



JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH EDITH ATKINSON

July 2, 1985

3637 - 14th Avenue, S.E.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

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Edith Atkinson was born during World War I in Davenport, Iowa, the daughter of W. G. Reed and Julia Jones Reed. She came to Cedar Rapids with her family when she was two years old. As a child she attended Adams School, McKinley Junior High and Senior High School. Her husband, Bob, grew up with her and attended the same classes. Three years after they graduated, they were married. In 1939-40, Mrs. Atkinson attended Coe College. Throughout her youth, for fourteen years, she studied voice, intending to be a concert singer. She learned to sing in German, French, Latin, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Hebrew, and Swahili. After graduating, she had a radio program on WMT Radio for about a year in the 40's. Mrs. Atkinson, who is known for her beautiful singing voice, loves to entertain and educate people by singing Black spirituals. She performs a number of these on the tape for this interview. She and her husband Bob have two children, Bob and Margaret. Mrs. Atkinson was the second Black hired at Collins Radio. During the 1950's she worked for the cause of civil rights in Cedar Rapids. Her interview includes growing-up memories, Black life in Cedar Rapids, family history, and spirituals.

INTERVIEW TOPICS
CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

1--When were you born? Where?

1,12-13--How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?

2,3, 1--What are your parents' names?

13,14,16,21-24--Where did you go to school?

2,14,18,24,37--Are you married or single?

2-3,22-23,27-28--Did you raise a family? How big?

3,7,11,17,21--What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

1. Transportation

2 --Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)

--Trolleys (the Interurban)

--Horses and First Automobiles

--Mud roads and the seedling mile

--Hunter Airport and the first planes

--Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

--Newspapers

17--Radios

--Advertising

--Telephones

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation

--Motion Pictures

--Cedar Rapids Parks

--Dances

--Carnival Week

--Chautauqua

--Community Theater

--Little Gallery

--Symphony Orchestra

--Circus

--Greene's Opera House

--Amusement Parks (Alamo)

--Camps

--Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

14--Iowa Theatre (vaudeville)

2. Famous Characters

--Cherry Sisters

--Grant Wood

--Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)

--Marvin Cone

14-15--famous Black entertainers

34-37--Cecil Reed

3. Lifestyle

- Life before air conditioning
- Winter Activities
- 32--Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
- 19,20--Clothing
 - Toys
 - Saloons/Taverns
 - Farm Life

4. Family Life 2,13-14,19

- Household Help
- Women's Roles
- 33--Childrens' Activities/Behavior
- Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)

5. Ethnic/Minority Life

- 12,13--Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
 - Indians
- 14,15,16-19,20,23,29-30--Segregation of Blacks
- 3,16,24,25-26,28-29,35--Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education 3,5

- 16,22,24 --Cedar Rapids Schools
- 21,22 --Coe College
 - Mount Mercy College
 - Cornell College

2. Government

- City Services
- Streets/Roads
- Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)

3. Medical

- Hospitals
- 16-17--Patient-Doctor Relationship
 - Broken Bones
 - Polio, TB, Debilitating Diseases
- 17--House Calls
 - Home Delivery of Babies

- 4. Business and Economy
 - Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
 - Local Brewing Companies
 - 16-24--Retail Businesses /Department Stores
 - Professions
 - Banking and Finance
 - 20,29--Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
 - Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
 - Farmers Market
 - Mills on Cedar River
 - 18--Buildings Erected
 - Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
 - Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)
 - 25-26,28-29 --Collins Radio Company
- 5. Attitudes/Values 19-23,30-31,33,37
 - Children/Discipline
 - Sex/Petting
 - Charity
 - Divorce
 - 29 --Work
 - 24-25 --Working women, Voting Rights for Women
 - Patriotism (World War I)

D. Historic Events in and Outside the Community

- 1. Catastrophic Events
 - Clifton Hotel Fire (1903)
 - Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
 - Bank Closings (1933)
 - Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
 - Public Library Murder(1921)
- 2. National Historic Events
 - Womens' Suffrage
 - 1--World War I
 - Roaring 20's
 - Prohibition
 - 18--Great Depression
 - 2,7--Civil War, underground railroad
 - 3-4--Importation of Black slaves to American Colonies
 - 4-3,11--Slavery and music

Interview with Edith Atkinson
Date of Interview: July 2, 1985
Transcriber: Leslie Onthank

This is Edith Atkinson of 3637 - 14th Avenue, S.E., Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on July 2, 1985, giving a little history and background of her family.

My father's father, John Reed, was half Irish and half Black. His complexion was about the same as a white person. He lived to be 114 years old. He married Francine Phyllis Butcher, half Indian and half Black, daughter of Chief John Butcher of the Blackfoot Indian Tribe based in Missouri.

My mother's father, Henry Jones, was born on the Island of Madagascar, off the southern coast of Africa. He was half Spanish and half Africian, very dark complexioned. He married Sarah Mitchell, who was part French, part Indian, and part Black. She lived 99 years.

My parents and seven children were all born in Collinsville, Illinois, a small town close to St. Louis, Missouri. During World War I the family moved to Davenport, Iowa, where my father worked across the river at the Rock Island Arsenal for the war effort and where I was born at the close of the war, making four boys and four girls. My father started working for the railroad and he worked in Omaha, Estherville, and finally moved to Cedar Rapids when I was about two years old.

I didn't get to know any of my grandparents very well, except Grandma Sarah. We didn't have transportation in those days like we have now. Most families now

have one or two cars. We went by train to visit the grandparents perhaps once a year.

Though my grandparents were old enough to have been slaves, they were fortunate enough to be settled in the North. My great-grandmother, however, was a slave who had her children sold away from her because of disobedience to the master. After the slaves were freed, she was reunited with them.

After the death of her husband, my grandmother was remarried to Henry Lee, the nephew of General Robert E. Lee, who, after escaping from slavery, fought in the Civil War.

I have had many people ask, "Wouldn't it be simpler if you were all the same color?" Well, think about it. We all once were the same color when we arrived in this country, but because of the greed of some of the masters who picked out the healthy, strong women and had children by them, thus making more slaves to sell, we began to be all shades of brown from very light to very dark.

My grandmother came to visit us for several months each year. She kept busy darning socks, patching clothes, making patchwork quilts. And while she worked, she sang. And I learned many of these hymns and spirituals I sing now from her.

I attended Adams School, McKinley Junior and Senior High School. My husband, Bob, was in the same classes and about three years after we were graduated, we were married. My grandmother attended the wedding at the age of 95 and she lived to see our son, Bob II, before she died at 99.

Bob II is now a professor at Florida A. & M. University in Tallahassee. Four years later we had a daughter, Mary, who now is employed at Rockwell in Personnel.

I studied voice for about fourteen years, intending to be a concert singer. I learned to sing in German, French, Latin, Italian, Spanish, Czech, and I've added just recently Hebrew and Swahili.

As I was attending high school in my junior year, I wanted to take typing and shorthand. My teacher, Ms. Griffin, advised me not to take it because I could not get a job in this area. My mother, however, told me to learn anything I could because if I had it in the head, no one could ever take it from me.

Some sixteen years after I graduated from school, I went to work at Rockwell as a typist typing Spanish books. Later I became an editor of tech books and engineering reports, bids and proposals. I worked at Rockwell for 28 years before retiring in 1981.

Over the years, there was not much demand for classical music and so for many years I've given such programs as these Negro spirituals I now do, sharing my heritage and background with others.

In 1690, twenty Africian laborers were brought to Jamestown, Virginia, by a captain of a Dutch ship. They were left as indentured servants. Do you know what "indentured servant" means? These people had to work to pay for the

transportation and clothes, food, etc. for an agreed amount of time and then were freed. Some became landowners and even slaveholders later. This was the beginning of the Africian slave trade in the American Colonies.

The other Blacks that followed later came from various localities. They did not speak the same language. Here in America they were suddenly cut off from their native culture, scattered without regard to their old tribal relations, having to adjust to a completely alien civilization, having to learn a strange language, and moreover, held under an increasingly harsh system of slavery. Yet it was from these people that this mass of noble music sprang. This music that is America's only folk music.

The Blacks seized on religion, a religion that implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions. The Old Testament stories caught on and fixed the imagination of these people. And they sang their listeners into a firm faith that as God saved Daniel in the lion's den, so he would save them. As God preserved the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, so he would preserve them. As God delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt, so he would deliver them.

As the years go by and I understand more about this music and its origin, the miracle of its production strikes me with increasing wonder. Melody had a relatively limited role in African music and harmony still less. But in rhythm, Africian music is beyond comparison with any other music in the world.

In all authentic American Negro music, the rhythms may be divided roughly into two classes -- rhythms based on the swinging of the head and body and rhythms based on the clapping of hands and tapping of feet. It is difficult, if not impossible, to sing these songs sitting or standing still and at the same time capture the spontaneous swing.

The earlier spirituals were built upon the form so common to African songs, leading lines and response. It would be safe to say that the bulk of these spirituals are cast in this simple form. An example is "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot".

(Singing)

"Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan and what did I see? Comin' for to carry me home.
A band of angels a comin' after me, comin' for to carry me home.

Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home."

(End of singing)

This is why, in kindergarten, children are given triangles, cymbals--to establish rhythms. We use rhythm in running, in swimming, in dancing, jumping hurdles. We must have that rhythm. So this is why we start the children as early as we do.

As the American Negro went a step beyond his original African music in the development of melody and harmony, he also went a step beyond in the development form. In this class of songs, the chorus becomes the most important part, dominating the whole song and coming first. Such a song is the well-known "Steal Away". We're going to use another of that type, "Little David Play On Your Harp".

(Singing)

"Little David play on your harp, hallelu, hallelu.
Little David play on your harp, hallelu.

Little David was a shepherd boy.
He killed Goliath and he shouted for joy.

Little David play on your harp, hallelu, hallelu.
Little David play on your harp, hallelu.

Old Josuha was the son of Nun.
He never quit till the work was done.

Little David play on your harp, hallelu, hallelu.
Little David play on your harp, hallelu."

