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## Weymon, Ella Oral History Interview (African-American): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with  
Ella Weymon  
African-American Resident

Conducted August 12, 1994  
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project  
The African-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: This is Donna Rottier. The date is Friday, August 12, 1994. I am interviewing Ella Weymon in her office in Holland, Michigan.

Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

EW: My name is Ella Lampkin Weymon.

DR: Thank you, and your date and place of birth?

EW: Date of birth, [date removed], 1949, Auburn, Alabama.

DR: And how long have you lived in Holland, Michigan?

EW: I've lived in Holland, Michigan, since May 1980.

DR: Could you begin, then, by describing in brief a little about your life before you moved to Holland--where you grew up, your educational background, and so forth?

EW: I grew up in Auburn, Alabama, the fourth child in a family of five girls and one boy. The six of us were raised by our mom, after our father left when we were young. I attended J. F. Drake High School and graduated valedictorian in June, 1968. From high school, attending college brought me to the Midwest. I attended Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. I was there four years, until 1972. Upon graduating, I went to work for Delco Moraine Division of General Motors in Dayton, Ohio. I worked for Delco Moraine six months. I was transferred to Flint, Michigan, in December 1972, when I married my fiance, Willis Weymon. Willis was already working for AC Spark Plug Division of General Motors. That's what got me to Michigan. I've been here since.

DR: What sort of work did you do for General Motors?

EW: Accounting work. I was an economics accounting major. I worked in various accounting departments at General Motors about four years, almost five years. Then I worked at Baker Junior College in Flint, now Baker College, almost three years. Then in 1980 we moved to Holland.

DR: How did you decide to move to Holland?

EW: My husband had taken a job with Haworth, Inc. That's what brought us to Holland.

DR: What did you know about Holland before you moved here?

EW: Not too much. We knew that the Tulip Festival was held here every year. Other than that, just a small town, ethnic background that was predominately Dutch, and the Tulip Festival.

DR: What part of the city did you first live in?

EW: North side.

DR: Do you still live there today?

EW: Right, same address. We moved there fourteen years ago.

DR: What was your first job in Holland?

EW: My first job in Holland was with Hart & Cooley on Eighth Street, working in their cost accounting department. I worked for them a little over a year. Then I took a position in Grand Rapids for about a year or so. Then I started our own accounting practice in 1982.

DR: Did you have any difficulty finding a job when you moved into Holland?

EW: No, I didn't have difficulty finding a job.

DR: How many people did you know in the community when you first came here?

EW: None.

DR: What prompted you and your husband to decide to start your own company?

EW: We figured that we could run our own business. The opportunity presented itself so that we could. I got started with the accounting business and he continued to work until he could come into the business full time. We started it because it was a time when I didn't want to continue to commute into Grand Rapids. With our accounting skills--I am the primary accountant, he's the marketing and computer person--it was an opportunity that I could get started building a business until he could come into the business full time.

DR: Could you describe a little bit about what your business does?

EW: We are public accountants. We do full service record-keeping, accounting and tax services on a monthly basis. We provide monthly financial statements for small business clients. We also do payroll processing. For some of our clients we do things like accounts receivable processing, accounts payable--writing out checks and such for them, these would be more a full service than our basic monthly service--whatever payroll tax reporting that has to be done, and year-end tax work as well. Two aspects of our

practice are regular monthly clients as well as year-end tax clients that we have during the early part of the year.

DR: What was the most difficult thing about starting your own business?

EW: Marketing and getting enough clients were the most difficult part about starting the business. Being a service, business people don't necessarily see the value of a service as opposed to a product they might immediately need. Getting enough clients was and still is the most difficult aspect. The skills to do our service were there, but to bring the clients in was a little bit more of a challenge.

DR: What would you say is the most rewarding thing about what you do?

EW: You are your own boss pretty much. The work that has to get done, if you don't get it done one day, you work later the next day. Those types of things. You have a little bit more control over your own work schedule, a little bit more control over your income and resource once an adequate cash flow is established. It's the control of both financial and your work resources, that is the most important thing.

DR: Do you have any children?

EW: Yes, we do have children, two girls. Our oldest daughter, Tara, is twenty. The youngest daughter, Trina, is sixteen. They are both graduates of West Ottawa High School. Well, Tara graduated

from West Ottawa High School in 1991. Trina will be a senior at West Ottawa this fall.

DR: What do you think about the West Ottawa schools and their experience there?

