

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

FLORINE WISE

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Chemical Heritage Foundation
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

on

26 September 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This oral history was conducted as part of a joint project of the Chemical Heritage Foundation and the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. This project was supported by the Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health under Award Number R25OD010521-01.



THE CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION
Center for Oral History

Title of the Research Study: Resources for Education and Action for Community Health in Ambler
Protocol Number: 817669
Principal Investigator: (name, address, phone and email) Frances K. Barg, PhD, Anatomy Chemistry 141-2, 215-746-1830, fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu
Co-investigator: (name, address, phone and email): Jody Roberts, PhD, Chemical Heritage Foundation—315 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA, 215-873-8281, jroberts@chemheritage.org
Emergency Contact: (name, address, phone and email): Frances K. Barg, PhD, Anatomy Chemistry 141-2, 215-746-1830, fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu

FINAL RELEASE FORM

This document contains my understanding and agreement with the Chemical Heritage Foundation with respect to my participation in the audio- and/or video-recorded interview conducted by Lee Berry on 26 September 2014. I have read the transcript supplied by the Chemical Heritage Foundation.

1. The recordings, transcripts, photographs, research materials, and memorabilia (collectively called the "Work") will be maintained by the Chemical Heritage Foundation and made available in accordance with general policies for research and other scholarly purposes.
2. By signing this document, you will grant, assign, and transfer to the Chemical Heritage Foundation all right, title, and interest in the Work, including the literary rights and the copyright. Participants retain the right to copy, use, and publish the Work in part or in full until their death.
3. The manuscript may be read and the recording(s) heard/viewed by scholars approved by the Chemical Heritage Foundation unless restrictions are placed on the transcript as listed below.

By signing this document, you are agreeing that this constitutes your entire and complete understanding.

(Signature) Florine E. Wise
Florine Wise

(Date) 3/19/2015

OPTIONAL: If you wish to place the following restrictions on the use of your interview, please indicate below:

No Restrictions

Regardless of any restrictions that may be placed on the transcript of the interview, the Chemical Heritage Foundation retains the rights to all materials generated about your oral history interview, including the title page, abstract, table of contents, chronology, index, et cetera (collectively called the "Front Matter and Index"), all of which will be made available on the Chemical Heritage Foundation's website. Should the Chemical Heritage Foundation wish to post to the Internet the content of the oral history interview, that is, direct quotations, audio clips, video clips, or other material from the oral history recordings or the transcription of the recordings, the Chemical Heritage Foundation will be bound by the restrictions for use placed on the Work as detailed above. Should the Chemical Heritage Foundation wish to post to the Internet the entire oral history interview during your lifetime, you will have the opportunity to permit or deny this posting.

The Chemical Heritage Foundation will enforce my wishes until the time of my death, when any restrictions will be removed.

This interview has been designated as **Free Access**.

Please note: Users citing this interview for purposes of publication are obliged under the terms of the Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF) Center for Oral History to credit CHF using the format below:

Florine Wise, interview by Lee Sullivan Berry at the Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 26 September 2014 (Philadelphia: Chemical Heritage Foundation, Oral History Transcript #0919).



Chemical Heritage Foundation
Center for Oral History
315 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106



The Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF) serves the community of the chemical and molecular sciences, and the wider public, by treasuring the past, educating the present, and inspiring the future. CHF maintains a world-class collection of materials that document the history and heritage of the chemical and molecular sciences, technologies, and industries; encourages research in CHF collections; and carries out a program of outreach and interpretation in order to advance an understanding of the role of the chemical and molecular sciences, technologies, and industries in shaping society.

ABSTRACT

Florine Wise was born in her grandmother's house and grew up in West Ambler, Pennsylvania, near her grandmother and many aunts and uncles. Her parents worked for Sperry Univac; two uncles worked at the asbestos plants. Although Wise was aware of special precautions needed to avoid asbestos exposure, she occasionally went sledding down the piles of asbestos-containing waste, as did most of the children she knew. Wise attended local parochial schools and graduated from Wissahickon High School; she worked as a legal typist/assistant for the Montgomery County Courthouse for a number of years. She has lived in several other places, but she considers Ambler her home town. Two of her children live near Ambler, one in Maryland.