(End singing)

The rhythm of these songs can be felt, especially when these people sang as they worked. The phrasing in this next song is an example. I know many of you have seen African safaris on TV and you notice that when the lead person is passing the equipment or boxes along to the rest of the group, they do it in rhythm. Not so much in melody, but in rhythm. At the end of each phrase you will hear "heh" to denote chopping of cotton or the weeding of garden, or whatever the slave had to be doing at that time.

(Singing)

"I want Jesus (heh) to walk with me (heh).
I want Jesus (heh) to walk with me (heh).
All along my (heh) pilgrim journey (heh).
Lord I want Jesus (heh) to walk with me (heh)."

(End singing)

One noted musicologist has suggested that Beethoven would have delighted in Negro spirituals and Brahms would have borrowed them as Dvorzak did when he wrote "The New World Symphony". A considerable portion of Bizet's opera "Carmon" is based on African rhythm, also.

Now there were many whites who thought the system of slavery was very unfair. Thus, the "underground railroad" existed here in Iowa for about ten years before the Civil War. The term "underground railroad" was taken from a southern slaveowner who said, "The Negroes escape to Canada as easily as if they traveled on a railroad that runs beneath the ground."

Freedom from slavery and freedom from life itself were often synonymous in thought. Hence, we have:

(Singing)

"Get on board little chil'n,
Get on board little chil'n,
Get on board little chil'n,
There's room for many a more.

The gospel train am a comin'.
I hear it just at hand.
I hear the car wheels rumblin'
And rolling through the land.

Well get on board little chil'n,
Get on board little chil'n,
Get on board little chil'n,
There's room for many a more.

I hear the train a comin'.
She's comin' round the curve.
She's loosened all her steamin' brakes
And strain'n every nerve.

Well get on board little chil'n,
Get on board little chil'n,
Get on board little chil'n,
There's room for many a more."

(End singing)

And before I go further, there's a song I always include in any spiritual program I'm singing, "A City Called Heaven", that I learned from my grandmother.

(Singing)

"I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow.
I'm tossed in this wide world alone.
No hope have I for tomorrow.
I've started to make Heaven my home.
Sometimes I am tossed and driven, Lord.
Sometimes I don't know where to roam.
But I've heard of a city called Heaven.
I've started to make it my home.

My mother has reached that pure glory.
My father's still walking in sin.
My brothers and sisters won't own me
Because I am tryin' to get in.
Sometimes I am tossed and driven, Lord.
Sometimes I don't know where to roam.
But I've heard of a city called Heaven.
I've started to make it my home."

(End singing)

Negro dialect in America is the result of the effort of the slaves to establish a medium of communication between himself and his master and other slaves.

Hence, the original African languages became absolutely lost. When we say "da" in these songs, it's the. "Dat" is that. "Dis" is this. "Dare" is there.

Not all spirituals are by any means used in religious services. Some were sung purely for the joy of singing. These songs were called jubilee songs. Still based on Bible stories, they were lively and joyous with a reference to future happiness.

(Singing)

"Oh, I'll be ready, I'll be re-a-dy,
Yes, good Lord, I'll be ready when the great day come.
I'll be ready, I'll be re-a-dy,
Yes, good Lord, I'll be ready when the great day come.

You talk about Jerusalem mornin'. Yes, good Lord.
You talk about Jerusalem mornin'. Yes, good Lord.

Brother, I do believe without a doubt
 That a Christian's got a right to shout.
 Religion's turned me inside out.
 Put on your long white robe and your starry crown,
 Be ready when the great day comes.

Oh, I'll be ready, I'll be re-a-dy,
 Yes, good Lord, I'll be ready when the great day come.
 I'll be ready, I'll be re-a-dy,
 Yes, good Lord, I'll be ready when the great day come.

Didn't the Good Book say that Kane kill Abel?
 Yes, good Lord.
 Didn't the Good Book say that Kane kill Abel?
 Yes, good Lord.
 He hit him on the head wit a table leg
 And I believed a my soul it killed him dead.
 Put on your long white robe and your starry crown,
 Be ready when the great day come.

Oh, I'll be ready, I'll be re-a-dy,
 Yes, good Lord, I'll be ready when the great day come.
 I'll be ready, I'll be re-a-dy,
 Yes, good Lord, I'll be ready when the great day come."

(End singing)

My grandchildren like to sing this song with me. Easy to learn because it's very
 repetitious.

(Singing)

"Wade in the water.
 Wade in the water, children.
 Wade in the water.
 God's goin' to trouble the water.

See that band all dressed in red.
 God's goin' trouble the water.
 It looks like the band that Moses lead.
 God's goin' trouble the water.

Oh, wade in the water.
 Wade in the water, children.
 Wade in the water.
 God's goin' to trouble the water."

(End singing)

Harry T. Burley was the first to arrange and perform spirituals in the style of the European art song for solo voice. Many concert singers developed the tradition of closing their recitals with a group of spirituals. Singers like Marian Anderson, Rollin Hayes, Leontyne Price, and Iowa's own Simon Estes. And recently we had a young singer, Jennifer Jones, on the Community Concert who ended her program with a group of spirituals.

(Singing)

"Sweet Little Jesus Boy born long time ago.
Sweet Little Holy Child didn't know who you was.
Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lord,
To take our sins away.
Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see.
We didn't know who you was.

Long time ago you was born.
Born in a manger low, sweet Little Jesus Boy.
The world treat you mean, Lord.
Treat me mean, too.
But dat's how things is down here.
We don't know who you is.

You done told us how we is a tryin'.
Master, you done showed us how even when you's dyin'.
Just seem like we can't do right.
Look how we treated you.
But please, sir, forgive us, Lord.
We don' know who you was.

Sweet Little Jesus Boy born long time ago.
Sweet Little Holy Child
And we didn't know who you was."

(End Singing)

During the '50's and '60's, many professionals began to tour the country singing the more modern gospel music. Many of these groups produced lead singers who later became famous in the popular music fields, such as Dionne Warwick, Andre Crouch, Mahaila Jackson, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight. It has found it's way into the night clubs of Las Vegas, the Newport Jazz Festival, New York's Phil-

harmonic and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Symphony Hall at Boston, Academy of Music in Philadelphia, London, Paris, Munich, Berlin—all have received gospel music with open arms.

Modern gospel music expresses one of the central experiences of Black America. It is part of the Black heritage and, therefore, its history should be taught, preserved, and repeated.

(Singing & Piano)

"We are our Heavenly Father's children.
And we all know that he loves us one and all.
Yet there are times when we find we answer
Another's voice and call.
If we are willing, He will teach us
His voice only to obey no matter when.
And He knows, yes He knows,
Just how much we can bear.

Although the load gets heavy,
You're never left, yes, alone to bear it all.
Ask for the strength and keep on toiling
Though the tear drops fall.
You have the joy of this assurance
The Heavenly Father he will always answer prayer.
And He knows, yes, He knows,
How much we can bear."

(End Singing)

I have given this program at Prairie Junior High School for National Education Week and Black History Month. However, I like to start all of my spiritual programs with this well-known poem by James Weldon Johnson called "A Tribute To Unknown Bards" because I think it's so fitting.

"Oh, black and unknown bards of long ago
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire.
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
the power and beauty of the minstrels liar.

Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes.
 Who first from out the still watch lone and long
 feeling the ancient faith of profits raise within
 his dark kept soul burst into song.
 Heart of what slave poured out such melody as "Steal
 Away To Jesus".
 On its strains his spirit must have nightly floated
 free, though still about his hands he felt his chains.
 Who heard great Jordon roll.
 And who was he that breathed that comforting melodic sigh
 "Nobody knows the trouble I see".
 What merely living clod, what captive thing could up
 toward God through all its darkness grope
 And find within its deadened heart to sing these songs
 of sorrow, love, and faith, and hope.
 How did it catch that subtle undertone, that note and
 music heard not with the ears.
 How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown which stirs
 the soul or melts the heart to tears.
 Not that great German Master and his dream of harmonies
 that thundered amongst the stars at the Creation ever
 heard a theme nobler than "Go down Moses." Mark its bars.
 How like a might trumpet call they stir the blood.
 Such are the notes that men have sung going to
 valorous deeds.
 Such tones there were, that helped make history when time
 was young.
 There was a wide, wide wonder in it all
 That from degraded rest and serval toil
 The fiery spirit of the seer should call these simple
 children of the sun and soil.
 Oh black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed
 You, you alone of all the long, long line of those
 who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed
 Have stretched out upward seeking the Divine.
 You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings
 No chant of bloody war
 No exalting paeon of arms one triumphants
 But your humble strings you touched in cord with
 music empyrion.
 You sang far better than you knew.
 The songs that for your listeners hungry hearts sufficed
 still live.
 But more than this to you belongs.
 You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ."

When we first moved to Cedar Rapids, there were only about 600 blacks in the
 entire city. We lived in the southeast side on 5th Street between 9th and 10th

Avenues. I started graded school at old Adam School on the corner of 5th Street and 7th Avenue. There were only three black children in that school. No incidents of any kind; we had a good relationship. I remember when we had picnics at the end of the school year. My mother was a very good cook and she always sent a hugh box of all kinds of goodies. The teachers all used to gather around me to help eat my food because we'd have fried chicken and hot rolls and potato salad and it was all just real yummy good and enough for everybody in the class usually.

Then we moved to 711 10th Avenue, S.E. I think I was ten years old when we moved there. It was in a Czech settlement and I wish I had learned a little bit more about the Czech language while I was there because we made some very good friends. The house was not anything to look at. We wondered why my mom and dad wanted to buy it. But my mom said with all of the hands we have here, she can give each one of us a paint brush and we would be able to make this house something special. And it was eight rooms, which would accommodate a large family. So we all got busy with wallpaper and paint and varnish and scrubbing rugs and reupholstering furniture and we finally ended up with a fairly nice looking home.

My mother loved to do yard work. She had what is commonly known as a "green thumb". And one day when she was out making barbequed ribs in the back, some of the neighbors came, when they smelled how good it smelled, came to find out what she was cooking. And this sort of introduced an exchange of recipes. And when they found out she loved flowers, they began to bring slips of hedges and flowers of various descriptions. And soon we had a lovely lawn and flower gar-

den in the back and a hedge in the front--all from slips that the neighbors had brought.

