

Charles Sterling Wiggins

Interview from Dr. Stephanie Boddie' s Unfinished Business Project

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Location: His home

NOT A CARE IN ALABAMA

I was born in the year of 1917 on September the 8th. In Alabama, Union Springs, Alabama. Not far from Montgomery.

I lived on a farm which is my grandfather's and grandmother's farm. And before that, it was the headquarters for the whole family. My father's friends and everything, that's where they gathered, my grandfather's farm. And then later years, I moved from there. I was there from 1917 'til 1928, 11 years old.

We were 5 siblings, and we were living in the country with my grandfather and my mother. And the reason I left, he [my father] sent for us to come to Pittsburgh. Well, he had prepared a place for us to be, you know, with family. And that was the story, that we migrated from Union Spring to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I was the youngest. It didn't seem to matter to me. We were just leaving. And I didn't know where we were going. I hadn't been nowhere prior to that out of the country. And so, it was a surprise to me that my father had made all these arrangements for us to come to where he was. [He was] looking for better work, better things to do, to prepare himself to find ways for us to be here with him.

My sense was, I didn't know where I was going.

I was pretty well taken care of. I don't remember anything I had to fear. Now, my sisters and brothers might have. They were older. I was a youngster and didn't have no problems. I was secure with my family surrounding me.

SEGREGATED LIVING, PASSING FOR WHITE

White people all around us. They were very close with my grandfather. It just so happened my grandfather was very close with them. My grandfather had a big farm. Cotton, vegetables, sugar cane and all that stuff we had around with us. So, it was a wonderful experience for me. And I didn't realize what segregation was for a long time. My sisters and brothers did.

My grandfather had a brother who lived in the city, and he would come down to the farm on holiday, at Christmas time. And bring us some Christmas stuff. We had to hang up real stockings and all they would put in them was some fruit. No bananas, because we didn't grow bananas in Alabama. But oranges and different things. And that was the only time we would see my grandfather's brother. There was a difference in the family. The family didn't recognize my grandfather back in Montgomery because of complexion. It was a big mixed family. But the one that lived in Alabama, his brother would come down and was free to go anywhere he wanted. I found out all this later. He was free to go from place to place. But he didn't bring nobody down

to see my grandfather. But, that was his brother. He'd leave his family to come down to see his brother. But his brother never went up to see him, my grandfather. That was segregation as far as I know.

He wasn't dark complexion, but his wife was, which is my grandmother. And that's from this family.

I found out from what I understood, they did not want to honor him up in the big city, my grandfather. But his brother would come down to see him. (Why?) Because of his color. There was a difference in their color. I don't know too much how that would go.

GOING NORTH

That was a big move. And strange enough, I had never remembered seeing snow while in Alabama. Now, there might have been ice and stuff, but I never remember seeing snow.

That snow was a big mystery to me. I remember it was in the month of March that we arrived here in Pittsburgh. I saw snow and the sun was shining and it reminded me of diamonds flickering in the snow. It was amazing to me. I didn't know what it was. That was my surprise right here in Pittsburgh.

Now when I left Alabama, we left by train.

My sisters and brothers had never been off the farm. We lived about 12-15 miles from a little town where you could go buy certain things, and all like that. But we had never been to Montgomery or Birmingham. So, we're just strangers to where we were going. So, what they did was, they put tags on us to make sure we wouldn't be lost. So those tags designate from Alabama to Cincinnati to Pittsburgh.

I'd never been on a train before. We had in the country, you might say, wagons! I don't ever recall even riding in a car.

I was the youngest and didn't pay it any attention. I was excited, never been on a train before. Now, I'll say this about the train. On the farm, 12:00 every day, the train would go through, woo woo, and we would say what time it is. We told time by what time the freight train would go through that little town. We could hear it on the farm. And we knew what time it was and probably would eat lunch.

With the fellow up in Montgomery, that much I know, my grandfather stayed on the farm.

MY EDUCATION

I didn't go to school in Alabama.

