because every evening they'd get out and walk and here they were all pregnant and then it dawned on us, this is what this is. They're putting them over here but you see they were shielding them. There were no Crittenton homes for blacks.

I worked at only one place for thirty-seven years and that was at the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services. I started working there in January of 1949. I was in different programs during that tenure but I enjoyed it. Now we were segregated when I went there. Blacks did not have white clients there. We only did blacks. But whites could do both. As blacks we had to have some form of social work training before we were hired. But whites could come right out of college and some came right out of high school and got jobs doing that.

I was the first black in the county that became the program administrator of the child welfare department. I had seventy-two people in my department. I used to be unsure about integration but it didn't take me long after I got into that department and I was sure about how I felt about it. When I got in there we had [black] children who had been in foster care, hung in the system, and they were telling me that nobody wants them, they don't have any relatives. Until one day I got enough of it. I was working on foster home licensing and relicensing and this child's name popped up and I said to the supervisor, "I had this case a long time ago. What's going on here?"

"Oh, they don't have anybody."

I said, "You mean to tell me that all the family got killed in an airplane or in a car wreck at one time?" So I got the name of trying to be smart. But [African Americans] started giving our babies up for adoption, and a lot of them never got adopted because we didn't want them. Well, I won't say [black people] didn't want them, but the guidelines that they put for adoption for whites were the same for blacks. Now how many blacks would have a bank account of X number of dollars, have education, before you could adopt a child? So consequently [the children] were hung in the system because [black potential parents] couldn't meet the guidelines.

Florence Borders was born in 1924 in New Iberia, a rural Louisiana community, and grew up in New Orleans. Here she discusses her experiences on black college campuses—first as a student at Southern University in Scotlandville, Louisiana, in the 1940s and later as an employee at Bethune-Cookman College from 1947 to 1958. Her recollections emphasize the impact of World War II on women's experiences and how that war transformed gender roles and the regulations that guided life on historically black college campuses. Borders' story emphasizes the support women were expected to give husbands but also the importance of women learning independence, given high mortality rates in black families.

My college years exactly coincided with the years of World War II and the most striking event of my freshman year was the bombing of Pearl Harbor. That

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

changed the whole college experience for all of us who were in college at that time, because once that happened, of course, the men on our campus began voluntarily to leave because they knew that they were going to be in any first draft, once it was put into effect. And they expressed the feeling that they would have a head start if they would just go on and volunteer because some of them had ambitions of going to Officers Candidate School, and they would have those few months ahead of some of the people who would be coming in later. So despite the advice of some of our faculty people who had been veterans of World War I, men left the campus wholesale before even we broke for Christmas which was just a few weeks more. They were being advised to just stay and finish out the semester and with the older wiser heads saying, "The war will end at some point. It will not last forever, and you might as well finish this semester so when you come back, you can begin at that point." Well, they chose not to listen and just every day we would see the young men dragging their trunks across campus to get to a point at which a taxi could assist them in getting the trunks to the station. And many of those young men, we never saw again. A lot of the girls cried. Sometimes because the young men involved were their boyfriends, but [also] because they had then begun to feel that this was a separation. This was a good-bye and our paths might never again cross. And so instead of all the joy that I had expected for my freshman year of college, within a few more weeks the country was at war.

I had [gone to] church that Sunday. And when I came back my roommate's ears were glued to the radio and as I came in bubbling with news of what had happened on the trip, she was saying, "shhhhhh. The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor." Well, not many of us had ever heard of Pearl Harbor. We had heard of the Philippines. We had heard of Manila. But Pearl Harbor was just unknown to us by name at that point. But long before we finished that freshman year in college we knew the geography of the Philippines. We knew Corregidor and Bataan,[14] and everything that was connected with the war, and we were steadily praying for the tide to turn, because at first, of course, [the Americans] were definitely the underdogs. And we started learning the map of the Philippines and of the near east, the far east, and everything else, because once the letters started coming from the young men, again there were places that they were mentioning that were unknown to us.

