending on the...

IB Depending on how fast you got out, cause if they let someone in at 11:45, that would make you go over. Then you had to eat whenever you could.

I You still got, what, a half hour or an hour to eat?

IB Well, sometimes a half hour, sometimes ten or fifteen minutes, whatever. When we was real busy, you know. There was times they called the season, and you didn't know when you was going to get out. And sometimes we would work most of the lunch hour, and we just had to take whatever we could.

I Okay. But you still got your bath in.

IB Yeah. You had to finish those people up before you went to lunch. Um huh. Oh you mean, did I get my bath in? I would get it in during the day sometimes.

I Now, was there a slow time in which you were asked not to come in during the year?

IB Oh, very seldom.

I How many people would you take care of in one day?

IB Well, like, let's see April and October, they had a few months that we'd take care of 20, 25, 30, and sometimes more, sometimes less.

I But you could handle up to 30 in one day?

IB Um huh.

I Now, how many people were there doing this thing that you were doing?

IB To do that...We had what, about three attendants, and we would each have about the same. Now that was when what they call the season.

I Yes, which was April and October.

IB April, well, several months in the spring, you know. And then, in the fall again.

I But when the temperature was extremely warm here in Hot Springs they did not come down?

IB Not, no.

I August, late July and August, they did not arrive.

IB Well, they came year around, but we wouldn't be rushed.

I Did the Maurice have any other different attractions in the building, like maybe a swimming pool or a gymnasium?

IB They, they had a pool that the severe patients went to, and you know, what is it, therapists, physical therapists took care of them in the pool.

I Where was that pool?

IB It was down in the basement.

I Was a lot of people coming in in wheelchairs?

IB Oh yes. They took care of a lot of people down there, too.

I Do you have any friends that used to work in that department that you remember?

IB Let's see. It was one man, I remember his name. I think his name was Eric. I don't know if he's still around or not. He was sorta crippled, but he, and who else? I don't remember.

I For crippled patients or wheelchair patients, they had a mode of lifting them...

IB In and out, um huh.

I Electric or hand?

IB I don't remember whether it was electrical or hand. But they had some way they got them in and out.

I Do you remember the manager of the Maurice at this time period that you worked?

IB Mr. [Railiet] was the first one that I worked under. [Railiet] and another young man, he died, uh, I can't call his name. And, Mr. Raillet, another heavy-set man from New York, I'm bad about names. And Mrs. Ann Smith was the last one.

I Okay, Ann Smith. The...Working at the Maurice, as an employee, did you feel that was the best bathhouse on the row, or did you...?

IB Oh yes, oh yes.

I You didn't like the Fordyce....(laugh over)

IB It had a good name, the Maurice.

I Did the employees move back and forth between different bathhouses, or did you stay...?

IB No, we stayed.

I So there wasn't one paying more than the other and an advantage trying to work there.

IB No.

I What about the gambling, was that pretty well over, or were there gamblers around?

IB That was going on during the time I was there. And one of the attendants, Grace Johnson, she would work at, did you know her? at, up there where the museum is. It was a big club up there. Do you, have you been here long?

I Wax museum?

IB Wax museum. It was a club there, and I can't think of the name of the club, but she worked, she would leave the bathhouse and go there and work, and then come back the next day. And anybody did that that wanted to.

I She was holding down two jobs?

IB Two jobs, unhuh. But I never...

I Did she have a larger family than you, or?

IB No, she just liked money a little better. (Laughter) A little better than I did.

I Do you know anybody else that did that?

IB Several people I knew did that. I had a brother-in-law--just anybody that wanted o take a second job, they did it.

I Your brother-in-law, is he still living?

IB No, no. He's a younger man, but he's gone.

I In her second job up there, was she a bartender, a waitress, or did she operate one of the gambling tables?

IB Oh, no, no,no, I know she didn't have anything to do with that. I, I really don't know how she was classified, I don't remember that.

I Miss Johnson still living?

IB No, No, she died.

I Those two jobs got the better of her...

IB I guess so. But she was in her 90's when she died. She was with her daughter in Chicago.

I Gambling was good then for Hot Springs? In your opinion?

IB Well, I think it was. I didn't hear of anything wrong, because, like I said, if you needed to work, you could work.

I You know there's only one bathhouse left on Bathhouse Row out of the eight buildings.

IB And I think it's a shame.

I What's the reason? What do you think, why do you think that happened?

IB Well, I believe one thing is, this is just my belief, they sorta let 'em run down, and I don't think nobody else wanted to take on that responsibility cause it'd take a lot of money to get 'em back in shape again. So, that's how I feel about it.

I We appreciate your time today, Mrs. Bedford, thank you.

IB Okay, you're welcome. I hope I was a little help.

I Yes, oh definitely, and this is going to be enjoyed in years to come.

End of tape marked March 25, 1993, Side A, Iola Bedford--Bathhouse Industry

IB

did you take it, in the morning, after the bathhouse closed, or?

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