I lived there at that house until I was married, at 21, some years later. I attended McKinley High School and at the age of about 15, during the time that they were having vaudeville shows here at the Iowa Theater. Mr. Goreman was the manager there then. In those days, of course, black people didn't stay at hotels and didn't eat at restaurants. So every time there was a black show coming here, Mr. Goreman would call my mother and Mrs. Nina Miller Bragg and find out where these people could stay. We have had the Mills Brothers at our house, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway. We have become acquainted with Louis Armstrong, Bill Bojangles Robinson. They all stayed within a radius of two or three blocks from our home or in our homes. My mother often fixed late dinners for them because they didn't have anywhere to eat after they performed, for which we got comps for the show. We didn't have to pay to get in to see the show. So this was quite thrilling, also. Another one, Ella Fitzgerald. She was quite young when she came, but we were acquainted with her. She stayed at one of our homes, also.

Cedar Rapids seemed to be a springboard for all of these entertainers to become so much better known. The Nate King Cole Trio stayed around the corner from us. And we went over there one day and Nate King Cole was telling us that he used to play organ in his father's church. His father was a minister. And he began to jazz up the songs a little bit much so the father says, "We can't have this, boy. You're going to have to go into another area."

Well, when they sang here I used to relieve them two hours and their supper hour. And then when they left here and went to Chicago, pretty soon they were in movies and in big time out in California.

I'm reminded of one time when the Mills Brothers were staying at our home and my mother told them they could have the whole upstairs with the exception of one bedroom where her baby and her granddaughter were staying. And that night we were peeking, my niece and I were peeking out the crack of the door and watched the fellas in their undershorts playing tag back and forth between the rooms. And their father told them, "You boys should not do that." Well the next day, I was going to McKinley at the time, I was about 16 years old. The next day I came home for lunch and my mother took me and she says, "I want you to meet my baby." You should have seen those fellas looking at each other and the father shook his finger and said, "I told you boys you shouldn't have been up there running around in your undershorts!"

And then, at this time also, we were given free passes to go see these shows. And in those days, black folks couldn't sit anywhere they wanted to. It was either in the tenth row from the front on the main floor or up in the upper balcony on the second floor. This was all during the '30's.

Now we also had a dance team. My mother did not approve of show business, but because both my brothers were older than I, I was allowed to go with them. So we formed a dance team called the Three Gold Flashes. My oldest brother, Wally, was a tailor and he got tuxedos and did the seams in gold and the lapels in gold and made gold blouses for us with mandarin collar and puff sleeves. We

went with the Dempsey Jones Group. They did country western music and then we did the other part. We danced and I sang. We went to almost every little town in Iowa and some in Minnesota for celebrations and such. This was good for us. We got a good cross-section of what rural America was like in those days. And many of those people had never seen black folks and we got treated very well, however.

Now, I graduated in the upper 10% of my class from McKinley and upon graduation I thought, well, I'll get a job like some of the rest of the girls. So I applied at Morris Sanford for a salesperson's job. And they told me they didn't have anything in the stock room. I applied at a number of other places and got the same kind of information. In the department stores here, Martins had a black elevator operator, Mrs. Harrison, but that's all. And Armstrongs had an elevator operator and then later they had the first saleswomen, I believe, was Jackie Carr on the second floor. They had girls in the stock room, but no one was hiring black people at that time except as maids or cooks or butlers or chauffeurs or something like that.

Now we did have some professional people. There was a dentist, Dr. William Beshears, who had an office in the Paramount Theater Building above the Coney Island. He had graduated from the University of Iowa and he had quite a flourishing practice because most black people went to him because we were discouraged from some of the others. Even as far as 1952, I went to a dentist that my boss recommended when I was working at Collins and that man let me know that he didn't care to have me come back, that some of his patients would not come to him if they knew he was performing repairs on black mouths. So I

didn't go back to him anymore. And he said he was sorry but he had to pay for his equipment.

All the doctors were fine, all the medical doctors were always fine. In those days they came to your house and we never had any difficulty with doctors. And many people were poor and they charged you accordingly. My husband tells of, he was born here in Cedar Rapids, and he tells of Old Dr. Vorpahl who operated on his grandmother and they didn't have money to pay. And he said to his grandfather, "Hank, give me that old repeater rifle you have up there and we'll call it square." So we had some really kind people in those days, also.

Now we had one black mortician first, was Montrose Johnson, who used to embalm the bodies up at Braddy's Funeral Home. But then they showed them in your home. We could not buy lots in, for instance, Cedar Memorial. Always in Linwood Cemetery and Oakhill Cemetery, but not in Cedar Memorial. The second black undertaker here was George Rice, who had his own funeral home on the corner of 8th Avenue and 8th Street. And once he moved again to 6th Street across the alley from Bethel AME Church.

Now in the '40's, after graduation I had a radio program on WMT radio every Thursday night at 9:30 with Maureen Canovan, the studio organist. It was a request program advertising the Mayflower Transfer Service. Joe Long was the president of that company. And we were on for about a year.

Now at church, we attended the Bethel AME Church, and most of the members came from the border states around Iowa. When we first moved to Cedar

Rapids, Bethel Church was a little frame church with long stained glass windows and a steeple on top. In the '30's they decided to build a church and we didn't have many male members of the church, mostly women. They said it couldn't be done because it was during the Depression years. My mother was a very avid church goer, very zealous in her church work. She said anything you set your mind to, you have to believe in yourself and you can do it. And so those ladies set about giving dinners and giving programs and she costumed many of the programs we gave from second-hand stores and rummage sales. She'd make over clothes for all the characters in the plays we gave. We gave a minstrel show which we did for the Shrine Temple and for many other organizations in town and they would donate money to the church for this. We had quite a bit of musical talent, so we didn't have much trouble putting together a show.

Let's see, the blacks lived in a certain area in those days. My first public appearance, at seven years old, was at the Methodist Church in Kenwood. Whenever we went to a white church, we realized that we were visitors. We were not asked to join. I sang many times at St. Paul's Church, at First Presbyterian Church, at most of the older churches in Cedar Rapids, but I always knew I was a visitor. I think the first church that had black members in Cedar Rapids was the Immaculate Conception Church.

When I was married in 1940, we were married in Bethel AME Church. And the church was rather small for the amount of people that were invited, but we had our reception at the CSPA Hall. Now in later years, probably in the late '50's or early '60's, my niece, Carol Reed, got married at Huss Memorial Presbyterian Church. We had a very good relationship with the pastor there and our church,

we kids were supposed to learn something of value besides playing all the time. At the same time they taught us many scriptures from the Bible and we always had our cookies and lemonade.

I enjoyed singing at Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church. All through my younger years I sang in their choir sometime and when they had large programs, I was asked to sing solos there.

My mother was a charter member of the NAACP and a very hard worker in this organization. When the Ellis Park swimming pool was built, they did not want to allow blacks to be--to come out there and swim. And she and Viola Gibson and attorney S. Joe Brown, a black attorney from Des Moines, were in there working on this so that we might have an opportunity to swim in any swimming pool that was built and paid for by public funds.

My mother also operated a couple of restaurants in the city when I was a kid. Where Al's Alley is down there on 3rd Street, she used to have a little restaurant there that served breakfasts and short orders and so on. And then later, she and Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Smith operated a restaurant on the corner of 4th Avenue and 6th Street during the time that my brothers and sisters were going to Old Washington High School. She also cooked at the Union Depot on 4th Street but finally decided that cooking for occasional parties was about all she could handle and still run her home efficiently. Now she made all of our clothes for both the boys and the girls. I don't think that I ever had anything out of a store until I was about eighteen years old.

and there was adequate room then for a nice crowd of people and a reception downstairs. Later our daughter got married there, also.

We were able to rent these various halls throughout the city for special events such as church conferences and weddings or receptions or dances or whatever. The Oddfellows Hall, which was downtown above the Dows Building, CSPS Hall on the south end on 3rd Street, S.E., CCBJ Hall, and there used to be a ball-room across from the old bus depot down on 4th Avenue and upstairs there was a hall and the lower floor I think was delegated to cars, new cars and used cars and so on. But we used to have a church conference down there at that building. And while our church was being rebuilt again, we had our meetings down there. The Y.W.C.A. also would let us have our meetings there.

END OF SIDE ONE

My mother believed that all of her children should learn to wash, iron, cook, and clean. Her philosophy was that you never know when any of these things would be needed. My father's philosophy was be responsible, honest, truthful, and if you have a job, do it to the best of your ability and be on time. During all the years that we were at home, we all attended the Bethel AME Church services together and we were never allowed to be late for any services.

My mother also visited other churches in the area and I always accompanied her because I enjoyed the music. We would go up on Oak Hill to Christ Sanctified Holy Church. Viola Gibson was a prominent member there and I belonged to a sewing circle there and learned to hem stitch handkerchiefs and so on because

Later, the things she insisted that her children learned were used. My older brother, Wally, who studied dancing in New York became an instructor. He used to do some instruction at the Jane Boyd Community House. He was also a cook, a milliner, a tailor. And Jim and Cecil were also cooks, specializing in barbecued ribs. And Francis and Lulu catered many large affairs. Francis, who lives now in Des Moines, later went into the field of quilting. She designed and taught quilting there and she crocheted articles of apparel, etc. Cecil went into the floor refinishing business and later into the political field. And, of course, I was kind of in the music field intending to be a concert singer when I was young but I decided that that was too much like a job. I enjoy singing and I wanted to just enjoy it, so I used it as a choir director of all the choirs at Bethel AME Church for about thirty years. And then I sang throughout the city and just really enjoyed that part of my life.

I went to Coe College in 1939 and 1940 and I sang in the acappella choir under Paul Ray and I sang in the vesper choir and I took choral theory and harmony from Andrea Johanssen. I also studied Bible under Professor Hudson and this helped me to be able to teach Sunday School at my own church.