But that changed the way college was for me for my freshman year, although we had nice little activities. We still had our dances and even after football games the dances turned into formals and truck loads of GIs would be invited from the Air Force base which was near us and from Camp Plauche and Camp Leroy Johnson here in New Orleans. It wasn't that we did not have men to dance with, we probably had more men than we would have had if the war had not occurred and the guys had remained on campus. But it was just that they tried to make everything so special because they began to feel that this might be the

last special thing some of these young men would experience. So we dressed in long formals for what would have been just a sock hop after a football game and tried to make each thing special. After the war, many of the girls married returning solders who would have been upperclassmen, and who would have gone by the time they would have reached the stage that they were in the normal course of events.

When I went to work at Bethune-Cookman College,[15] I married a returning veteran who was in college continuing his education under the GI Bill,[16] and most of the young women on that faculty married returning veterans who [were coming back to school]. And a lot of the codes for behavior between faculty members and students had to be adjusted because there had once been a no fraternization policy between faculty and students. The first thing these returning GIs felt had to go was some rule telling them that they could or could not date certain people who might be the people of their choice, and they had a strong argument. They had just gone through a whole lot of stuff for the right to choose their mate, and it didn't matter to them if that mate happened to be on the faculty. So nobody really said that rule was abolished, but it was merely ignored. And several of us at Bethune-Cookman College at that time married returned GIs who continued on through their college and graduated, as my husband did. But that was one of the ways that the war had affected us.

By the time I finished library school [at Southern] the war had ended and the veterans were returning to college campuses en mass and staff had to be increased. So I could have had my pick of jobs just about, because librarians were very much in demand, and so I chose to go to Bethune-Cookman College because of Mrs. Bethune.[17] I looked forward to meeting her, working with Mrs. Bethune, and being able to do things with her and help promote programs which she was interested in implementing. And Mrs. Bethune could work four or five secretaries to a frazzle. So everybody who could push a typewriter had to help get out correspondence and things when she had big projects underway. And she sat and talked to us about her dreams for young black women, and one of them was to see more of us enter into politics. Oh, I remember how much she encouraged me. She was really a very family-oriented person despite all of her other outside involvements, as the president of an insurance company even after she had retired from the college as administrator.[18] And she had a number of things to do keeping the National Council of Negro Women going and encouraging the women at Bethune-Cookman to see that there was an active chapter right at her own doorstep. All of this occupied a lot of her time, but she was nevertheless still a very strongly family-oriented person.

And she was very mindful of women. She did not want women to have to give up their professions because they had families. She wanted to see us married, and raise families, and still work at whatever it was we chose to do. And the thing that impressed me when I went to work at Bethune-Cookman

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

College was the large number of women who headed departments. But then when I thought about Mrs. Bethune having started the whole thing, it wouldn't then seem so strange that she put confidence in women. The Dean of Instruction was a woman. The head of the Education Department was a woman. I mean, women really were in the leading administrative positions after the president and that was true for many of the departments. I was frequently offered the opportunity to work elsewhere at larger salary increments, but I felt if Mrs. Bethune had made the kind of sacrifice she had made to do what she had done, I could give up a few little old luxuries and make whatever contribution I could make to help further her work. And I think that a lot of people that worked there had that kind of mentality. We knew that we could make more money somewhere else, but that wasn't why we were in the profession. And so, you know, we were getting along. We weren't starving and we weren't candidates for welfare.

But I knew that my husband's eventual goal was to attend Meharry,[19] and when he was ready to go, despite Meharry's advice that wives and children stay home, I joined him and took the children. We all left and went to Nashville. I was working at Tennessee State and the women had a little group. Many of the women of the fellows who were enrolled in Meharry worked and they called it the PHT Club—putting hubby through. Putting hubby through. It was really a way of having one income continue. I worked and that maintained us on a daily basis. I wasn't unique in that. Unless you came from a professional family with somebody who could afford to send you to medical school, you usually had wives who worked.