When I came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1928, my father enlisted me in the school with my other sisters and brothers. They put me in the first grade. At that age, then later on, they put me in the 3rd grade. They didn't know anything about me, how I could speak and all that.

The particular school I was invited to go to with my sisters and brothers was called Rose Street School. It was only a few blocks from where my dad had the home for us. And that was uptown, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

That was my first interest in school. I had no schooling at all until I come to Pittsburgh.

My sisters and brothers being ahead of me, they were able to coach me when I'd come home doing my alphabets, which I didn't know before. But they were able to help me through the first few grades of school.

The school I went to had whites, but I wasn't acquainted with them. Actually, the whites in the school were strangers to me. 'Cause I wasn't used to it, especially coming from the south. Of course, now I can't speak for my sisters and brothers who were older than me.

WORLD WAR II: DRAFTED TO SERVE IN A SEGREGATED NAVY

The war at that particular time was drawing down. The Japanese had come into the war and Roosevelt was still president. And the war, it was the end of the Depression too. People getting food and stuff instead of starving. Anyway, after going to school I decided I wanted to get more schooling, and I wasn't held back from trying to get what I wanted. Everything seemed to work out okay.

I did not enlist in the Navy. I was drafted in the Navy. There were two of us that were drafted out of the whole group that they were taking in at that time. They wasn't taking Black guys in the Navy that much. At that time, they decided to integrate the service. I was selected to go to the Navy. And I left Pittsburgh, me and one other guy. We went to Illinois, the Great Lakes. And at the Great Lakes, I got my training.

It wasn't integrated. I went into an all-black group. I graduated from that all-black group. And when I graduated from the all-black group. There, we were scheduled, my whole group, 100 something guys, were scheduled to go over to the Japanese area. The war was over, but they wanted us to be on duty. I for whatever reason, got acquainted with a group of guys in Chicago who had been there for a while. And I said, "I don't want to go across seas." They said, "You want to stay here? Tell you what sign up for the Seabees then you won't have to go." Out of that whole group, I was the only one who didn't go overseas. I signed up for it and they gave me the slip and I signed up for what they call the Seabees. Now the Seabees is Navy but a different part of the Navy. It's like the engineers are in the Army. We build and make things possible for others to come through and have it done for them. And I had to spend time in the Seabees to get through that. I'm already a Navy guy but I had to go up to New England and get inducted up there to be a Seabee.

When I went from Pittsburgh up to Connecticut, what they called the base up there, that's where I got my training for the Seabees. On my coming from there back home, and going back, I got sick. With an ailment that you don't hear about today. It was called rheumatic fever. It was a very dangerous thing back then. But now-a-days you probably don't even hear it.

I was one of only a few on my base who were Black. All the rest were Caucasian. So, I went from Black to White. I was the only Black in my unit. It was okay. (Shrugs) I didn't see, feel any difference up there. They treated me okay until I got sick. I mean I was sick and couldn't do anything.

But I find out, if you don't mind, that rheumatic fever, they were surprised that I had it. I was told by the doctors it wasn't the kind of thing that happened to Blacks. He said, "You Black people don't usually get that disease." And I didn't keep it long. One of the good parts is there were about 20-30 whites down with this and I got out of that before they even got out.

THE STRANGENESS OF THE SEGREGATED SOUTH

I left Connecticut after being up there for some months getting myself well, and I caught a train to go to Georgia. I went through NY. When I got down to Georgia--now I'm from Alabama, going to Atlanta, a southern boy going back to my roots. And when I got down there, I found out it was segregated in Atlanta. I couldn't eat with the white boys.

It was a little bit strange. I wasn't used to being segregated. I wasn't used to what it was. But then I was put into a hospital unit. We had a lot of soldiers coming back from the war, wounded. They assigned me in the hospital to help out the soldiers coming back, 'cause I'm up on my feet and that's where I stayed for my time.

In Atlanta, Georgia, there's a city above Atlanta called Dublin, and it's an old farm area. And when we wanted to leave Dublin to get away from the hospital, a group of us Blacks, we would go up to, out of the big hospital. But when we got up there, we went to the store. We had to go around to the back to get the sandwich. We were told that in the hospital, to... Don't cause no trouble because we had to come back. But I couldn't go to the store and get around the front to get a sandwich.

