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Paris, Cecil, and Paris, Mazie and Paris, Arthur

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewees: Mr. Cecil Paris, Mrs. Mazie Paris, and Dr. Arthur Paris
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Natasha Lightfoot
Date: March 15, 2006

[Transcriber's Note: The tape provided for this interview was extremely unclear. Anything that I could understand I put into text.]

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the 15^{1st} interview of the Bronx African American History Project. Today is March 15th, 2006 and we are in Brooklyn, New York at the home of Mark Naison and we are interviewing Cecil and Mazie Paris who are long time residents of many portions of New York City including The Bronx and we have with us Arthur Paris, a professor at Syracuse University who is their son and Natasha Lightfoot who is going to be our interviewer and also Dr. Paris' daughter when she comes, her name is Oneka.

[Tape Unclear]

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): Now what sort of work did your mother do?

Mrs. Mazie Paris (MP): My mother was a dressmaker.

[Tape Unclear]

MP: My mother's name was Trudy.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: So how'd you end up coming back to the United States after high school?

[Tape Unclear]

NL: Cecil, tell us a little bit about your family.

[Tape Unclear]

CP: September the 20th, 1919. My mother migrated from the West Indies, specifically--.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: Okay, after you were born and what sort of work did she do?

CP: My mother?

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NL: Yes.

CP: Domestic work. And so she did domestic work and--. And migrated to New York City and she lived there, I grew up in New York, NY.

NL: Did she move to Harlem?

CP: First no, she did not move to Harlem. She first moved to the West Side of Lower Manhattan--.

[Tape Unclear]

CP: She moved to the West Side of Manhattan and further migrated to Harlem and that's where I grew up.

NL: What high school did you go to?

CP: I went to public school. Which was then called Textile High School.

[Tape Unclear]

CP: And so while my mother was working in Manhattan--. I went to Textile High School in Manhattan and I graduated. – And then I was fortunate enough to be accepted into City College, and I went to City College. And I worked through City College and--.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: Now what [inaudible] of the service did you go into?

CP: The Army.

NL: Now when you went into the Army were you--?

CP: No.

NL: How'd the two of you meet?

[Tape Unclear]

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Mark Naison (MN): Now, did your families belong to West Indian associations? Is that how they knew each other?

CP: Well, I don't know really. I do know that, they came across on the same boats together.

MN: Was there a tendency for people from the Caribbean to—you know to bond with one another and socialize?

MP: Yes.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: Do you remember any places where there were particular—West Indian associations?

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Did either of you go to cricket matches, was that part of the--?

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Now, Mr. Paris what sort of work did you do and how old were you when you first began working?

[Tape Unclear]

NL: Did either of your parents get involved in politics or, you know, like the Garvey Movement?

MP: No, my mother didn't get involved.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Now, did you settle in The Bronx when you got married?

MP: Yes, and no. We lived in The Bronx until--. And then--.

[Tape Unclear]

CP: We were some of the first non-white tenants to live there.

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[Tape Unclear]

NL: So she lived in the neighborhood for some time?

CP: My 3 sisters and, and my grandmother and my great aunt Susan.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: And what was it like [inaudible], was it a nice neighborhood to live?

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Were there jazz musicians?

MP: Jazz musicians.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Now did you ever go to hear live music in The Bronx when you were living there? At churches or clubs or theaters?

MP: Oh, yes. Fordham Road--.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Did you ever go to the Hunt's Point Palace?

CP: No.

MN: Did you listen to West Indian music in your home at all?

[Tape Unclear]

MN: So you didn't go out of your way to listen to Calypso or--?

MP: No.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: Did you take your children to museums? Were there many cultural opportunities?

[Tape Unclear]

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CP: She was always taking the children someplace.

NL: Did you ever go to outings or picnics with your family, like in Crotona Park or--?

CP: Yes, yes, yes my father used to take us--.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: How did you get your domestic jobs, was it through word of mouth, through agencies?

MP: --it was through word of mouth and also--.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Now do you remember seeing a change in the composition in the racial composition of the neighborhood? Is that something that impressed itself upon you at all?

MP: I remember there was a shoemaker [inaudible] and he went downstairs and worked over at the El and the shoemaker was on the north side of the street. The shoemaker was White--.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Now, Mazie and Cecil when you were starting a family in Manhattan—okay and Arthur how many siblings do you have?