But he died before he completed his degree. He died in '59 and I had the two boys who were nine and ten and the girl who was three. He suffered from a coronary embolism which resulted from his pushing his car up a hill in Nashville. And it happened that my husband was buried on his thirty-third birthday. So it was a really tough period for me, but I often think about how my mother helped me. Because every time I'd sit down and start feeling sorry for myself, she would say to me, "You might as well get up and go on with your life. Your great-grandmother was widowed at twenty-seven with more children than you and much less education and she made it. So you ought to be able to make it, but you aren't going to be able to make it if you're going to sit around pitying yourself." So I said, oh well, I guess I'll go ahead on and get a job near my family at least. So I did.

Margaret Sampson Rogers was born in 1939 Wilmington, North Carolina. Her mother, who had run away and had a baby out of wedlock at a very young age, was determined to protect Margaret from a similar fate. Here Rogers explains the lessons her mother tried to pass on about the people she should associate with and those she

should avoid. Rogers' mother expressed many prejudices about skin color, morality, and respectability that her daughter challenged. Rogers describes how her own behavior did and did not conform to her mother's admonitions and how she understood the expectations put on black women under segregation.

Our black people are very prejudiced. They always have been and my mother was one. She was a very fair-skinned lady and she often made the remark that she didn't like black people. The only reason she wore black shoes was they went with her outfit. So she was very particular about with whom I could associate. Because she would say, "well, you don't need to associate with that person because his mother's not married," or "her mother's not married," or "they drink a lot. You don't need to be with these people." She was a very bigoted individual, very bigoted. When I got ready to get married, she told me I had to be careful whom I married because [otherwise] I could have children that looked like ink spots. But this was stuff that went in one ear and out the other. I couldn't see that. I never could see that. But she was very bigoted. People would tell her, "I waved at you when you were driving down the street the other day."

She'd say, "Well, child, I didn't see you. I was just looking straight ahead. I didn't see a soul." Yes, she did. Yes, she did.

My mother was not welcome in neighbors' homes. But my father was welcome in everybody's house. She was very bigoted that way and I didn't like it and that was one of the [issues between us]. I felt that we were having enough problems with the whites. Why do we have to have this problem within the race? The fair-skinned blacks, especially the fair-skinned blacks with long hair, were very much disliked by the darker skinned. They didn't like to associate with them and a lot of them were very nice people. They really were. But it was jealousy. It was perpetuated down through the generations that the lighter, the fairer were the more intelligent, the more talented, and that's why you had a lot of blacks who tried to pass. Because if you were dark you weren't given the same considerations. And somehow it just kept going and then the children would pick it up from the adults, and it just kept going and going even to today. In some cases the teachers played favorites because of color. The teacher played favorites because of occupations. The doctor's children and the lawyer's children were treated differently. The very fair-skinned were treated differently. In a lot of instances, when they had the beauty pageants within the schools and whatever, the fairer skinned girls were usually the first ones considered. It just went on and it wasn't something that any thought was given to. It was just an assumption. This is the way it's going to be.

If you became pregnant that was the end of your education. They didn't want anybody to see you. Folks didn't want to associate with you because [you would be] considered [a] bad girl. See, it was still a double standard. These same people who were talking about what this girl who's pregnant had done, in a lot

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

of instances they were doing the same thing. Having sex wasn't the problem. She got caught. But in a lot of instances she wouldn't have gotten pregnant if somebody had told her how not to. But you couldn't during that time. I couldn't ask my mother anything about sex. Because every question I asked her I got slapped in the mouth. So then you had to find an adult that you could go to to ask who would tell you what was right and what was wrong. I had to ask my librarian at high school. I used to call her my second mom. She had a miscarriage and I was in the tenth grade, but I had no idea what this was. I knew she was pregnant because I had seen [her] abdomen in [her] clothing. But when I went [to the hospital] it wasn't there. So the first thing I wanted to know was well, does it go down immediately, is it like a balloon? Because I had no idea what happened to the abdomen once the baby was born. I really didn't know how the baby came out unless she had an operation. So I asked her and she would sit and talk to me.

