

Myrtle Cheatham March 10, 1993 Interview

"I" stands for interviewer.

"MC" stands for Myrtle Cheatham.

Tape marked Myrtle Cheatham--A

I Today's date is March 10, 1993. The time is approximately 1:31 p.m. The location is at Myrtle Cheatham's home. I am interviewing Myrtle Cheatham, and my name is Ranger Toni Cooper.

I How are you doing today, Mrs. Cheatham?

MC Fine.

I Which bathhouse did you work in?

MC Fordyce Bathhouse.

I What years did you work at the Fordyce? Do you remember?

MC It was in the 60's, I believe it was. Maybe the 50's.

I What was your occupation?

MC Bath attendant.

I How did you get started in the bathhouse?

MC A neighbor called me, asked me did I want to work in the bathhouse. And asked me did I finish high school. I told her yes, and she took me in the bathhouse. I was at the Majestic for two years. Then the soldiers, the army sent the soldiers in up there at that time, and they took over and we had to leave. And I forgot, I can't remember the year now, but then that's when we came to the Fordyce Bathhouse.

I How long did you stay at the Fordyce?

MC I was there for sixteen years.

I What was an average day like working in the bathhouse? What was your routine?

MC The routine...We had to be on the job at 7 o'clock in the mornings. And we had lunch around noon. After, there was many days that we did not get lunch. We would run down and swallow a few bits, and back up. Because we bathed the world, and that was on our tags, the card tags, that we bathed the world.

I Your dressing rooms and lunch areas, then, were in the basement?

MC In the basement. And I bathed [Merle Oberon] at Little Rock. You all might have read of her, she's a movie star. And Gypsy Rose Lee. We bathed Gypsy Rose Lee. I don't want []. But, and we bathed people out of the cold climates and the tropics. They would come. And to my understanding that I picked up, we only had one more, another water like this water in Hot Springs, and that was in Europe. And so we would work hard. The work wasn't heavy, see. But our patient in the tub, and the patient would sit there maybe a minute. We would first give them three cups of water to drink. And that's what began to open up the pores when they began to perspire. And if... we had to know only fifteen minutes with the water with the temperature they could only stay in there. Fifteen minutes.

I How hot was that water?

MC That water was 103 degrees. And that thermal water was hotter than your regular water at home at 103, it was hot.

I Did you have to take physicals to be a bath attendant?

MC Had to go to the doctor when you got ready to take the baths. If you was gonna bathe you had to see a doctor. And the doctor would give us ...we'd have to show our hands. That's all we had to do. Inside and out. To see if there was any kind of scars or anything on their hands. And we bathed on Sundays, ['cause the man done called] Mr. Bolton, he stopped us from bathing on Sunday, and that we were proud of. He was one of the superintendents.

I Did you see the superintendent often?

MC Not too often. Not too often. You remember when I first begun, we'd go in the pack room. Before I got to be an attendant, you had to learn it, you had to be sure that you knew what you were doing. We would wrap the people up in real hot packs, take them out, then shower off. Then from there to the cooling room, and they would remain in the cooling until their pores closed before they could dry off to go out to go outside, to keep from taking cold.

I Was that a needle shower you put them in?

MC No. Just a regular shower. And, pardon me, it was a needle shower. And they always got a good shower with that needle shower. We had a problem trying to get them out, they wanted to stay in longer, but we had to get them out. We knew to get them out in a certain time.

I Did you get a different wage from putting the hot packs on?

MC Yes. When...We only put on the hot packs. I don't remember, I don't think we made, matter of fact, maybe 10 cents or 15 cents. And course when you moved to the bath attendant, you made 50 cents.

I Is that a day, or week?

MC No. That's a day. That's a day. Glad you asked that.

I Did bath attendants depend on tips?

MC If it had not been for our tips, I'm assuming that we would have perhaps starved to death. We would have starved to death.

I You made 50 cents per person? per day?