Arthur Paris (AP): 4.

MN: 4, so there are 5 of you.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Now when [inaudible] and visiting your grandparents, what was your sense about The Bronx? We're going back to a neighborhood which is less desirable or was it a very stable safe area?

AP: --the finest houses which were east of Boston Road--. There was a greater sense of the neighborhood being quiet and peaceful.

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[Tape Unclear]

AP: And she used to come to our house in the projects. —on the 14th floor.

MN: Now when you moved into public housing was it considered a good—a step up at that time?

MP: I guess it was a step up as a different step. Because—everything new, everything much more--.

MN: So you had appliances that are, yes--?

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Now what year did you move into the [inaudible] Houses?

MP: I moved in 1956, '55. We bought the house in '54 but we didn't move into it until January 1955.

NL: And what year did you move into the [inaudible] housing in Harlem?

MP: 1948.

NL: Okay, so you're there for 7 years. And Arthur what were your recollections of living in public housing?

[Tape Unclear]

MP: But the Rosarios they were Spanish people. Now there was time when I grew up in Spanish Harlem and so I was familiar with the Spanish people. However,--.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: Did you feel safe growing up in [inaudible] Houses?

[Tape Unclear]

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AP: But beyond that I don't remember outright discrimination. There are still Irish and Italians who east of—and on the other side of 3rd Avenue. I remember those kids in school. So there is a fair mix of Black and Latin and--. There is a public school on West 115th between Lexington and 3rd--.

MN: Now, was there a point in which there was a conversation in your family, we have to get grandma out of The Bronx?

CP: No.

MN: So that neighborhood never became dangerous then?

CP: No.

NL: What about cleanliness? Were the streets relatively clean?

CP: Yes.

NL: And you didn't have step over drunk or any of that stuff?

MP: No.

NL: None of that stuff.

[Tape Unclear]

NL: So you went to school during the day and worked at night?

CP: Yes.

MN: Now how did you find the house in East Elmhurst? Was this word of mouth?

[Tape Unclear]

MN: How did you find out there was an open house and decide this was the house you wanted?

CP: I went to look at the house, I didn't have much money--.

[Tape Unclear]

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MP: I have 2 sisters and one sister was very fair skinned—apartment, I don't remember her--.

[Tape Unclear]

MP: Okay, so my mother took me to see this apartment--.

[Tape Unclear]

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

[Tape Unclear]

NL: What is the story about the house in Bayside [inaudible] the way it started--?

CP: It was a 4-bedroom house--.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Natasha are you asking a question?

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Claire Harris is a person I went out to interview who's probably, you know, our age Arthur, so it was the Harris family, that was your godmother?

AP: Yes. —on the top floor and she was a godmother to me.

[Tape Unclear]

CP: When we moved the Harlem, we didn't have too many, you know, continuation of friendships with [inaudible] in The Bronx.

MN: Any other questions?

AP: My mother has a brother, okay, well my mother has 2 sisters, one she's mentioned, Gladys who--.

MN: The lighter skin person.

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AP: And there's another one Ruby who is the mother of this cousin of mine who's a teacher.

And then she has a brother, so my mother has a brother—his name is Benjamin. And then the other 2 had a different father--.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: Why don't we do this then, we'll wind up the official and then talk about pictures and if something comes up relative to the pictures I'll put it on the tape. So thank you very much, wow this was--.

[Break in Tape]

AP: My father's 2 aunts, they—the three of them--.

[Tape Unclear]

[Break in Interview]

MN: Okay, we're talking about the [inaudible] Market. So Mister Paris this was 167th Street?

CP: 167th Street. One block west of--.

[Tape Unclear]

CP: The best place to get fish [inaudible] was 115th Street and Park Avenue.

[Break in Tape]

MN: We're talking about jobs that were difficult to get. You said your brother was an electrician?

AP: Yes.

[Tape Unclear]

MN: So he got into the electrical, electrical workers union?

[Tape Unclear]

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MN: You had a lot of college-educated people who were working in the post office, who were cooks on the trains or a lot of people who were chefs--.

[Tape Unclear]

AP: And getting, you know, a job as a motorman or a conductor was a big step, those were the union jobs and but it definitely was a restraint on the income level of the community as a whole.

[END OF INTERVIEW]