We were invited to go up there at Christmas time. It was a dry county. You couldn't drink, but the people who lived on the farm that we went to, they had stuff. They had to do what they had to do to have a drink. They didn't put it out where it could be seen, because it was illegal for them at the time.

But anyway, even in Atlanta we wasn't free. We was still segregated.

Very uncomfortable because I had freedom now. 'Cause most of my life coming to Pittsburgh, after that was freedom. And I didn't expect that to happen. But that segregation was still down there. And it didn't end 'til we got to Washington DC.

And the first time, I seen these chain gangs working the railroad. A big guy sitting up on a horse with a rifle, making sure people were working. And I wasn't used to that, even coming from the south. I'm seeing more of what was happening with us Blacks at the time. And so, it's now I can say it's a big difference in the world I'm living in today than the world I was living in back then.

I WANT TO BE A WATCHMAKER

Horological. I come back in the year '48. I graduated from school and everything. And I was out of the service. At that time the government was giving soldiers the benefit of going to school getting more education or trades. While I was in the Navy, I saw how these little things we were using intrigued me. And that's when I come back home I said, well, watchmaking. If I could go to school for watchmaking, that's what I liked. And meanwhile, at the same time, I got to working in the post office. I signed up for watchmaking. I got the ok to go to this school. I had to take a test. It was on the northside of here in Pittsburgh. So, I take the test, written test, and the test of taking apart a clock, a small clock and putting it back the way I took it apart. I could take wheels out of a car and put them back. Or an engine out of a car and put it back. I did that. And they passed me. So, the dean at the time said we will accept you, but we have to wait for a while 'til we find, what they call a desk. That's a bench, what the watchmakers work on. They said when we get a bench we will let you know. So, they told the people who were behind me in the government, in the service pushing me to get in there.

At that particular time, going to school, you got a stipend from the government. They gave you a small amount of money if you had a family and all. So, I was getting that, walking around, doing fine, and they never called me. Six months went by. That's a long time. I said, "They haven't got a place for me in school." 6 months went by. So, I was called over by the people who sent me there, the government. They wanted to know how I was doing. Oh, I was doing fine. I'm not going to school. They said, "Why?" I said, "They never called me." He said, "Somethings wrong. Somethings not right." So, they said, "We'll check it out." They went to the dean. The dean explained to them, the reason we haven't called on him: 80% of our students here are from the south and they will not work or go to school with a Black. So wasn't no Blacks in there.

A few weeks, they called me and said, "You still want to go to that school?" And I said, "Yeh, I want to be a watchmaker." They said, now there's one up in Cleveland. I said, "I can't move my family. I don't have the ability or money to do that. The school is right here. That's why I chose it." Prior to that I had the choice of Cleveland and here. So, they said, "Well, if you want to go to that school. We're going to talk with the dean again and see what's really going on."

I was working with the clock at home doing what I had to do to pass. So, the dean said, "As soon as we get an opening, we'll call him so he could come take the test." They said, "Okay, but we will be there," the government guys. And I guess 6 weeks, they called me to come in on a Saturday to take the test. So, I went over and I had the government backers behind me. By now, there's no reason I couldn't pass the test. I passed the written test and I passed the physical test and the dean came out and said he passed the test and you start the school Monday. I came in that Monday. They had 3 different units of the school. Grade school, high school and college, where you finished. It takes 3 years to go through. I started off with number 1, then 2, and I went through that whole school. The only Black to go, but after I finished up the school, 3 or 4 months later, Blacks could come in. I opened it for the Blacks. My going through was able to let Blacks in. There were 3 or 4 Black guys from the South who came in to be watchmakers.