MC Per person. Per person. Per person. Right.

I When did you start receiving pay by the hour? Did that happen?

MC No. We did not receive.

I Did many of the bathers return year after year and ask for you?

MC Oh yes.

I Where did most of the bathers come from?

MC They came from all over. And they would...because you see we were dependent on them for our living, and they would always return if you was a good bather to come back and ask for you. And they would not take anybody else. They'd wait for you.

I Did the heat in the bathhouse ever bother you? It was so hot in the bathhouse, did that ever?

MC [] It didn't bother us at all.

I Which bathhouse or bathhouses did most of the Afro-Americans bathe in? The black people. Which bathhouses?

MC Oh. Well, the Buckstaff. The Buckstaff is where the white... and at that time the blacks was not allowed to bathe in the Buckstaff. They had nothing but white attendants and the masseuse and all.

I Where did the African Americans go to bathe? Any bathing house except the Buckstaff?

MC Now, when you say the African Americans...

I The blacks, the black people.

MC Yes. We had the Pythian. We could bathe at the Pythian. We bathed there, at the Pythian Bathhouse. And it stayed crowded, there, because it was the only place we had to bathe, at the Pythian Bathhouse. That's on Malvern, now, Malvern Avenue. That's where we bathed.

I Well, can you think of any dramatic cases of healings that you would like to share with us?

MC Oh yes! When they would come in, we had attendants that they would have to go out to bring them in in the chair, and when they'd leave, they would leave walking, straight up forward, when they'd leave. It's amazing.

I [arthritis?]

MC Arthritis. And it's still good for arthritis. See Larry has already been up there.

I Do you take the thermal baths yourself? Did you take the baths when you were working in the bathhouses?

MC Well, we were so [timed] to get out, we never stopped to think about taking the baths when we got out. We got our bath at home. We could have, but we would have had to wait until all the guests was out.

I About what time did you usually finish? for the day?

MC I really hate to...I guess I won't say that, but anyway, I had a, it was a lady came down if she come in at 11:30, it was almost time for lunch, you had to stay there. One came in around 3:30, and she looked up at the clock, and she saw me looking at the clock, and she went out and reported me, cause I was looking at the clock.

I What time...3:30 is what time they quit taking guests?

MC Yeah. They stopped taking them at 3:30.

I So you were always out the door by 5 o'clock?

MC Oh yes, we was on our way home at that time, because, see we had, I had a family. And I had to come home and go to work again, you know, cooking.

I How large was your family?

MC I have, let me see. I had two boys and three girls. And I thank God that I never got pregnant again.

I How did the bowling alley in the Fordyce look? Because we don't have any pictures of the bowling alley. There was a bowling alley in the basement.

MC Uh huh. Now some of the men...course I never did bowl because I never did learn how and didn't care. Now we had men that would bowl during their lunch hour. Yeah. They bowled. And course, they loved bowling, you know, knocking the pins down. We would look at them, but that was about the size of it.

I Did you have any conventions that came here, groups of people that would come to a bathhouse? Church group?

MC Yes, yes. Most of them was Baptists. And they would come by groups and bathe. Oh, we, when we said we bathed the world, we bathed the world, and they would come by groups. And, so we had in the Fordyce a hose, they call it, it was like this, and we'd turn them around, and...

I Scottish douche? I was going to ask you about that.

MC The Scottish douche. We would turn them around and they wouldn't want to get out, and we'd put it on a certain degree, then cool it down. We had one lady to faint. And we had to work to get her back to where she was able to come out. And then, the vapor, of course. We had one that we put the whole body in, and we had one with the head out. Quite a few of them would prefer their head out and not fastenend in there.

I Any reason? Because it bothered their hair? Or they just wanted their heads out?

MC The poor ladies, they never did get their hair done, they never did keep their hair looking pretty for their husbands. Because they couldn't do anything about it
, if once you get in there, you gonna get it wet.