EW: Positive. Both of them had positive experiences. Occasionally, in the early grades they had a couple incidents that could have been a little bit racial in overtones, but not really anything that was a major incident, only slight overtones. The teachers and the principal, whoever might have gotten involved, handled it with tact and we were pretty much satisfied. Overall the quality of their education there I think is good. Students coming from West Ottawa High or Holland High can get a good education there that would prepare them to go to any university any place they want to in the country.

DR: Good. What is your oldest daughter doing right now?

EW: Right now she is working as a summer intern for International Paper Company in Mississippi. She attends Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. She will be a senior this fall. She's studying chemical engineering. She did get a fairly good background in math and science from West Ottawa.

DR: What were your hopes for your children when you moved to Holland?

EW: Our hopes for them were to get a good education, grow up in an environment that would be a safe environment for them, one that had good community values, and where they would just grow up to be

nice young people. We did want them to go to college after they finished with high school, so pretty much being in a school district and an area where you can utilize a good public school system was important to us.

DR: Have those hopes been realized or have those hopes changed at all?

EW: The hopes have been realized and they haven't changed too much. The girls pretty much, I would think, have stayed on track. It has required working with our children, and making certain we work with the school district, too, to see that they are benefitting from what is being offered.

DR: Are you a member of any community organizations?

EW: We're members of Third Reformed Church. I am a deacon, but not on the current consistory (governing body of the church). Business-wise, we're members of the Holland Area Chamber of Commerce. I have served on the Board of Directors for the Holland Area Arts Council and Child and Family Service of West Michigan. There are a couple of commissions and committees through the City of Holland that we have participated in. Right now I'm participating with a new committee, not so much with the City right now, but the Chamber and City as a joint collaboration. We're trying to do something multi-cultural with some of the other ethnic groups here in the community.

DR: How did you become involved with Third Reformed Church?



EW: A friend of a friend, or someone from Haworth introduced us to the Reformed tradition. We started initially at Hope Reformed Church, and when we left Hope, we transferred to Third Reformed. We've been at Third Reformed now probably eight years.

DR: What is your religious background?

EW: Baptist. My husband and I were both raised Baptist.

DR: What appealed to you about the Reformed tradition?

EW: It's a little bit more organized from the Southern Baptist, if you're familiar with that. The services are a lot shorter. Everything is compact. You can get in and get your religious worship done, and in about an hour or so, you can be on your way. That appealed to me, as well as the governing organization within the Reformed Church. The length of the service and the governance of the congregation were appealing to both of us as well.

DR: How do you feel about Holland's image as being a traditional Dutch community?

EW: That image is what we thought before we came here. But as we've lived in the community, we know that it is not just a Dutch community. Most of the persons in our particular neighborhood are not Dutch; they're from someplace else. Most of the people we interact with are from someplace else. So the ethnic Dutch background has not been the case for us. I've found that to be a little bit more enlightening when we got here, that it was not

traditionally Dutch, even though that's the overall image from people who don't live here.

DR: How do you feel about the growing ethnic diversity in Holland?

EW: I think it's good. It should be good. As different cultures work together, they understand each other better. I think it will be overall good for the community.

DR: What specific things do you think those different cultures can offer the community?

EW: A sense of their diversity. I find it always challenging to be able to experience different things and to learn about different people. You learn about each other by living together and associating with each other. To the extent that this is done, whereas we do not become polarized--I see a little of that happening here--but to the extent that the community does integrate, or at least make an attempt to get the ethnic cultures involved completely within the community, there's going to be more interaction. If that interaction occurs, then people learn from each other. As we all learn, it becomes a better place for all of us to live.

DR: How do you think Holland has responded to the different ethnicities living here?

EW: I think it's sort of slow. It is responding, but it's not being done as aggressively as it could. I think it's going to take just a little bit more expressing of opinions and asking the city to

move forward a little bit more strongly, along a positive type of a direction so that we don't get a lot of negative problems generated here. It is slow, but it is not "not-moving." There's lots of work that can be done.

DR: You mentioned that you were working with a committee dealing with multi-cultural awareness and that type of thing. What sorts of specific things are you working for?

EW: We're still in the planning stages right now. We've had a couple of preliminary meetings where we have been establishing a format of the program. It's going to be something along the framework--about the closest similarities--and yet not really similar to--a Chamber program called Leadership Holland. But it's not like Leadership Holland, it's completely different. It's trying to get minority persons interested and teaching them, if that's the case, about what is available within the city, through the city, and through the surrounding communities as well. It's helping them to obtain leadership positions in terms of interacting, but it's not like the Leadership Holland through the Chamber, but something that has a total different type of a multi-cultural diversity which means learning as well as doing. Both aspects will be part of that program.