I sang summers at the First Congregational Church under the direction of Paul Anthony. All of the young people who were members of the Coe's acappella choir could come and sing on Sunday without having rehearsed because we were supposed to be good enough to sing their hymns without rehearsing with them. So I'd sing there in the summertime while I was going to school.

I studied voice with Ralph Leo for about fourteen years. He used to have a studio above the old Kresge Building downtown on 2nd Street and 1st Avenue. He taught me to sing in Italian, Spanish, German, Latin, French (I already had taken French in school but I mean we perfected a little bit of the pronunciation and so on). Very, very wonderful man. He was an organist at the Elks Club at that time and I remember during the '40's when I had my first child we had had quite a bit of illness in the family and were just down to no money. And he was behind the idea of giving us a room free that the Elks Club endowed there at Mercy Hospital without letting us know who it was or anything. It was just a kind thing that he did. And then during this same time he continued to give me lessons though I couldn't afford to pay for them. And they were only \$2.50 for a half hour. But he continued and told me not to worry about the cost at all.

Then when I went to Coe, I was in the aceppalla choir under Professor Paul Ray and Eleanor Taylor was the organist. I have since sung with Eleanor Taylor at the Presbyterian Church and I understand that she's the organist for the Temple Judah Choir. And I hope one of these days I'll be able to sing a couple of Hebrew songs with her accompanying me because I have studied a couple of those now.

After our children were born and of school age, they went to Tyler School. And we both were members of the Tyler PTA, which I became unit president and later treasurer of the PTA Council of the City of Cedar Rapids. We went to all the school functions and tried to prepare our children to make good citizens. It's too bad that you have to raise children to know that they will meet people who will not always accept them, but we had to tell them this. They didn't be-

lieve us until abruptly they came up against. . . Bob was up playing with a boy and his father came home and said, "Get him away from here. I don't want you to play with that kind of person." He came home and asked me what was wrong with him. And I said, "Not a thing, but let's face it, there are people who are prejudiced so you have to accept them and go on. Don't let it bother you. You can rise above it because you're as good as anyone else and you have to make your mark in this world, though." And our kids, we encouraged them to be the best that they could be that they tried because in those days you had to be better than the other fella that was of a different race because you didn't get a break unless you were. This was good in a sense because they had to work harder.

Then our son, Bob, ended up being an A student. He was elected governor of Boys State and he was in the honor society. And our daughter, while she was not as gifted scholastically, she was in a lot of things. She could do things with her hands. Good in ceramics and good at organization. And she helped with my sister during her school years when my sister was doing catering work. She would go along with her. So she got so that she could organize huge parties of 400 or 500 people and know how much to cook for them and how to do it and get it all ready on time and all that sort of thing. So they each had their little nitch they fit into.

My husband was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Robert Atkinson, Sr. His grandparents, however, were born in. . . came from Buxton, not born in Buxton, but came from Buxton, Iowa, here and lived in Cedar Rapids about 60 years. There was a community of people from Buxton here and in Waterloo and in Des Moines

and generally in the Midwest. Buxton, Iowa, is a southern Iowa community, a coal mining community, where most of the employment was coal mining. It was a small community where everyone knew everyone else. Consequently, when they moved to these various places, they still would get together once a year and have this big picnic and talk over old times. When I sang with Mrs. Nina Miller Bragg, who was from Buxton, consequently all these people wherever we sang in these various towns around Cedar Rapids knew her. And we just really had a time. We sang gospel music at churches for. . . we didn't charge, but they would usually take up an offering and pay our expenses. We sang together for about 30 years.

I graduated from McKinley High School in 1937 and went out to get a job. I couldn't get any job to tie me over, I was going to go to college and I wanted to save some money. I couldn't get a job in any of the places where my fellow classmates were getting jobs. Finally, I ended up with a job at the old State Theater on Third Avenue and Fourth Street as a maid sweeping up tickets and popcorn and keeping tissue and taking care of the ladies room. However, when I did attend Coe, this gave me time to study when I was there because it didn't keep me busy all the time. Five dollars a week was my salary, but in those days five dollars a week did a lot toward getting your clothes and your books. That was the day when the Bailey Boot Shop was an expensive shoe store and five dollars was a lovely pair of shoes.

Then I got married in 1940, and my husband was of the old school. He didn't believe in women working. And not many of the women were working outside the home. But in 1952, while he made a fairly good living working at the Penick

and Ford Company, we had some debts--outstanding debts--from illnesses and so on, and so I asked, "Now wouldn't it be all right if I went to work?" "Well," he said, "if you don't have to work in a factory, it might be all right." So I decided to apply at then the Collins Radio Company, which is now Rockwell Collins. I hadn't typed for 16 years, not any speed typing. And I remember that the employment office was on Third Avenue and Third Street above where American Federal is now. I took a typing test on a standard machine; not an electric machine. I was about 33 and these young girls were around me just typing away and I was plodding along at a slow speed and I thought, "Oh, my goodness, I'll never make this!" Well, I didn't pass the typing test the first time around but she told me that because all of my other scores were high, she would give me another chance at the typing test--to go home and practice for another week. I did that and I went back and took the typing test and they sent it out to the Personnel Department at Collins. My recommendations had come in, my references, and she said, "Well, they were very good and my other tests were very good." And I said, "What was the typing score?" And she says, "We won't talk about that! But I'm going to send you down to the Third Street building under Millie Larr." And that's when I started my stint at Collins as a typist. I was the second black hired in the office at Collins. The first one was Hattie Martin, who was a chemist.

I was a typist for seven years there. Because I had a language background, they bought a typewriter that had the Spanish characters and accent marks, and I typed Spanish books for a South American group that had bought equipment from us. And I proofed them at night with the head of the Language Department here. And then later, when they decided that the engineers could read English

and speak English enough so that we wouldn't have to do this any longer, I did straight typing for the balance of that seven years. And then when they had a vacancy in the Editorial Department, I approached them and asked them if they had a vacancy, would they consider me? Well, the requirement was that you have three years college. I hadn't had but a year and a half, but I told them that with seven years of experience of typing Collins books, whoever, even if they had a masters degree in English, they only had one year of grammar just like I did. Besides having English grammar, I had French grammar and German grammar. And I knew my grammar pretty well and I wasn't going to take a back seat to anybody. So he says, "Well, we'll consider you if this girl quits."

So in about three months, she left and I thought well, they had forgotten all about me. So he called me into the office one day and asked me was I still interested. So I got the job as editor with a three months trial period to see whether or not I still enjoyed it. And I was an editor from then until about five years before I retired in 1981, at which time he had me take over the scheduling. I scheduled all the work to the department and saw to it that it got out on the required date. Whenever he was absent, I acted as supervisor for the entire department. I had thirty girls working under me. I took over signing time-cards and authorizing overtime whenever it was necessary.

I had one of the biggest retirement parties in 1981 that I've ever seen there in all the years I worked there. They really rolled out the red carpet for me. This was a good place to work, and I remember that when our son was going to Iowa State studying engineering, the summers he came back to Collins to work. He worked as a procedure writer. And he came up to check out how much money I

was making and he was making fifteen cents more an hour than I was. And this tickled him so much because he was only about nineteen years old at the time. Later, I thought perhaps he might come back to Collins and be an engineer. But no, he graduated from Iowa State in 1965 and he became an engineer at the light company for a year before he went into service.

Later, after Bob graduated and worked for the light company, he went to service for three years and went to Viet Nam and he ended up a first lieutenant in the Army Signal Corps. After he came back, he and his wife and daughter went to St. Louis, Missouri, where he attended Washington University and got a Masters Degree in Business Administration. And after that he moved to Pittsburgh, where he attended Carnegie Melon and got his Ph.D. in Industrial Management. He also had a masters in Computer Science. He taught at the University of Illinois in Champaign for about ten years before he got a better offer for a school in Tallahassee, Florida A. & M. University, where he is teaching now for two years. He also has a computer company, Applied Science Information Systems, Inc. Bob has four children. A daughter who is now 22 and a junior in college and a straight A student. She is majoring in Computer Science and minoring in Accounting. He has a boy, Robert III, who is fourteen, and two daughters, Heather, who is nine, and Robin, who is eight.

Our daughter, Mary, is working at Rockwell in the Human Resources in Personnel. She has a son, ten, and a daughter, seven.

Bob has not dropped his musical ability. He had music lessons when he was a youngster. And when my husband gave me a Spinet organ for my Christmas pre-

sent one year, he said, "Why'd you get an organ? Why didn't you get a piano?" But after that, he got acquainted with the organ and I could hardly pry him loose from it. And when he got old enough to buy something, he bought a Hammond organ with a full manual in the bass section and has made his living partially with this. When he was attending school, he always had a combo in the college towns where he was. And when he went to service, on his time off he had a combo. He said the servicemen didn't have any place to go, so, and you can always pick up some musicians, so he had a combo there also. He has played at each town he has either gone to school in or is working in. He has taken charge of the Music Department and in Tallahassee now he is the Minister of Music at the Bethel Church there. And he still plays his own organ. He transports it back and forth. The church has been just recently rebuilt and they haven't purchased an organ yet, so they're using his.

Now, when I started working at Rockwell, I worked at the Third Street building til 1963, which was about nine years--ten years. Then, at the Building 120, which was then called the Engineering Building, they decided to spread our department and move half out there. We were to be special projects. And they called me in and asked me would I go as one of the editors. Well, I really didn't want to move way out there. It was going to be harder to get to work. I was within walking distance downtown. And he knew just the words to say to convince me. "There have never been any black people working out there. You get along well with people. You don't mind answering questions when they're asked of you. We wanted to have you be a first." And that changed my mind about whatever I was thinking otherwise. I'd find a way to get out there. So then I was the first black working in Building 120. And from then on, more and more

were hired in the office. There already had been a great number on the lines, in the assembly line, production workers. But from then on, they began to hire more blacks in the office. And then in later years, they began to hire more professionals: engineers and supervisory capacity and so on.

We taught our children that they have to aim high to get any place. So our son went on to be a college--now, we didn't ever think he'd be a teacher. We thought he'd be a musician. Well, he decided to do this as a hobby on the side and then went on into teaching. He enjoys working with young people.