I They had a beauty parlor in the Fordyce.

MC They had, they had a beauty parlor in there. They could go to the beauty shop and get their hair fixed before they come out to their husbands. You know, so they could look pretty when they come out to their husbands.

I Well, did very many women use the gym on the third floor?

MC No, uh huh. Not many women used the gym. Mostly men. Mostly men.

I Was the Scottish douche for anything in particular, or could just anybody have it?

MC No. Anybody couldn't have it because that stimulation was there. Anybody couldn't have it. Only you had to have a prescription from the doctor.

I Did any of the bath attendants operate it, or was there a special operator to run the hose?

MC We ran the hose ourselves.

I Would you treat anybody with diseases?

MC If we did, we knew nothing about that. Not like it is now, for God's sakes no. Only thing, we had that arthritis is one of the main things that we treated them for.

I We understood that they were treating for syphilis with lead...

MC If that was true I didn't get that information.

I Did a lot of people use the sun court? There was a sun court on the second floor for sun bathing.

MC Yes. Yes. The ladies would go out, and they would love to sit out there to get theirself brown and pretty.

I What kind of furniture did they have out there?

MC Well, let me see. It was... Oh, I can't think of this furniture. But anyway it was furniture that, I can't call the name, but anyway, it was nice furniture. Because we had nice furniture from the city.

I Were there some lounges so they could...?

MC Uh huh, the lounge, the furniture. And they could have places to lounge, as I told you, in the sun.

I Do you or your family have any pictures that were taken inside of the Fordyce at the time you were working there?

MC No. No.

I Why do you think the bath business has declined over the years? What's your opinion about that?

MC Well, course, during the time when we were...I hate to keep repeating myself about those tags, but during the time, my husband was working at Reynolds Metals Company, at that time.

I Out at the plant that's now closed?

MC It was wide open. That's why we had so many people in Hot Springs. We had so many people in Hot Springs at that time.

I Did those people from Reynolds Aluminum come in here to take baths?

MC Well, some of them bathed, yes, they would bathe. But, I tell you now. I better not repeat that because I'm not even sure that was true about, as to why he left.

I Was the army and navy still sending people here for arthritis at that time?

MC Oh yes, yes, yes. And really, that's what it was all about, was arthritis. That's what it was all about. And it did the trick.

I What was the most unpleasant part of the job that you had? Was there an unpleasant part that you didn't like as well?

MC Let me see, was there an unpleasant part that I didn't like? Well, I was so, I don't remember, I liked all parts of it.

I Did the superintendent and his staff come around and check to make sure the water was hot or the bathhouses clean?

MC Yes, you had an inspector. I got in trouble there, I believe, too, I think. That inspector walked in that bathhouse and caught my water a little bit too hot. She sure did. And, what did she do? I forgot how, but she caught my water a little too hot. I think I might have got reprimanded for that because it was pretty dangerous to let it get too hot on your patients.

I What did they do to you for having the water too hot?

MC Well, I had a...she passed and gone...she was head bath attendant, and she had to go to the front and speak for me because she had a lot of influence, too, with the bathhouse, and she had to speak for me, to keep them from firing me, so she saved me. I shall never forget her.

I She's high on your list.

MC Yeah, she's high on my list.

I How did the duties working at the Fordyce differ from the duties working at the Majestic. Was it any different? It was about the same?

MC The only thing that I could think of at the Majestic and why we got so many people with that hose, they didn't have one. They didn't have one.

I Did you get better tips at the Fordyce than you did at the Majestic?

MC Yes.

I What was the normal tip?

MC I had...We didn't get too many, the normal tip--maybe 15 cents, and then 20 cents and 25. I had one lady when she left she gave me 50 dollars.

I She was here for 12 or 18 baths?

MC Eighteen baths, and she gave me 50 dollars when she left.

I Is that generally when you received the tips were after or did you get those...