MY OWN LITTLE SHOP

In the city of Pittsburgh, they had the big stores like Carper, Gimbles, that sold watches and had stations for repair work. I applied, now I have a certificate, and I thought I should have no

problem. I applied to get into those different places, but they wouldn't take me. I couldn't get a job. So, in the meantime, when I entered the post office, I'm working there, I was able to take my trade in my work job. What I'm trying to say, people I worked with gave me their business and that's where I worked it. And I did well.

I had my own little shop. Just like that cupboard back there. But I couldn't get a job with any of them. They only had whites. That is a prestigious job. That is a trade for them.

Unwanted. Bad. I thought by now, having that trade, I could get what I wanted. But I didn't. They turned me down. So, I felt very bad. And it was a good job.

I had a son and a wife by then. My son, Charles G. Wiggins, was born in '44. I got married in 1939 to Martha. (We were married 60 years.).

In some cases, I felt they didn't get me one way; they got me in another. After getting in and letting me be able to get what I wanted. Then when I went to apply they stopped me. School didn't have nothing to do with that. The people who owned the big stores didn't want a Black face out there accepting watches. And so, I started my own little business. I had a little problem with that after starting my own business.

If someone wanted to buy a watch, I wanted to be able to sell it. But the big dealers was in New York and they would send watches to these stores. I tried to get a deal with them, and they wouldn't deal with me 'cause I didn't have a big place. So, I could just repair watches which was good for me. I wanted to draw more in and be able to sell watches but they wouldn't let me. They're not going to let me have it anyhow. So, you got disgusted. I'm not speaking for everybody, but most of us felt that way. Speaking for myself. I was disgusted.

You start to say, they don't want us to get anything worthwhile to make a living at. On our own. I've learned a trade, able to do it, but they don't want me to branch out with it. So, they want to stop me. They let me go with one deal, get it, but then stop me from using it. That's what really happened with my trade. Very little or no change with me.

STILL STRIVING

One of the changes I started to notice, I never went along with it, but the idea was that we were striving to get things that we saw the other people have, that we didn't have. They didn't let us have and we felt that we should have. The entertainment and different things, and going and buying things. I can go back now to the early 30's when downtown Pittsburgh was still segregated. You go to the store, order a sandwich. Even before I went into the Navy, I could go to the store but I couldn't eat it there. I had to go outside. That was in going to fight for the country.

That was a good lesson for me. When I left Pittsburgh, leaving to go to training, I stopped at the place to eat the sandwich, in Pittsburgh. I couldn't eat it up where I bought it. I had to take it outside. And that sort of hit me. Here, I'm going to fight. I don't want to go fight. I don't want to go. But they make you go. Yet, I can't eat my sandwich up here. That opened my eyes to what I might expect to leave Pittsburgh.

I would say after the war, we received things that we wanted to get or have that we didn't have. Then, what to me, it was a difficult thing because what we have now, our own businesses, our own hotels, when it opened up for us on the other side, we lost what we had gaining what we were looking for.

Getting from the other people, they had all the good hotels we could stay at, the stores we could walk in. And we had our own little stores, our own hotels. They went out of business because we got what we were looking for. To me that's a disaster, because we lost. We didn't do anything with what we had then. We lost. The stores we had, our own stores, we lost because we could go to the A&P.

In getting what we won, we lost for our own selves.

The closest I come to MLK was here in Pittsburgh at Warfield and Oakland. They had a baseball place in Oakland and he came out to speak and that's the closest I had come to him other than seeing what happened in later years on TV.

I really didn't have feelings about it. He was just another person trying to speak up on things concerning Black people. It didn't affect me. My lifestyle at the time. I was doing ok, I thought. I wasn't getting what everybody had, but I was eating. I was enjoying myself. I didn't see that I was losing anything. But I did listen to what he was saying.

LIVED TO SEE A BLACK PRESIDENT

I said, "God did it." Without God, we would never have had Barack Obama stepping up at all. I said, "God sent him here for a purpose." A lot of things prove to me his purpose. Being Black as far as I know, he has gone through that whole term without being killed, without being taken out of here. A lot of people didn't want him in there. A lot of people would kill him to get him out. I said "the Caucasians have been killed for being President, starting with Lincoln and down to the list of them. But God blessed Obama. He saved him from having any bloodshed. His family has been saved. All of that was in danger to me and I was just thankful that God watched over him and kept him and he's still here today."

