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Between the Wars

A House on Church Lane

Geneva E. Edney

Geneva Edney (87) was interviewed by Gregory Woods on August 17, 1992. Ms. Edney was a lifelong resident of Germantown and Mt. Airy. She died February 9, 2002 at the Germantown (Lutheran) Home.

My name is Geneva E. Edney. I was born September 22, 1905 in Germantown on a beautiful small street called West Price Street.¹ My mother's name was Truelove (known as Tressa) Chambers Smith and my father's name was Robert T. Smith. My mother came up from Lynchburg, Virginia. She settled in Germantown and met Dad. He was from Germantown.

In the early days my mother did not have the best of health. It was so common among Southerners that attention was lacking when she was born. She had a congenital heart impairment. She did not do any work outside of the home. She took care of me and saw to it that I got to school and that I did not miss any music lessons and appointments when I came home from school. She was strict. She also made sure I practiced my music. My mother never felt that she ever missed anything because my dad was an outstanding father. He worked for little pay and he was very faithful to her. You are talking about keeping marriage vows—he *kept* them. He felt he had a beautiful wife. When she was ill from time to time, he would send flowers from a florist. Our porch would be full of beautiful plants. She would come down and sit on the porch.

Q. What was your dad doing? How was he working?

GSE. To start he worked for John S. Trower at the corner of Cheltenham Avenue and Germantown Avenue. A very outstanding catering service. They only catered to the wealthiest people. They were outstanding in marriage parties or buffet parties. The ordinary or poorer people couldn't afford these services.

My dad was a driver for Trower. He had another job working for a garage in Chestnut Hill. He also worked for another caterer on Germantown Avenue. At various times he just worked at different places. Working for minimum wages, he kept busy. God bless him.

Q. How many people worked at Trower when he was there?

GSE. Quite a few. There was an ice cream maker who was German. He would make the best and richest ice cream. They had an outstanding German baker. He would make rolls—they were large, not the pocket size ones. I guess no one knew about this recipe except these German people. Trower's also made some of the most delicious sandwiches and cakes. They were indescribable—the only

¹ Social Security records list September 21 as the birthdate.



Geneva Smith in her 1925 Germantown High School yearbook. The caption reads "Not one word spoke she more than there was need." Ambition: Music Instructor. Hobby: Tennis. GHS archives. Courtesy Gloria Goode.

thing you could do, you had to taste them. Now after living thirty, forty, fifty years, I can smell them but I still can't describe them. They were made with the purest ingredients—nothing but the purest of ingredients.

They had many other drivers and they would take the orders and serve folks all over different distances. They would go to Bryn Mawr. They would go to the private schools and colleges and to the private estates.

Q. Were all the chefs white?

GSE. They were white, that was what was stressed at that time. They were qualified to do that particular kind of work. They had to have the expertise and outstanding knowledge, practically of perfection.



Caterer John Trower (1849–1911), Geneva's father's employer. GHS archives.



A 1913 photograph of John Trower's catering business at 5706 Germantown Avenue. GHS archives.

The Trowers were people of color and John S. Trower was one of wealthiest Negroes in Germantown at that time. At Mt. Zion Baptist Church there is a huge stain[ed glass] window as you come in to the front of the church over the pulpit. It was donated by John S. Trower.

Q. Did you know him personally, or his family?

GSE. Yes, I saw them. There were five sons who worked with their father. It was a huge business. One thing I remember about the Trowers: they did not serve people of color. I remember a daughter. She was quite a singer. I would play for her to sing when she was 8, 9, 10.

I was brought up in a Quaker Sunday School. Mary P. Carter was my Sunday school teacher. At that time Sunday school would open from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. By the grace of God I had a beautiful uncle who took me there. Uncle Walter was my father's brother. Miss Carter became interested in me because I could sing a little and play the piano. We would go to the Home of the Good Shepherd for girls on Chew Street. It is now the property of La Salle College. I was so delighted to go. I would see these children



Studio portrait of Geneva Edney c. 1930. Courtesy Gloria Goode.

Stained glass window donated by John Trower. Photograph from Mt. Zion Anniversary book, 1996.



who needed care. To get back to my point, we were treated to ice cream from John S. Trower. This was a great thrill. We would go to visit this home once a week.

Q. Did Trower train people of color for jobs like cooking?

GSE. No. That was not to be expected at that time. There was a line—separation not segregation. I don't like to discuss that at this time. We only did things like washing. My grandmother would take in washing for \$1.50 a basket of clothes. There weren't too many jobs. You could be a cook in a private family—or perhaps a little business if you were lucky. [Trower] never had colored people there [cooking]. The father [John Trower] kept an exclusive business. But it declined and is now a bar. To this day I have antiques given by people my father knew. Some were presents from them or Trower. I returned to my mother and father after Dr. Edney [my husband] died. I was able to give them the proper attention they needed. I sold some of the pieces—some were cut glass and pure crystal. Dad did his work. He was so proud, a happy person, patient, lovely. They were outstanding models for me.