MC She didn't give me anything until she finished, and that's why it was such a huge amount. I never did see her again. The whole time I was there. But, my sons, that's what they worked for, and that's the one thing that I thought of that my sons worked for tips and that's what that's what I wanted to do. I wanted the tip, too. Because I knew how much money they was making. They mostly lived off of their tips.

I Where was he working?

MC He wasn't in the bathhouse at that time. He worked, my son that's got the business now, he worked at Royal Vista Inn for 19 years. And they really hated to lose him when he left. And, so that was a great time in Hot Springs.

I The gambling was still here at that time?

MC Yes, they were gambling. What is those big gamblers' names? We had all of those here, too. Do you know?

I Al Capone?

MC Al Capone. And who else, do you know, do you know anything about them? You probably wouldn't, but I thought maybe he might've heard of them. Al Capone and who else? And we bathed President Truman, the president of the United States.

I At the Fordyce?

MC Yes. He's dead now. He bathed here.

I While he was president, or?

MC Yes, he was the president of the United States.

I And who bathed him again?

MC A fellow named...his last name was Mott, that's all I know. Yeah, his last name was Mott. But he bathed him. And, so, I'm pretty sure that he bathed him.

I Was working at the bathhouse considered to be a good job?

MC That was why. Now, that was another thing that was why I wanted my children...we worked, my husband and I, we worked to give our children their education, because we didn't want them to have to wash the bath tubs. We gave them their training. And I have a daughter now who has a master's degree in social work, and she love people, like me. And I have a daughter who's teaching in Chicago, there in Chicago, Lake Shore Drive. She figures that when they retire, they're coming back home, and that'll be the day, I'm waiting for that. Cause she's young yet, she's my baby. So, I just had a good time. So I have a good time waiting on my husband. He's worked hard, took care of his family. He didn't throw his money away. And we're unfortunate, I have to live in the hospital for months and months, and help feed him and see to it that he would eat his dinner, blah, blah. Things like that, and that like to got me. Children didn't want me to stay up there, but it didn't do any good, didn't help, I stayed anyway. So I would make sure that. Course, he's spoiled rotten, yeah, he's spoiled rotten, and sometime I have to kinda jerk him out of it. Yeah, yeah. So that's about...Let me see.

I Do you remember any thing besides the Scotch douche that the Fordyce had and nobody else did? Do you remember any other things that they had that...equipment and services that the other bathhouses didn't have?

MC They didn't have. This was the thing that brought so many to the bathhouse that's..

I Did the Fordyce have other special equipment?

MC No. No. No.

I Were they still using the Hubbard tub at the time you were working there?

MC Um huh. Yes. Now when you say Hubbard tub, you talking about getting..

I That large tub on the third floor.

MC They didn't use that tub much. Not many, not much.

I Took about a thousand gallons of water to fill it.

MC They didn't use it that much. I shall never forget that I had Mrs. Rockman, she's from New York City. She had a heart condition, and you couldn't keep her from taking all that heat, and so she went out and I just

made sure that she was dead. But then the doctor wasn't far across the street. I ran across the street, and it wasn't but a few minutes and the doctor was there. But she wasn't dead. And they sent on the other side to get her husband to come in. And when she saw him, well I just made sure that she was really gonna die. We had to get him out and get him on the other side. So that's the husband, so you know. Ya'll young ladies treat your husbands right. You, you don't have one yet, is that it?

I I'm married now.

MC You're married, you did marry, now, yeah. Well, you need to be nice to your husbands.

I So the doctors' offices, were they located across the street from the bathhouse?

MC Yeah. Wasn't far. I didn't have to go far. The doctor's office was right across the street there.

I Up there on the second floor?

MC I had to come out of the bathhouse and go across the street to the doctor's office. That' where I called the doctor [] the doctor. Across the street. I forgot his name.

I We appreciate your time today, Mrs. Cheatham, and thanks for talking with us.

MC Well, I was just glad to do it.

MC

MC Scottish douche

I

MC