Mary enjoys working with people period. So she's in a good spot there at Rockwell. Now, she has taken programming at Kirkwood and one of these days when Bob's company is flourishing a bit better, she'll probably be working for him doing programming in his computer business. And if I'm still able to see and do things, maybe I'll edit some books for him.

During my working years in the '50's, we suddenly discovered through the Junior N.A.A.C.P. here, that we had civil rights--that we should be allowed to eat in public eating places and stay in hotels and so on throughout the city. Earl Carr was the director of the Junior N.A.A.C.P., who helped to bring it about. One day, as I worked at Collins, some of the girls I had told that we weren't allowed to eat in various places downtown, and we went over to the Divarr Restaurant on Second Avenue at that time, to eat. And that was the first time I had ever eaten in a restaurant downtown, though I had been here ever since I was two, and I was about 35 then. Then later we went to Ross' Steak House, which was on the corner of Third Avenue and Third Street. I went to school

with Don Ross but I wasn't allowed to eat in his restaurant until we found out that we had the right to do it. And then many of us went from place to place eating and so on. We had to remind people that we are citizens. We went, now there was no occasion for me to stay at a hotel here in Cedar Rapids, but friends of ours would come in then and we began to use hotels for conferences and so on. We began to go to theaters and be able to sit anywhere we liked. And that was started in about the '50's. And then, of course, in surrounding states it took a little longer. It was in the '60's that they began to have demonstrations and so on so that this would happen all through the United States. Housing opened up a bit by '65, but there were still demonstrations and so on.

When we moved at our present location here on Fourteenth Avenue, one of our neighbors told us later that they were one of the ones who got up a petition to keep us out of there because people had spread rumors around that, you know, and when I say this I hope people will stop putting everyone of a race into one nitch. We're not all alike. You're not all alike. Whoever reads this, they're not all alike. I don't care what race or nationality they come from. And I told the people this when they finally found out that we were not going to kill our grass and throw watermelon rinds on the front lawn, or pork chop bones on the front lawn, and this is what some of them thought, I think, because they had driven by some places that looked pretty bad and there were black folks on the front porch, and they figured we were all like this. Well, I told them, "Now, you go around the corner from our house in this nice neighborhood of yours and see that filthy house around there. Who lives in it? A white person. So you know you're not all alike."

By the same token, one day at work, we had a black elevator operator who wore oil on her hair and she'd wear it down one day and up another day, and she'd maybe wear the same dress twice with a white collar on it, and the collar would be dirty. When you got your back to the people that you're servicing, you want to take care of the back of you. Well, they asked me, "Why isn't she as clean as you are?" And I thought a minute. And there was a girl in our bindery there who had not been taught all the elements of hygiene, and I said, "Well, for the same reason that you are cleaner than that girl that works back in the bindery." And the girl I was talking with threw back her head and gave me a good belly laugh. She says, "You made your point. I understand." But this is how it is. You have to remind people that we're not all alike. I don't care what kind of trash it is, I don't want to live beside black trash or white trash. It doesn't matter what color they are. I just want people to treat me the way I'm going to treat them.

And these same people who had gotten that petition up told us about it later, and we became fast friends. They were over for coffee, and they were over to get recipes, and we were invited to their home to eat. But you know who broke the ice were the little children. My husband has always had the ability to have rapport with little children and dogs. And this one family across the street had eight children. And Bob said, "Well, before we get the inside of the house straight, we'd better get out in the lawn and get that straight so that people can see that we're not going to let it go to pot and lower the valuation of their property." This little boy came over and he didn't know our names. I was a little leery of what he was going to say, but he said, "Mr. Man, can I help you with the lawn?" He was about four years old. And Bob said, "Yes, I'm going to

put these cuttings in the wagon and pull them up behind the house and put them in that pile." "Okay. I'll help you," he said. Well, when he finished, Bob had some peppermint sticks, and he said, "Now, I'm going to give you a couple of these, but you go home and ask you mother can you eat them. Don't eat them now til you ask her." He went home and asked his mother and he pointed over there and said who gave them to him. And she hollered over and said, "Would you folks like to come over for a cup of coffee?" And that was—naturally, we saw some curtains open and some people peeking. And we went over, and I don't even drink coffee, but I had a cup of coffee with Carol that morning. And then, pretty soon some more people asked us to come over for a cup of coffee.

And then when it was, oh, about Christmas time, there was one man that was a really hard nut to crack. I speak to everyone because I feel that this is morning, it's nice, this is not a really big town, so I say "Good morning," to everybody. This man could hardly open his mouth. He'd just nod his head. But yet he watched us. Christmas time came. We had kind of an open house. We had a lot of goodies baked, candy and popcorn balls and all sorts of things, and we had friends in from the neighborhood. So this man's wife was a nurse at Mercy Hospital, and he had made the statement to some other people that, "My wife doesn't agree with my way of thinking about things in the neighborhood." She came over with her little girl, and we gave them some goodies, and I said, "Would you like to take your husband some?" "Oh, no, he can come after his own." Well, when he came home from work, she sent him over. And he says, "I can't stay long, but I came over for some goodies." Well, while I was passing the trays to him, he was busy looking all around the house to see what it looked like inside. Bob said, "Would you like to see downstairs?" So he took him down

to the family room and all this. And this man was interested in the lawn and flowers and all this, and he was telling us--we have a big hill behind the house--what we could do with that, how we could terrace it and plant flowers and this and that. But he still was not willing to be too friendly. He had five children. Now, he didn't try to influence them. And those younger kids became fast friends of Bob. Bob took them fishing, and they'd come over and tell him about when they learned to play golf, and when they learned to play tennis, and whether they won or not. They came over finally and looked at baseball games with him. And he bought pizzas and they'd sit down there, lie down on the davenport, and just have a great time. Well, when they moved--his job had him transferred to Minnesota--and Peter, the youngest boy, came and says, "Well, when I come back to visit, I'm always going to come and visit you, Bob, cause you're my friend." Then one day, his father came and he came up to the porch and shook hands with Bob. And I said, "Well, a little child shall lead them." Here he is now. When their daughter got married, they sent us an invitation to the wedding over at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Marion. We went to the wedding. He was there to greet us, and I thought, "My goodness, what a change." Telling the people, "This is my good friend, Bob, and Edith Adkinson."

So, you see, when people get to know you, this makes a big difference, I think. You're no longer in that stereotype nitch that they put you in at first. And I think that the medium of television, and people going about telling their experiences and so on, has helped a great deal in breaking down a lot of the false ideas people have of each other. We're all brothers under the skin. And this reminds me that when my husband was in the explosion over at Penick and Ford in 1977, he was passing through the department that blew up and happened to

be in the explosion. The two fellows that worked in there got burned very badly because they only had a T-shirt on and their jeans, and where they had a double layer of clothes, they didn't get burned. He happened to have on clothes from the outside, which were severely burned on the outside, but his face and hands got burned, and around the tops of his boots. And he crawled for the door because he couldn't see. Well, they took them all to emergency at Mercy Hospital, and then called for me. I was on my way to church, and when I arrived there, they told me to go directly up there. I walked in there, and those three men were there, and they were taking tweezers, pulling the skin off his hands and off the other two. And I said, "Which one is my husband?" I couldn't tell. This showed me that when skin is burned, it all turns grey. You couldn't even tell. I rode in the ambulance to Iowa City with them, and over the intercom radio they said, "I'm bringing three burned victims from Penick and Ford, two whites and a black." And when we got in there, the doctor looked at them and said, "Which one's the black guy?" He couldn't tell the difference. The skin looked all the same when it was burned. And when they took the tweezers and pulled off this burned skin, they all looked the same under that skin. So this brought home again to me that we're all the same under the skin. We have different pigmentation, but we're all the same. We burn, we hurt, we bleed--just like the rest of them. And we all want to have the best we can out of this life.

I've often been asked about Cecil, my brother next to me. Cecil worked at the Elk's Club first when he was here. He was the handy man at the Police Station first. And his beginnings were not auspicious, like the rest of us. But he had an inner strength that allowed him to rise above this station in life. And after he graduated from Washington High School, he worked at the Cedar Rapids Elk's

Club, just like Wally, Jim (those are my other brothers), my husband Bob, and I worked there on parties and things as a check girl. And then if they needed, entertainment, we also entertained. My brothers did everything, including cooking, tending bar, refinishing the dance floor--Cec did, along with Wally and Jim.

Cecil was married to Evelyn Collins, a minister's daughter, and they had four children. Carol is an employment administrator for the Kansas City Star newspaper. Richard is an elder in the Church of Christ. Michael is, he is of the firm Michael J. Reed Associates, financial management in Los Angeles. He helps athletes invest their money. And David, now deceased.

Cec started here doing floor refinishing in Cedar Rapids. For 23 years he had his own company. He served in many civic organizations and gained a lot of friends and supporters before he went into politics. At 52, Cecil announced his candidacy for one of the six Republican nominations for State Representatives for Linn County. And he was the first and only black ever elected to the Iowa House of Representatives and the first Negro ever to preside over that body. He was the first black Employment Security Commissioner in the United States, and he was also the first member of his race to be appointed to a full time major state post.

While he was living in Des Moines, he originated, designed, and coordinated a course entitled "The History of Black America" for the Des Moines Public School System. The course was so well received that it is now being offered in other public schools of Iowa. His message across the land and at thousands of

meetings, when he met people of all ages and backgrounds and interest groups, he told them this, "I have not had all of the education that you've had, but I didn't have to be educated to tell you how it is to be black." Some people thought he might feel that he wasn't adequate to speak at colleges and so on. He said, "You don't have to be educated to tell them what it's like to be black."