Detailing changes she has observed in her community, she notes that West Ambler has not been included in Whitpain Township's comprehensive development plan; the area only recently got stop signs and sidewalks. She says older communities, many of them generations old, are being uprooted to make way for gentrification. Because of the remediation of the asbestos piles West Ambler's park was closed; the new Wentz Run Park, built as a substitute, is too far away for West Ambler residents to use, so Wise has been trying—unsuccessfully so far—to get a community center approved Boys and Girls Club, a space for other groups like dance classes, and a place for both young people and senior citizens to hang out.

Wise helped establish Citizens for a Better Ambler (CBA) to fight a proposed high-rise on Ambler's asbestos area. With the advent of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the CBA developed into a community advisory group (CAG), and the ensuing debate over remediation caused a split between Sharon McCormick's faction, who advocated total removal of asbestos, and Wise's, who wanted capping. Wise points out that removal of asbestos would mean many years of continuous truck traffic, with uncontrolled asbestos exposure, and increased flooding, all in the African-American neighborhoods of West Ambler. Despite these disagreements, Wise says things are going well with the CAG, and she is now the head of the environmental justice committee of the CAG.

Although she laments the demise of community cohesion, the indomitable Wise continues the dedication to service practiced by her mother, an informal community leader. She is now involved with Chuck Colson's Angel Tree, through the Presbyterian Church; this group helps keep prisoners bonded with their children. She emphasizes the importance of communication among citizens and believes that a community center would expedite such communication in Ambler. Her objectives include improving the safety and appeal of Ambler for its residents, especially by improving infrastructure and preventing flooding.

INTERVIEWER

Lee Sullivan Berry earned a master's degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Information	1
<p>Born in Ambler; grows up in West Ambler, near many family members. Parents' employment. Uncles worked at asbestos plant. Sledding on piles of asbestos waste. "Back Street" houses. Catholic elementary school, then Wissahickon High School. Lives in Philadelphia with first husband; returns to Maple Street with mother; remarries widowed again. Works as legal typist/assistant at Montgomery County Courthouse.</p>	
Impressions of Ambler	8
<p>West Ambler more black now. Facilities still not in Whitpain Township's comprehensive redevelopment plan. No sidewalks for West Ambler; Wentz Run Park too far, opened as West Ambler park closed. Older, possibly historic, communities being uprooted. West Ambler in Whitpain Township, South Ambler in Borough of Ambler.</p>	
West Ambler Civic Association (WACA)'s Improvement Attempts	14
<p>Tries to establish Boys and Girls Club. Horrific crime impetus for center. Section 8 housing promoted for high-rise project; houses built when high-rise voted down. Closing of asbestos plants affected Italians' employment; African-Americans mostly employed outside community. Closing of park.</p>	
Organizing	22
<p>Citizens for a Better Ambler (CBA) and community advisory group (CAG). NAACP lawyer. Destruction of McDonald's from asbestos-filled land. Wise's relationship with CAG and Sharon McCormick. Debate over remediation. Flooding in West Ambler. CAG meetings going well; Wise head of environmental justice committee. Landowners renting to white people, displacing African-American former owners; community feeling gone. Need recreation building to help provide pride, accomplishment. Otis Hightower and Alice Dean. Comprehensive plan for West Ambler.</p>	
General Thoughts	42
<p>Attending school to become medical administrative assistant. Her mother as a role model. Keeps prisoners bonded with their children. No progress with CAG; cannot agree with Sharon McCormick. Thinks EPA doing excellent job of communication. Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection as advocates and interpreters. Infrastructure in West Ambler. Lesson for other communities. Priorities include improving infrastructure and building a better sense of community.</p>	
Index	54

INDEX

A

Adams, Robert, 41, 42
Ambler asbestos piles, 4, 5, 46
Ambler streets
 Bethlehem Pike, 10, 14
 Maple Street, 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 18, 26, 29, 30, 39, 43, 44, 51
 Mount Pleasant Avenue, 9, 11, 20, 26, 44, 47
 Oak Street, 8, 30, 51
 Railroad Avenue, 8, 30, 39, 51
 Tennis Avenue, 10, 29
Amchem Inc., 10
American Legion Auxiliary, 40
American Legion Post, 13, 21
Angel Tree, 40