DR: How many African-Americans or Asian-Americans or other minority ethnic groups do you see taking leadership positions in Holland right now?

EW: Not too many, not very many at all. That's why part of what this group that we are formulating right now is going to help build a bridge. Because sometimes things and people are in two different camps, just sort of looking at each other wondering "Why don't we interact?" So we're trying to build another bridge so that communication can happen a little bit more effectively, and the persons who want to flow into different aspects of the community life, they will know how to do so.

DR: Speaking specifically about African-Americans in Holland, do you have an idea of the population numbers or how many African-Americans do live here?

EW: There was a census that came from the city, but that went back to I think about 1990, and it related to Ottawa County, which said that maybe there might have been 200 families in Ottawa County. Just as a gut feel for the city of Holland, I suspect that there might be, maybe, a hundred families or so within the city of Holland, mailing address, not just within the city limits. That might translate into 200 to 300 hundred or so people, maybe a hundred families or households.

DR: Do you have much contact with other African-Americans who live in Holland?

EW: I have limited contact with African-Americans in Holland. I see a few on a professional basis who come for services. There are no African-Americans within the neighborhood in which we live. There

are none at the church where we attend. So on a professional basis I interact, and a few of these have developed into friends outside of the professional capacity.

DR: What changes have you seen in African-Americans who live in Holland since 1980 when you moved here?

EW: I haven't seen too many changes in the African-American community. I've noticed that there has been an increase in African-Americans within the city limits because I can see them walking along the streets when I'm coming to the office or going downtown. I notice that there has been an increase since 1980. Usually you can go all week, all month, almost all year long and not run into another African-American person outside of business contacts, because they were just not there where I would be. But now I can see our people walking in the mall, walking along the street, that type of thing. So I know the numbers are increasing, and I suspect most of those are within the city limits.

DR: What changes have you seen in the Holland community in general in the fourteen years that you've lived here?

EW: A tremendous growth, a lot of residential development, commercial development, those types of things have occurred here. One comment my youngest daughter made a couple of years ago, she doesn't like the growth because the traffic jams as you cross the river going home and those types of things. She sees the growth as a negative because of the additional congestion in terms of

getting from home and different places. One positive thing that she did mention a couple of weeks ago as we were walking in the mall. We saw at least a dozen or so African-American people walking just in the mall on one Saturday afternoon. She made the comment, "Mom, that's the most African-American people I've seen in Holland at one time--ever." So that was good. She was almost two when we moved here, so there's pluses and minuses when there's growth that's occurring. You look at things like traffic patterns and you think, this growth is not good. But overall I think the growth is good for the community.

DR: You mentioned a little bit about when your children were in school. How much prejudice or racial tension have you experienced or noticed in Holland?

EW: Directly myself, none. I have not had to encounter any bit of racial prejudice or such. Usually because of the clientele in the professional arena that we move in. Persons are a little bit more aware and a little bit more astute about racial issues, and that doesn't become an issue. Early on, mostly in the elementary level, I can think of maybe one or two incidents over their whole elementary years that occurred. But like I say, it wasn't anything that was out of the ordinary, flagrantly racial. Once we were aware of it, we talked to the teachers or whoever was involved and it was pretty much resolved between the adults in an orderly manner so that it didn't get blown out of context or

something of that nature. We haven't had any really negative type of racial experiences since we've been here.

DR: Do you think Holland is different than other areas of the country as far as that sort of thing?

EW: In terms of racial tension and such? It is still small. Holland is still a small community for one, and people, not having to deal with a lot of African-Americans, I think has made them not develop the type of prejudices that some communities would have, who would have a larger African-American population. I think that some of the other ethnic groups such as the Hispanic and maybe Asian, might have a little bit more problems in terms of prejudice against them because of the fact they are a larger group. Usually if there's a larger group and if there's some prejudices, they will experience them more so than we as African-Americans. And particularly as a professional African-American person, I interact mostly with persons who are of a professional background so that the people we come in contact with will not be typical persons who might have more of a prejudiced type of outlook on life. It makes it a little bit different from my perspective because of the fact that Holland has a low African-American ethnic population here. The prejudice has not been as flagrant towards our people as a whole. I think individual persons who would be in a different economic position perhaps will have experienced more prejudice here in the community than myself and my family would have because

of our position, economic background puts us into a different arena of persons that we interact with on a day-by-day basis and who we interact with on a social basis.