He had many awards. First, in Cedar Rapids, he was the recipient of the first Social Action Award presented by the Cedar Rapids Catholic Center Associates--a ceramic statue of St. Martin duPoise, a 17th century Negro social worker. He donated land for Lincoln Park in Cedar Rapids, and then worked with fellow citizens to make it a neighborhood recreational center. He was honored in Juno, Alaska, with a presentation of the Order of the Alaskan Walrus. He's listed in the Dictionary of International Biography, and received Certificate of Merit for distinguished service by promoting brotherhood between all--awarded in London, England. He got a Man of the Year Award, and he was elected by the Trustees of Freedom of Residents in Notre Dame University based on his record of public speaking. Cecil was honored for his role in the development of Job Service of Iowa by having one of three conference rooms at Job Service's Administrative Office in Des Moines named after him. The room was designated by a plaque bearing his name, "Cecil Reed Conference Room".

When Cecil was named Assistant Regional Manpower Administrator for the Job Corps in Kansas City, he had been Equal Employment Opportunity Officer for the four state manpower administration region administered from Kansas City since 1969. He administered the Job Corps in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and

Nebraska, with responsibility for recruitment and operation of conservation and residential centers in the region.

And after 49 years of marriage, Cecil and Evelyn made a trip to the Holy Land in 1984. They returned with an even greater determination to keeping on in their fight for the rights of all mankind. They saw many awesome sights, and walked where Jesus walked. And they have come to the conclusion that real joy comes not from ease or riches or praise of men, but from doing something worthwhile. And also, it is not what a man has, nor even what he does, which directly expresses his worth, but what he is.



Edith Atkinson: She'd rather be singing

When Edith Atkinson sang "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" at this year's edition of the Follies, it was her first big stage performance since she was a student at Coe.

But at one time, Edith, 66, regularly sang and also performed in The Gold Flashes dance trio with her brothers Cecil and Wallace Reed. From around 1935 until 1940, the three dancers accompanied the Dempsey Jones Troupe, led by the man who served as Linn county recorder from 1932 to 1960. She recalls that Dempsey, who played country-western, used to introduce Edith and her brothers by saying, "now we go from the ridiculous to the sublime."

Edith says Cecil, who went on to a career in government after being appointed to the Iowa Employment Security Commission in 1967 by then-Gov. Harold Hughes, was a very good dancer and could do difficult feats like leaping up in the air and coming down in splits. Wally liked to do the more graceful steps and once taught dancing.

Although she enjoyed performing with her brothers, Edith wasn't disappointed when her 1940 marriage to husband Bob broke up the dance act. "I wasn't really as good a dancer as they were. I'd rather be singing, and you made the same amount of money," she says with a warm smile.

And sing Edith did, before and after her marriage. Although newspaper clippings from the 1930s hail her as Iowa's Marian Anderson, Edith tended to tailor her music to the occasion.

Edith, who took singing lessons from Ralph Leo, learned to sing arias in French, German, Spanish,

Profile/

Edith Atkinson

Address: 3637 14th Ave. SE.

Age: 66.

Hometown: born near Davenport; has lived in Cedar Rapids since she was 2½.

Occupation: retired from Rockwell-Collins.

Education: attended Coe College, studied voice with Ralph Leo.

Family: husband Bob; son Robert II, who is a department head at Florida A&M School of Business; daughter Mary Williams, Cedar Rapids, who works in personnel at Collins.

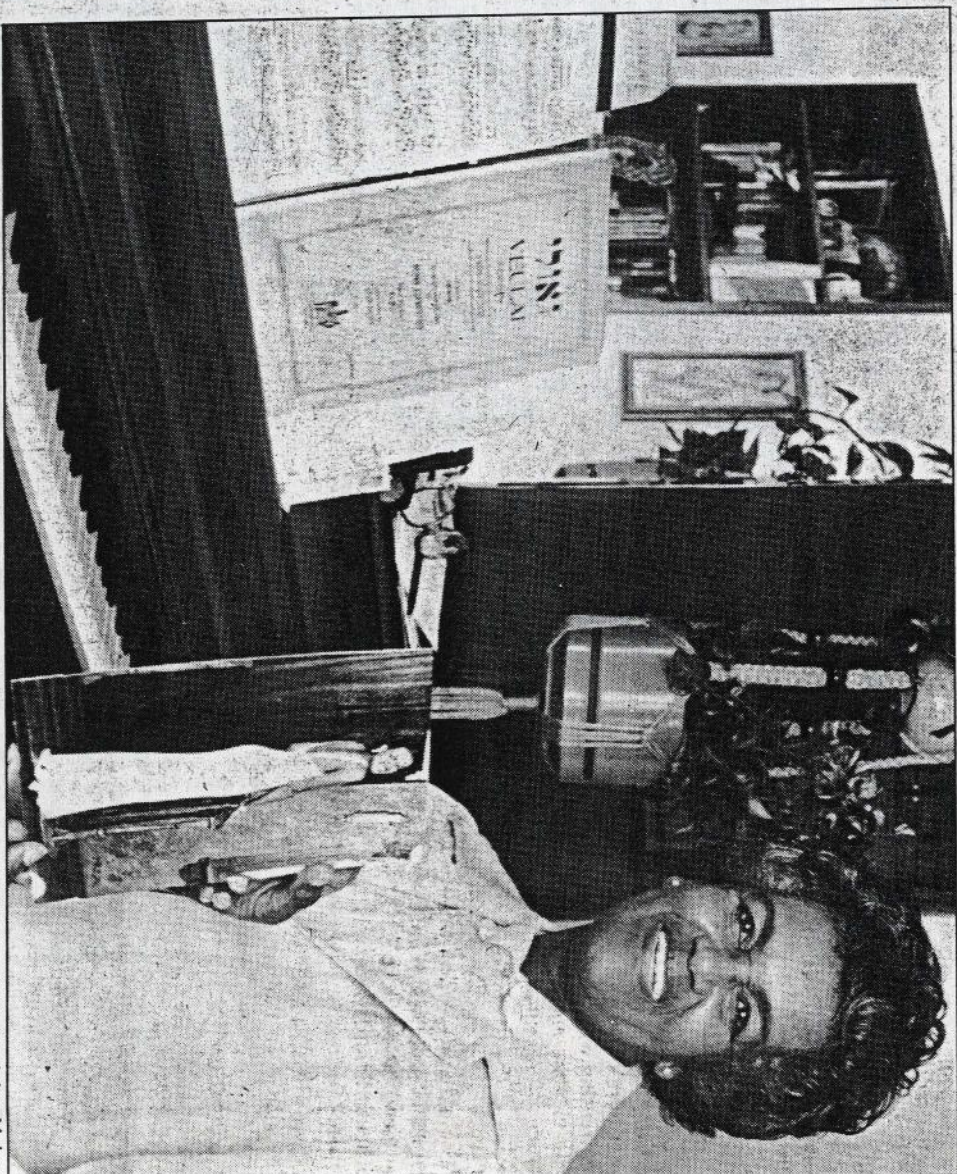
Interests: singing, knitting, crocheting, sewing and language.

Latin and Italian. She even recalls singing "The Prune Song" in Czech with Cedar Rapids Mayor Milo Sedlacek on a local radio program. "I can sing the Czech National Anthem in Czech," she adds.

When she performed in an Amara restaurant during an Oktoberfest celebration, she sang a few popular tunes, some spirituals and finished with Brahms' "Lullabye" in German, which she learned in school. Workers came out of the kitchen to listen. "I get a kick out of singing in their (her audience's) language," she admits.

"I love language. When I went to Coe, I took three languages. I had English grammar, French grammar and Spanish grammar, all at the same time," Edith says.

Her love of language came in handy later, too. Although Edith started her more than 28 years in



Neighbors photo by John McIvor

Edith Atkinson made a singing comeback of sorts this year.

the editing department at Collins as a typist, when she retired she was an editor setting deadlines for others.

Edith's encounter with Mayor Sedlacek wasn't her only experience with radio. In 1943, she and WMT organist Maureen Canavan had a radio show in which they did

requests phoned in the previous week. The Thursday night program was recorded in advance, and Edith earned \$5 for each half-hour show.

"Back then you could do a lot for \$5, you could eat for a week," she says with another smile.

•Turn to 5W: Edith



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DEATHS/EASTERN

CEDAR RAPIDS

Edith L. Atkinson, 81, of Tallahassee, Fla., formerly of Cedar Rapids, died Friday, June 9, 2000, in Tallahassee Memorial Hospital after suffering a massive stroke. There will be no services at Edith's request.

Survivors include a son, Robert II of Doylestown, Pa.; a daughter, Mary Howard of Tallahassee, Fla.; a sister, Francis Brewton of Des Moines; and two brothers, Cecil Reed of Cedar Rapids and Jim Reed of Texas.



Instead of flowers, a donation in the name of Edith Atkinson may be given to one of her favorite charities, Camp Courageous of Iowa, P.O. Box 557 RR 2, Monticello, IA 52310-0557.

The family's address is 2044 Val-
kyrie Ct., Tallahassee, FL 32308.
(850) 383-0459.

ENTERTAINMENT

Spiritual awakening

Edith Atkinson on stage again in Cedar Rapids

By Tom Fruehling

Gazette staff writer

Edith Atkinson loves the stage so much she gave up a trip to Spain for two upcoming local performances.

"I'd had these commitments," says the classically trained 76-year-old singer, once referred to as "Iowa's Marian Anderson." "What was I to do?"

First, she has a date at 7:30 next Tuesday night in the Daehler-Kitchin Auditorium on the Coe College campus. It is free and open to the public. As part of the school's Marquis Lecture and Performance Series and in conjunction with Black History Month activities, Atkinson will sing and talk on the history of spirituals.

Then, there are continuing rehearsals for the Follies, which is to be presented next month. She'll once again be doing a solo after a seven-year hiatus from the annual musical.

UP CLOSE

Passing up a trip to Spain, compliments of her businessman son Bob, is eased somewhat by the fact that she spent her latest birthday in Paris along with the globe-trotting son.

"He and his business associates threw a big dinner party for me," she says. "I couldn't think of any way to thank them. So I said, 'I'll sing a song for you.'"