I never thought there'd be a Black president of the United States. Never. The fact is, I was, we had the congressman before president, up in New England. I forget his name. We were lucky to have him in there. I look today, I still say we're blessed to have whatever, how far we have gone, but we haven't gone far enough. We have a long way to go. We have a lot of obstacles in our way. Every day there's obstacles out there. We have to say it's going to take a lot more yet to overcome them. And I think education is number one because we got to know what's going on through education to keep up with what's going on. If you get behind it they're not going to give it to you. I am not one of these smart people to learn all that. But there's youngsters out there who are great. They'll get it. Might not be in my time. But they'll get it.

Black lives do matter because we are human beings and God put us all here. We're all here as a person. And our lives should go like God wants it for everybody. But there are people in this world who don't see it that way. They want it all to themselves and they don't want it mixed. But, I'm seeing even now as we sit here, I think from the little bit I see, it's going to be mixed up now. I mean the law of nature is going to be put in a barrel and we're all going to be mixed. I won't see

it. But it's going to happen sooner or later. But it's happening. To me it's happening. And I credit God with doing all this. I think the devil has had his turn and right now his doors are closed because he's got too many of us down there now. But, I think we're becoming smarter and wiser and we're seeing what has happened to us and what's been done, and I think we can overcome.

WORDS TO OUR YOUTH

I think that the best thing they can do today is keep their head in the book. Learn what's going on. Keep up with what's going on by reading and seeing what's happening so you're not left behind. Once you're left behind it's hard to catch up. Get yourself in that library in that school. Learn what's being said and being done. And so, you can't be said you didn't know how to do it, how to manage it. Those who do know how to manage it, who got the education, they got it through sticking through what they were doing and wanting to do it. That's what we have to do. Don't let them keep you out. Learning, that's what's needed today.

Voting is very important. Even though we might not vote for the ones we want, but vote. That's power. Because somewhere along the line, some people you didn't vote for, you wish you did because they do better without you voting. But you know you got the power that we didn't have 40, 50, 100 years ago. Vote. It don't cost you nothing. All it does is your time. Utilize it, save that time, and go, walk up or have someone take you to vote. And I have. I'm a witness to that. I've voted every year. Even when I was in service. Soon as I come out I was voting. And I voted ever since. When I go to the voting booth today, they look at me, they know me. The reason they know me is because of my age. And they say, here comes Mr. Wiggins. And glad to see me that is to say, cause I'm there. Whether my man wins or loses, I still vote. Get out there and it's not that hard to do. 15, 20 minutes. Vote.

I'M BLESSED, GOD BLESS YOU!

I am very fortunate and happy to say I am very pleased. The good Lord has been with me, and I have reached the age of 101, and I'm very blessed. I say I'm blessed because I haven't been through any tragic things too much, but God has been walking beside me, kept me here. And I pray to Him to keep on watching over me, and so far, I thank Him for everything. I hope that He continues to let me go on being here as I am today.

I hope whoever hears my voice have some feeling that what they hear from me is genuine. I have not added or taken away anything to impress someone. This has been my life.

And I still say God has watched over me and kept me here, and I'm here to talk, and I hope someone hears what I'm saying and takes heed. And I use that expression, govern themselves accordingly. Whatever it might be. If they see how far I've come in life and still here talking at 101, most explained to me they're surprised.

I'm not surprised. I'm pleased and blessed that God's given me the will and the wisdom to say what I've said. And I hope that it goes out and somebody's touched by it. Hope someone will say I understand what He's saying and maybe someone might want to copy after me. Bless you. Do that.

I hope that wherever you are and whatever you're seeing, I've added something to somebody's life. Because I know I've added to my life by giving this message. Each and every day that I'm here every moment.

I hope that my presence being able to be here that I reach out to somebody. Thank you for inviting me into this. God bless all of you and keep up the good work.