DR: Did you have any problems being African-American and starting a business in a predominately white community?

EW: No. Starting business here would be as if we had started a business anyplace else. Offering a service, particularly like accounting services, persons have to feel comfortable with that provider of the service. It still took us into an arena that would require us to market to a perspective client, and if they liked our services, they would take us on as an accounting service. So it wasn't based upon ethnic background.

DR: What changes would you like to see in Holland in the future?

EW: Changes? I really would like to see if the city, or the city limits, encompass the townships, particularly to the North side where we are, Park Township. Our Park Township office is the structure for the government on the local level there so we don't quite get involved in city politics or such as much as we would if we lived within the city limits and had to be concerned about who's going to be elected for mayor and who's going to be elected for city council and such. That is what I would really like to see, and it's not something that a person can say, okay, it's going to happen, because I don't suspect it will. But I wish the city had had the foresight to incorporate the townships to be part



of the city limits so that it becomes more of a natural flow for a person to get a little bit more involved in what happens within the city limits. The city pretty much dominates what happens in the surrounding communities a little bit more than what would be suspected. That's what I would like to see happen here.

A second thing I would like to see is a few more African-American people to come to town because it provides an opportunity for persons to interact with African-Americans who are on different economic strata, so that you can see that we are different segments within the African-Americans community as well as different segments in any type of community. Those types of things.

DR: Why do you think there are so few African-Americans living here?

EW: Most of them still have the idea that Holland is a Dutch community. That would be the overall type of impression. Another hindrance to African-Americans as well as anyone who wants to come into the community is affordable housing. The housing market here has escalated tremendously over the fourteen years since we've come here. So it's very difficult for the young people, if they would come into the community, to afford a home. Renting here in Holland is almost as high as if you were in a major city or someplace. And the wage level, I don't know if the wages would be as competitive as if you were in a major metropolitan area. But the cost of housing I suspect is about the same and the quantity

of housing, particularly rental units, are not available for a person with moderate or lower income. The housing issue and the overall impression that Holland is a Dutch community are two reasons why more African-Americans are not here in the community.

DR: What are the most positive things for you about living in this community?

EW: Positive things such as being a small community, still relatively quiet, relatively crime-free. The public schools are still relatively good. Your children can go there; you're not forced to put them in a private school or some other alternative method of trying to get a good education for your child. Those are some of the good things about the community.

DR: On the flip side of that, what are some of the negative things about living here?

EW: The most negative, I think, would be the fact that there are not more African-American people here so that our children would have had a chance to interact a little bit more with African-American people. We've had the opportunity, we could take them back to Flint where we have friends, or take them down to South Bend, Indiana, where there's family and such. But here within their own community, there has been a limited number of African-American people for them to interact with. Even that has a plus and a minus. They still know how to relate to our people we've taken

them elsewhere, but I think they would have appreciated having a greater number of African-Americans to interact with here at home.

DR: Why have you stayed in Holland as long as you have?

EW: Business. Our work has kept us here. Since we opened a business and my husband has come into the business full-time now since the past six years, so this is where our work is. That's what keeps us in the community, because our jobs are here now.

DR: Do you think you may ever move out of the community of Holland?

EW: Highly unlikely until we decide to say we are going to retire or something, because like I say, this is our job. We aren't going to lay ourselves off or something like that! I would not suspect that we would leave other than through retirement and such like that, but that won't happen for a few years yet.

DR: What one thing about you or your life do you think that people who will be reading this interview should definitely know, or what would you like to be remembered by or known as?

EW: Remember to be open in a situation where there might not be many of your own ethnic background, would be the main thing. Come in with an open attitude. Lots of times persons almost seem as if they have a chip on their shoulder or a point to prove, but you have to be open and willing to look at the same situation with a different eye, or just sit back a minute and think about what you want to do and how you want to live. Set your own goals pretty much is what I say and go about achieving those goals. Remain

focused and don't get too bent out of shape about the ordinary things that might be happening which may or not be ordinary, depending on how you look at it. But you have to be open and willing to set your own goals and pursue those goals.

DR: Thank you. I've asked all of my questions. Unless there's anything you would like to add, thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

EW: You're welcome, Donna.