With that, she broke into a favorite, "Sweet Low Sweet Chariot," then followed with a French song. Singing on foreign soil was like a lifelong dream come true for Atkinson, some seven decades after a little Cedar Rapids girl set her sights



Gazette photo by Lisa Powell

Singer Edith Atkinson will perform and talk on the history of spirituals next Tuesday at Coe.

today's rhythm and blues and even 'rap' comes directly from pure spirituals brought over by slaves. Those are our roots, and young people should know that they got where they are today on the backs of those slaves."

But hers are not stodgy lectures. They're also filled with joyous songs by a master stylist.

"When I can make others feel good," she says, "then I feel good."

soil was like a lifelong dream come true for Atkinson, some seven decades after a little Cedar Rapids girl set her sights on a career in opera.

She studied voice for 14 years as a child and enrolled at Coe in 1939 for the study of foreign languages to further her operatic phrasing. Before that, though, she'd made a name for herself performing in a song-and-dance act with brothers Cecil and Wallace Reed.

She even had her own local radio show and was encouraged more than once by visiting show business legends like Nat King Cole and Duke Ellington to take her talents on the road.

"I was the youngest of eight kids," Atkinson remembers. "And my mother said there was no way I was going to leave home for show business."

Her college and opera aspirations ended with her marriage in 1940. And while raising two children and putting in 28 years at Collins Radio before retiring in 1981, she still found the time to sing. She directed the choir at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church for 30 years and has long performed at schools, for church groups and in nursing homes.

"I love singing, and I love people," explains the grandmother of six and great grandmother of two. "I've always loved being on stage with the spotlights, too."

When she took a solo role with the Follies in 1989, it marked her first big public appearance since college days. She took a break after four years when her husband Robert became ill. He's now in a nursing home, so Atkinson is doing whatever she can to stay busy.

She says she feels she's helping to educate others on Black history through her music.

"People need to know that

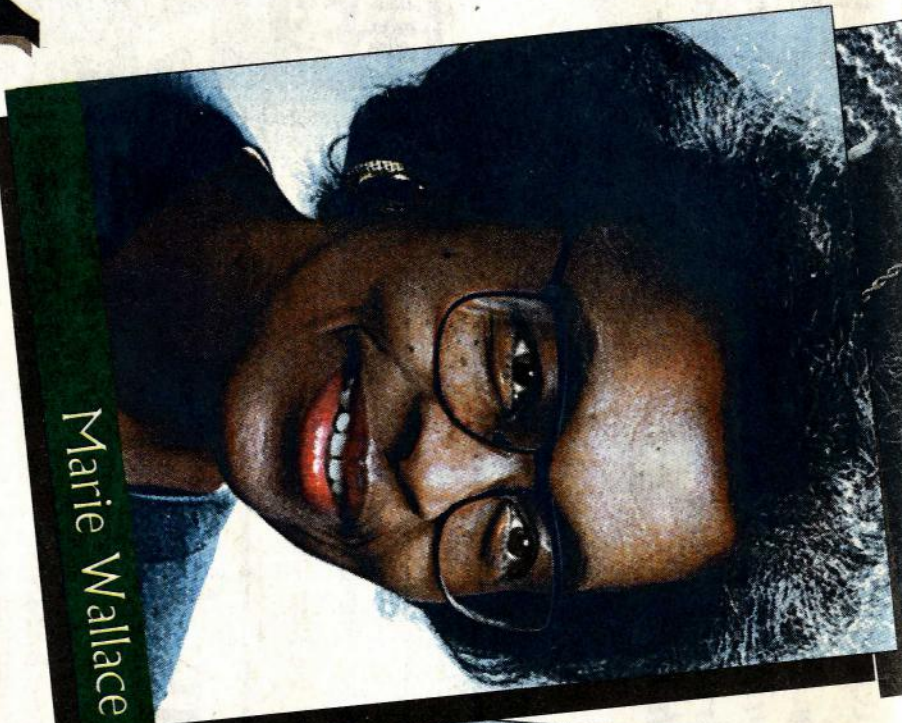
James Randall



Edith



Marie Wallace



Rick Williams



MAKING THEIR M

African-Americans in Easter

Farewell celebration

A farewell musical celebration honoring singer and long-time vocal instructor Edith Atkinson will be held from 4 to 7 p.m. Sunday at Beems Auditorium in the Cedar Rapids Public Library.

The event is sponsored by the lay organization of Bethel AME Church, where Atkinson served for many years as youth choir director. She is moving to Florida to be closer to her family.

The reception will include music by former members of the youth choir, as well as selections by the gospel group Psalms, the Rev. Derrick Davis and Atkinson.

Refreshments will be served.



Mrs. Edith Atkinson

Please join us at a farewell musical celebration honoring and saying good-bye to this great woman and legend on Sunday, Aug. 15 (today), 4 to 7 p.m. at Beems Auditorium, C.R. Public Library.

8-15-1999

Acclaimed singer to perform



Edith Atkinson

History Month activities. Details in Up Close, page 7B.

Classically trained 76-year-old singer Edith Atkinson, once referred to as "Iowa's Marian Anderson," will perform at two area events. First, she'll sing spirituals and talk about their history next week at Coe College as part of the school's Marquis Lecture and Performance Series and in conjunction with Black

Edith Atkinson

Editor's note: Today's subject is Edith Atkinson, 73, 3637 14th Ave. SE, retired scheduler and assistant manager in Rockwell International's Graphic Services Department.

What do you like most, least, about retirement?

I get to do what I like to do now, which is sing. When I was working, it kind of curtailed me. I sing at churches, schools and organizations. Least? You don't get paid for the work you do. But I'm enjoying myself — there's really no least.

If you could visit with any five people from throughout history, who would they be?

Booker T. Washington, Marian Anderson, George Washington Carver, Alex Haley and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I met Marian Anderson but didn't get to talk with her. She was my idol. I had intended to be a concert singer when I was growing up — and one paper in the state called me 'Iowa's Marian Anderson.'

What's good and bad about living in Cedar Rapids?

It was a good place to raise our family. These kids have more advantages today than we did growing up. The bad: I couldn't come up with anything bad. I grew up when the racial issue was bad — we've got a ways to go yet, but we're working on it.

What is your goal in life?

Like the song says, if I can do some good things every day, then my living will not be in vain.

What is the best book you ever read?

'Roots' by Alex Haley. It was more informative than most books I've read, and told me things about my own people that I didn't know.

If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?

Europe, to see some of the things that I've read about in history. And see if I could understand some of the languages I've studied.

What makes you laugh?

I laugh about myself, many times. You don't get to be as old as I am without a sense of humor. Laughter is good for you, and I laugh a lot!

What is your favorite meal?

Baked ham, potato salad, green beans.

What are your leisure interests?

Singing, knitting, crocheting and fishing. My husband says I'd take that knitting to bed with me if he'd let me. I was taught at an early age to keep my hands busy. 'It keeps you out of trouble,' my grandma used to tell me.

The most important thing you've learned in life is . . .

To practice the Golden Rule. It's hard to do, but if you can do that, you can make yourself happy, and others, too.

What's your idea of a great time?

Family get-togethers at holiday time — and fishing. In June, the kids fly out from wherever they are to Minnesota, and we have a great time! I'm a bullhead fisherman. We catch other things, but they're my favorite.

If you were given a million dollars, how would you spend it?

I'd donate some to church and our favorite charity, Camp Courageous. Then, with our six grandchildren and this great-grandchild, I would make a trust fund to set them up in business, or their education, or whatever. Then I'd set up some programs here in Cedar Rapids to keep kids busy, to keep them off the street. Actually, I think I'd go around the world, too.

Do you have a pet peeve?

Yes. It's when I'm shopping and people stop in the center of the aisle to chat.

What did you want to be when you were in high school?

A concert singer. But I was the youngest of eight and my folks wouldn't let me leave home. They wanted me to be a concert singer, too — I don't know how they thought I was going to be one and not leave home. Then I left college to get married; they didn't have provisions in the '30s for married students.

The first thing you notice about a person is . . .

The eyes. Then the smile. And if I shake hands, I like a firm handshake, not a wet noodle.

Exclusive of the present, what would be your favorite time in history to live?

The Gay Nineties. I loved the long dresses and large hats. My husband is a hat person, so I'm still in love with hats.

What was your most embarrassing moment?

When I was in my teens, I was singing for a dinner at Quaker Oats. I hadn't yet learned that you must look above the people's heads and not at the people themselves, because your mind will wander. There I was, singing a Spanish song, looking at the people — and I forgot the words. I had to make up some. I just broke out in perspiration!

— By Shirley Ruedy



Profile

Education: Majored in languages at Coe College.

Hometown: Davenport.

Family: Husband, Robert, 74, retired from Penick and Ford's dextrin department; children, Robert II, 49, Philadelphia, national accounts executive for Merck & Co. Inc.; Mary Williams, 44, Tallahassee, Fla., office manager of Department of Social Work, College of Arts and Sciences, Florida A & M University; six grandchildren and one great-grandson.

What was your most embarrassing moment?

By Suzanne Barnes

They went to different schools. They grew up in different parts of Cedar Rapids or even in different towns.

Their lives have been devoted to medicine, the arts, politics, science, education and the church.

They remember how things used to be.

Russell "Doc" Collins, Edith Atkinson, Juan Cortez, Vernon Smith and Vivian Smith range in age from late 60s to early 80s. The age-range exception is Suzy Beshears, the 46-year-old daughter of William Beshears, the first black dentist in Cedar Rapids.

They attended nearly all-white schools. "There were only three (blacks) when I went to Adams," recalls Edith.

"I knew nothing about prejudice," notes Doc, until he got into high school. He was aware that he was sometimes treated differently than his white friends. "But if I didn't like what somebody said, we either fought or I got out of the way."

Edith, 76, says she was always taught not to call kids names. "Somebody called me the 'N word.' My dad had given me boxing lessons along with the boys," she says, a smile tugging at her mouth.

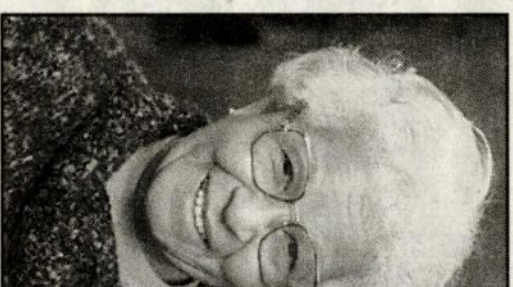
"He told me to plant my feet and hit from the shoulder. And when that boy called me the name, I planted my feet and hit from the shoulder. And he said, 'That skinny girl can hit.'"