B

Bender, Mr., 6, 8, 13
Bishop McDevitt High School, 5
Bluebell Elementary School, 8
Bluebell, Pennsylvania, 2, 8, 9, 11, 15, 16, 20, 26, 28, 38
Bodeen, Barbara, 27
BoRit site, 22
Borough of Ambler
 South Ambler, 4, 12, 17, 21, 47, 48
 West Ambler, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32, 34, 35, 37, 42, 43, 44, 45, 47, 49, 50, 52
Boys and Girls Club, 14, 21, 22
Burgess, Diane, 13, 27, 34

C

CAG. *See* Community Advisory Group
Cattie, Danielle, 15, 16, 17
CertainTeed Corporation, 19
church, 16, 17, 34, 40
 First Presbyterian Church, 40
Citizens for a Better Ambler, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27
Colson, Charles W., 40
Community Advisory Group, 23, 24, 27, 28, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46
Cutler, Adam, 32, 33

D

Dante (grandson), 13
Dean, Alice, 32, 33, 34, 35, 45
DEP. *See* Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection
Dorsey, Ebony, 15, 16, 27
Dylan (grandson), 13

E

Emmett, Edward A., 21, 29, 42

F

Ferguson, Missouri, 9
flooding, 9, 11, 28, 30, 44, 49

G

Germantown, Pennsylvania, 6

H

Henkels & McCoy, 9, 15
high-rise [project], 18, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 48
Hightower, Otis, 31, 32, 44, 51

J

Jewel (sister), 15

K

Keasbey & Mattison Company, 4, 49
Kramer, Bob, 14, 21

L

Lansdale, Pennsylvania, 19

M

Madison Elementary School, 21
Maricola, Mary, 10, 17, 29, 50
Marino, Michael, 18, 22, 23, 26
Maryland, 7, 8, 16, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 41, 50
Matthew, Thelma, 11, 43, 51
McCormick, Sharon, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 41, 42, 46
Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, 7, 36, 40

N

NAACP. *See* National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 19, 22, 23, 52
Nevada, 29, 42
Nicolet Industries, 18
Nixon, President Richard M., 40
Norristown, Pennsylvania, 8, 11, 16, 18, 51
North Hills, Pennsylvania, 10, 12
North Wales, Pennsylvania, 10, 19

P

Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, 32,
33, 41, 48
Perry, Brad, 10, 15
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1, 6, 10, 12, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32
Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, 12
prison, 40, 41
 Graterford State Penitentiary, 40
 Jessup State Prison, 41

R

religion
 Christianity
 Roman Catholicism, 5

S

Shady Grove Elementary School, 8, 13, 22
Souderton, Pennsylvania, 14
Spring House, Pennsylvania, 1, 2
St. Anthony-St. Joseph Elementary School, 5, 8
Superfund, 43, 45

T

Thompson, Alva, 17
Thompson, Patsy, 17

U

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 9, 14, 23, 29, 32,
33, 41, 42, 43, 47, 48
Univac, 2, 3, 19

V

Virginia, 3, 20, 35, 46

W

WACA. *See* West Ambler Civic Association, *See* West
 Ambler Civic Association
Warner, Evelyn, 23, 52
Wentz Run Park, 9, 12
West Ambler Civic Association, 14, 27, 28, 31, 32, 44
White Mountain[s] of Ambler, 48
Whitpain Township, Pennsylvania, 8, 11, 12, 15, 20, 21,
 28, 30, 32, 33, 42, 45, 49, 50
Wise, Oscar (husband), 15
Wise's family
 Bertha (cousin), 8, 11, 44, 47, 52
 Cassie (sister), 39
 Chad (uncle), 4, 19
 Denise (cousin), 34
 Julie (sister), 34, 39
 Robin Cole (cousin), 9
 Ruth (sister), 9, 34, 39
 Sam (uncle), 4, 19
 Shirley (sister), 39
 Walter (uncle), 48
Wissahickon High School, 5, 6, 8

Z

Zucker, Adam, 14