Q. Your first house—could you describe it?

GSE. It was on Newhall and Coulter Streets adjacent to Enon. Enon Baptist Church bought those houses and demolished them. We moved to Coulter and Priscilla Streets—a house that had been occupied by Whites. It had been blocked off because we [Blacks] did not live everywhere. This house was adjacent to the Keyser School, which has been converted to a factory. Our next house was at 5231 Pulaski Ave. This house was like a little palace—a beautiful porch and living room.

Q. Was it difficult for you to move into a mostly White neighborhood?

GSE. No, it was a mild transition. We had good credit and references. We had put our money in the building and loan bank. We didn't have a problem. We paid the bills. When I got married Trower served my wedding at the church. That was a first and it hadn't been done before.

Trowers served our wedding for a small fee. That was because Dad had been so faithful.

Q. What was important to your family that you do at home?

GSE. I maintained my home—I did house work and kept my home neat and clean since my mother wasn't well. My mother's sister taught me to be independent and do things for myself. My aunt taught me how to prepare foods, take care of things in general, to do the little things, be tidy, neat and to work faithfully. To this day when I do private nursing I do those things, give proper care and neatness.

Q. When you were home did you have big Sunday dinners?

GSE. Yes, my mother had three beautiful sisters, Edith, Margaret, and Hattie, who would come over from church, which was not far away from our house. Mother was accustomed to a house full of people eating. Talk about Southern hospitality—they brought it with them. The sisters would bring their families with food. Lovely food. My mother's nieces and nephews, her sisters' children, would come over any hour up until the time my mother got sick and died. You would hear a knock on the door and my mother would say, "Bring them in," and we would have dinner. After my mother died I had the training and my aunt who had lost her mother came up and lived with me. We continue even till this day in my apartment— if someone comes over we will have dinner. We have a refrigerator full of good food. They would say I can't stay long and we would say we got so and so and they would take off their hats and coats and dine.

Q. Was your family religious?

GSE. Yes my entire family was religious. We were taught in the Quaker Sunday school. I also went to Mt. Zion Baptist Church and went to their Sunday school. My grandfather was a minister and my father was a deacon and my mother was a deaconess. They made me a young deaconess and missionary there. I also played piano there.

It was so secure in my family, physically and spiritually. I never knew what a problem was. I was taught at my mother's knee and at the Hill School. [We were taught] "Hitch your wagon to a star."

I started playing the piano at about ten at Canaan Baptist Church. I started taking piano lessons there and learned to play the pipe organ too. I played for the Sunday school and the Church from ten until I was eighteen, when I married Dr. Edney. My teacher, Professor Taylor, taught the outstanding Jessie Jones (she was put in Enon Church); Alberta Fowler Blackwell (she was put in a church when young); and I was put in Canaan. He [Taylor] died not



Geneva Edney (l.) and her Aunt Margaret at Margaret's home, 1960s. Courtesy Gloria Goode.

long ago. He taught many a long year.

Q. Was it unusual for child to play the piano for the church?

GSE. Yes this was unusual because it was very expensive for someone to get piano lessons. My father worked three jobs so I could get those lessons and to pay for my mother's special medical expenses. I got a baby grand piano when I graduated from Hill School and I kept it until I moved to where I am now. My father had a sick wife and needed specialized medical care. We expanded the house so the baby grand could fit in the house. My father made these sacrifices.

Q. What songs would you play in a church setting?

GSE. Would you like to hear some of them?

Q. Yes.

GSE. I will take off this hat and play some songs for you.

[Ms. Edney then played two dramatic pieces].

Q. Is that one of the pieces that you would play for your church?

GSE. Yes—not too bad for 87!

Q. What musicians inspired you?

GSE. My own teachers—Mr. Taylor, and I had a French teacher, Prof. St. Clare Raines [?] who taught me some very important things about music. I went to Temple and I had private music lessons in harmony.

Q. Who were your neighbors?

GSE. Our neighbors were friends and members of our churches. They knew each other. They moved in gradually as the Caucasians moved out. After Manheim and Coulter Streets there were the richer folks. They had chauffeurs and governesses. It just transferred over. If people did not like people that they were living by they would move to another place just above their living standard. We moved in the late sixties to Rittenhouse Street. My grandfather bought the house and gave it to me. We

stayed there for a long time. My mother died there. After that I moved to where I am now. You have to make a decision to be happy wherever you are. A lot of it depends on you.

Q. Did you have any racial problems when you lived on Manheim?

GSE. No problems whatsoever, never ever.

Q. You went to the Hill School. What was it like?

GSE. First of all you learned to obey and you were taught to improve yourself and to be the best that you could be. Your teachers were examples. We had Olivia [Yancey] Taylor—she taught at the Hill school. She took care of the discipline with problem children, and ones who couldn't keep up. She was very strict. Olivia Taylor was a very fine person and she also attended the Quaker Sunday School with my Uncle Walter and me.