"Then I didn't have any more trouble. That was it. I got along fine." When she reported the incident to her folks, they taught her to treat people in a more tactful manner. "You don't fight."

When he was in first grade at Taylor School, Vernon, 69, was taunted by another youngster. A couple of African-

"I applied all over the state of Iowa for a teaching position. Some people wrote back on the application, 'Filled,' and that's it."

Russell "Doc" Collins



American fifth-grade girls came to his rescue and chased his tormentors across the railroad tracks by Rockford Road. The girls seemed so big and the distance they chased the boy so far, "I thought it seemed like miles," says Vernon, smiling at the memory.

"When I was growing up, parents walked their kids to school, guarded over them and kind of went down to the school to watch them come home," says Juan, 78, who went to Tyler School, then old Washington High School by Greene Square.

Vivian, 81, has lived in Cedar Rapids since 1941. She went to Dubuque Senior High School, which had "maybe five" blacks.

"We had our school friends, at school," she says in her soft voice. School friends didn't see each other away from school, she adds.

By the time Suzy went to school in Cedar Rapids, "everybody was mixed."

But before Suzy's day, blacks weren't always able to participate in organized school

sports, says Doc, who lived on the west side of the Cedar River. On the other hand, Vernon, who moved to northeast Cedar Rapids when he was in second grade, says he was always able to participate in school plays and sports.

African-American teen-agers had separate dances periodically, says Doc. "Blacks from all around, Waterloo, Cedar Rapids, Iowa City, etc., would come." They also had skating parties every month or two.

The Jane Boyd Community House, which opened in 1927, provided a welcome outlet for many. "We practically lived up here," says Suzy, now the Jane Boyd social activities developer.

At one time, separate clubs and organizations existed for blacks only. Edith remembers belonging to an all-black Girl Reserves — a predecessor of Camp Fire — at the YWCA.

When Vernon's parents tried to get him into Boy Scouts, they were told he could not join the neighborhood troop, made up of kids with whom he routinely played. Instead, he

would have to be in a E Scout Troop of one.

"We didn't have access to things kids of today have," continues Doc.

"We didn't know we had it rights," points out Edith. At one time, blacks had sit in the balcony when they went to movies. Their choice of restaurants was limited to the bus station diner on island cafes.

When he was 14 or 15, non and some of his childhood friends went into the V and the Butterfly, two downtown restaurants, to see who would be served.

To their surprise, one rant did serve the kids. They think we had real simple things, a milkshake, because we didn't have much money, he recalls.

Every Christmas, Juan among the newspaper carriers treated by The Gazette meal at the downtown loop's. He adds that people didn't eat out as often as they do now. "During the pressions, people didn't pay a high price for a

"I don't remember any hardships or difficulties, except during the cold weather. We jogged and we still endured."

Juan Cortez



"A lot of people could realize that I was because of my features. . . . A lot of people assumed that we were white."

Suzy Beshears

ATKINSON

ATKINSON FILE

COMPLETE

STORY IN Afro-Am FILE

NEIGHBORS

Growing up in Cedar Rapids: Strong families important

■ From page 6

guided him and kept him busy.

Vivian, who came from a family of nine, says her father was her mentor. "He believed all his children should have a college education in the first place. He thought education was the key to advancement."

Juan's uncles took him under their wings. One wired together a crystal set so Juan and his brother could listen to radio plays and music. Another uncle told him what to watch out for in Chicago, where Juan moved in 1936.

Doc says his father, Robert Collins, helped get him into Coe.

Suzy's father died when she was 8, so she doesn't remember much about him. "We went through a lot when we were going through school because the whites didn't like us because we had black in us. The blacks didn't like us because we had white in us."

"They told me when I got to 11th grade and I wanted to take typing and shorthand, 'No sense in taking it. You can't get a job.'"

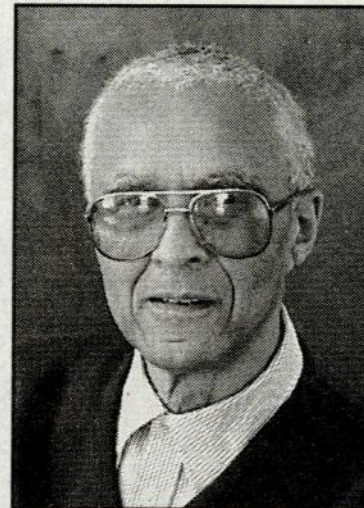
Edith Atkinson



Her mother, Kathleen Be-shears, always reassured her children that they should be proud of what they were and

"how great our dad was."

"She really helped. And that's why I think all of us are very proud of what we are. She could



"It was definitely a happy childhood because I had things to do. My father always kept me busy."

Vernon Smith

have let us go back and 'just pretend you are white.' "

Rather, she told her children when people asked them who

they thought they were, just to answer "Proud Americans. And that's what you are, you are an American."

New Board Member Profiles

by Laura M. Derr

Six new board members will be presented to the membership at the Annual Meeting for approval on Sunday, April 23. Three have already been introduced in a past issue of this newsletter: Trisha Job, Jay Schuldiner and Steve Jenkins. It is a pleasure to introduce three more - Tom Bever, Susan Kuecker and Edith Atkinson.

Tom Bever is the owner of Park Avenue Realty in Marion, a commercial realty company. Tom's family has been in Linn County since the mid-1800s. His great grandfather, James L. Bever, Sr., donated the land for Bever Park to the City of Cedar Rapids. A graduate of the University of Iowa and an Air Force veteran of Vietnam, Tom has been an active volunteer over the years, serving as a member of the Board of the Cedar Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and as President of the Marion Chamber of Commerce. He is also a member of the Cedar Rapids Board of Realtors. Tom and his wife Linda have a grown daughter, Carrie. He brings much needed expertise about facilities to the Board.

Susan Kuecker is an Iowan who grew up in Eagle Grove. A graduate of Iowa State University in 1977, Susan has lived in Cedar Rapids since 1988. She is already known to many at the History Center as a researcher and exhibit committee member. She edited the Kelsey letters in our collection for publication in the *Palimpsest* in 1991. She was also a researcher for the 1993 Vicksburg exhibit, the 1994 Traveling Trunk outreach project, the 1994 production of "1865: Reverberations After the War," the 1994 "Footprints in Time" exhibit, and the 1995 "Women in the Healing Arts" presentation in conjunction with "Womens Work." Susan is a member of the Civil War Round Table, and is currently researching historic buildings for the Linn County Historic Preservation Commission. She is interim librarian at the Iowa Masonic Library. She will continue to be an invaluable resource for historic research for grants and exhibits.

Edith Atkinson was born in Davenport but has lived in Cedar Rapids since the 1920s. She attended Adams and was one of the first graduates of

VOLUNTEER ACTION

by Louise Wickham

Our Volunteer Recognition event was well attended. Fifty-two came to see the antics of "Pleasant Company," whose singing cheered and entertained us. We were celebrating all the hard work our volunteers have contributed in 1994 --- 13,004 hours!!! Thank you again for your diligence and persistence!

One of our hardest working volunteers is our Board President Laura Derr. Laura attended our Volunteer Action meetings and Staff meetings regularly. She is generous with her time in communicating with individuals and with groups. Consequently she has gained the respect and friendship of everyone who works with her. She is appreciated for her tact, enthusiasm, kindness, and timely sense of humor.

At Board Meetings, Laura

TIME LINES-
MAY 1995

Knitting musician sings and sews for fun

There was a time when Cedar Rapids' own Edith Reed Atkinson was favorably compared to world-famous contralto Marian Anderson.

Edith passed up a concert career 43 years ago to get married. That doesn't mean she gave up singing. It's just that she took on other things too.

When she's not warbling in her sweet high voice for fellow church members or at club meetings, the 64-year-old chanteuse mostly tends to her knitting.

Edith's easily as nimble with her needles as she once was on her feet when she and two older brothers danced as The Three Gold Flashes.

She'll pull out her yarn at the drop of a stitch and whip out baby booties, mittens, scarves and stocking caps by the score.

For the past five years or so, Edith has knitted tiny caps for babies to wear home from St. Luke's and Mercy hospitals. About 100 children a year leave the hospitals with these personal gifts from Edith, who donates the yarn as well as the labor.

If it's Christmas time, the tiny bonnets are red and green. Around July 4, they're red, white and blue. She and her daughter, Mary Williams, even made black and gold caps to mark the Iowa Hawkeyes' Rose Bowl trip.

Edith doesn't stop with tykes' top hats, though. She regularly gives hand-knit winter clothing to the St. Vincent De Paul center for distribution to the needy. She also makes lap robes for wheelchair-bound Multiple Sclerosis patients, and she used to knit bandages for

enough yarn to start a store."

Edith's also an adept seamstress. She's made clothing for her daughter and six grandchildren and has made most of her own suits, blouses and skirts for the past 10 years. "It saves a heap of money," she points out.

Edith learned her needlework skills at an early age, but for many years music was her chief pastime. She took voice lessons for 14 years and entered Coe College with the intention of becoming an operatic singer.

In the meantime, she made a name for herself on the stage circuit throughout the state. Edith sang on local radio shows and shared the spotlight with big-time entertainers like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong when they passed through town.

She recalls seeing the Mills Brothers in their undershorts when they stayed in Edith's home. "My mother had told them there was nobody upstairs but her little baby," Edith laughs. "I was 16 years old."

While Edith passed up a scholarship at Coe to get married, she continued her singing engagements and led three choirs at Bethel AME Church for 30 years.

She also put in more than 28 years as an editor in the graphics department at Collins before retiring two years ago. She says she was the second black woman to hold an office job with the firm.

Edith says she joined the job market only after her daughter, who's now a Collins employee, and son Bob, a marketing professor at Florida A&M University, were well along in school.