Q. Was there a big different socially between people like your father's family who had been in Germantown a long-time and newer immigrant people?

GSE. Yes there was. They had a certain standard and they tried to maintain it or make it better. You just didn't socialize with everybody. We were "choicy" in our friends. You did not perform to their way of living—you tried to maintain *your* way of living and keep up to your upbringing.

Q. Who did your parents not want you to socialize with?

GSE. Oh dear, this is getting into hard-core stuff. Today it's popular to have family without marriage. Then, you had to select a mate and be faithful to them. You tried not to emulate bad examples. Your parents would quote, "Evil association corrupts good morals." You stayed with your parents, went to church with them. You tried to be obedient to the Golden Rule. You came home at such and such an hour. In summer you would go to your porch or to the park. Quakers had meetings during the week to do crafts. A little Utopia back then...

Q. You tried to keep problems away from your doors?

GSE. Yes, far away! You are not safe in the streets now. Crime is everywhere. Crime, crime, crime—unthinkable! You are not secure anywhere.

Q. What things did you do back then to amuse yourself?

GSE. Movies, house parties—we went house to house, and concerts. My parent would take us to the movies and when I was young they took us to see Marian Anderson in concert. Marian came out of a church down Broad Street in South Philadelphia.

Q. Were you involved in the Girls Reserve?

GSE. Yes, the Girls Reserve was like the Girl Scouts. We would meet once a week. This was before 1930. Yes, we would go there and be taught how to perform our duties. You grew with the facts of life and the idea of becoming a true man or a true woman by way of thinking and your spirit and your living. We would have classes, discussions and talking. Basically you were taught that your teachers, ministers, and parents were your examples. Every other group you went to only reinforced these ideals until you were on your own. Then you had your own family and you tried to do the same thing.



Geneva Edney (center) at a picnic at cousin Luther Handley's home, 1980s. Courtesy Gloria Goode.

Q. What activities would you do?

GSE. We had dances and dinners and did ordinary things that made people happy. There wasn't too much else to do!

Q. What was Germantown High like?

GSE. When I got to Germantown High School prejudice was more noticeable there because it was close to me. We did not swim. I never saw the swimming pool. I can't say for sure if we were barred, but we were never permitted. Only a few colored graduates ever went to senior prom. The well-known outstanding colored family, Dr. Warrick and his daughter [Dorothy] went to the prom. They were very friendly. Both groups [Black and White] were as one to them because they were exclusively high.

Q. It looks like if you had money it made a difference.

GSE. Yes, it sure helped. The Warricks were an old Germantown family and he had two daughters. I later found out I was related to the Warricks.

Q. Did you go to school with them?

GSE. No, they came long before I did. I just remember some of things they did. Dr. Warrick was my mother's doctor. My grandmother was a Warrick. There

was some relationship if you trace things out.

Q. Was he a good doctor?

GSE. [Laughs]. He was a general practitioner.

Q. Was it hard at the mostly all-white Germantown High School?

GSE. It did not matter because we were taught we were as good or better than anybody. We were taught that as far back as my grandparents. We were taught that your life was your life and mine was mine, you had your corner and I had my corner and we were taught to get along with anyone. If it was unpleasant you weren't in that situation to start with.

After I married Dr. Edney we used to go and play tennis in Strawberry Mansion from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.—that was his exercise. Then I was blessed with the seed of new life but for the 9 months I wasn't too well. I delivered with difficulty and the little one didn't survive. I was staying with my mother recovering from the loss of the baby. My husband's dentist office was at 27th and York Sts. He had just renovated his office and was just getting out of debt. He was taken ill and went to the Jewish Hospital now known as Northern Einstein Hospital. He wasn't there twenty-four hours before he died. After my husband died a lawyer took care of the business because my husband did not discuss business with me; he just handled things.

After 1930, Mother got a grocery store at Penn and Pulaski—and my daddy died. We sold poultry and fish. I would clean them. We had a driver, Joseph. There were few places that would clean chicken and fish for you. We had a saying if you have a better mousetrap the people will buy it. Alden Park people bought from us. On Sundays, people would knock on the door and say, "Mrs. Smith, do you have any chickens left?" My mother did not like doing orders on Sunday.

I was playing the piano for churches, not on a regular basis. My family had help from beautiful grandparents. My grandparents were on Price Street till they died. We owe a lot to our family. We owe a lot to my father, Robert P. Smith.

Did color make a difference? Yes it did. It's a trifle better today because of the educational opportunities. You can make it if you persist. You have to have a vision. I went to Women's Medical College for practical nurse training; then I went to the chronically ill hospital (I forget the name); then took pharmacy school, so I could give medication. I worked till 70, then worked at Community Episcopal; then did a little private duty after I came home to take care of my mother. Then my aunt came to live with me. Now I am in the Center [Germantown Nursing Home]. I have my piano. There is a beautiful chapel with a pipe organ.



Geneva Edney at the Germantown (Lutheran) Home, 1990. Courtesy Gloria Goode.

Acknowledgments:

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