My mother ran away from home when she was twelve. She got married and she had a baby when she was thirteen. Once I became twelve I was not allowed outside after dark. I had to be home, in the house, before street lights came on. That included the years I was in college, until my senior year, and I had just had it. I sat on the porch at the people's house across the street and let the street lights come on. I just simply refused to be home before those street lights came on. I was just too old for that. My mother talked about people having children and not being married, people having sex. She never used the word sex, of course, oh, no. If you said that you got slapped in the mouth. The girls were called dirty and no good and they usually would say, "Well, you know, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. The mama is no good; therefore, the daughter can't be no good." You know, if one person in the family did something then everybody in the whole family was blamed for it. And so my parents picked who I could talk to. When people called on the phone, they had to know who it was and if it was somebody from a family they didn't want you to talk to, I couldn't talk to them. But if I had to talk to them without my mother knowing, that's what I did. I just don't see it. But you fought that Jim Crow stuff on both sides. It wasn't just on the white side. That's what is so sad.

One of my dear friends lived on the street around the corner from me but our back yards connected. But [my mother said] I couldn't go to her house because her mother was not married, and she had a bunch of "bastard young 'uns." So I played with Hattie anyway. Whenever my mother left me home and she went out in the car, then I'd go out in the back yard, hop the fence, and go play with Hattie. And the kids would whistle and let me know when they saw that Buick coming, and then I'd scramble back in the back yard and when she came home I'd be out in the back yard playing.

And then there were people she wanted me to associate with. What she kept bringing up to me was the fact that I was an illegitimate child. I was constantly

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

told this. This was something that black people did, too, which does not help the children. But she was telling me I was going to grow up and have a bunch of "bastard young 'uns" just like my mama. So being as stubborn as I was, I figured out there was one sure way not to have any and so I didn't have sex until I was married. But it was not because I did not want to. Let's clear that fact up. It was that I was so stubborn and determined that the only way to prove to my mother I was not going to [get pregnant] was not to have sex.

I dated a guy in college[20] for about four months before I found out he was white. I didn't know. I would date the service men. They could take me to the movies. They had the money. A jealous classmate found out he was white and told the administration. This was during the 1950s. They called me in and said, "You get rid of him in twenty-four hours or we're expelling you from school." And if I had been expelled and sent home, my mother would have killed me graveyard dead. There was no doubt in my mind, this lady would have killed me. And I did not have the nerve; I could not find it within me to go to this boy and tell him the school says I can't date you anymore because you're white. I thought he was Puerto Rican, really, is what I thought. He was well liked. At homecoming he sat with the president and his wife during the game. He would be on campus after curfew. He was a well-educated person. He was stationed at Fort Bragg.[21] He was in the Army, staff sergeant. So once people found out he was white, I could not come right out and tell him that these people are so prejudiced, they say I can't date you. So I told the guy that I couldn't see him one day, that I had to work. He was on campus anyway. When I saw him, I grabbed a buddy and we walked past and I was all over this guy like white on rice, you know, because I knew it would upset my boyfriend. I kissed him on the jaw, you know. And so my boyfriend got upset and he called me later and was asking me about it. And I said, "Hey, well, you know, that's how the cookie crumbles." It was a mess. But I knew that I could not bring that white man home. I knew I could not let the school expel me for dating this white man because my mom would not have allowed it. She didn't like dark-skinned black people but there was no way in the world I could bring a white man in that house. Not and ever plan to come back in there.

It was expected, and it still is to a certain degree, that a woman has three or four jobs. She works out of the house. She's the maid, cook, and chief bottle washer. She is expected to be there for the husband whenever sex is required, whether she wants it or not. That's the third job. Okay. Then if there are errands, whatever, take care of the kids on top of all the other stuff. So you have a good four or five jobs that you do and it is expected that you do this. Your husband expects that you do this, white or black. [But if you were black,] then you worked for the whites. You did everything that they wanted done. So then that added another job. And if you said, "Well, this is Miss Ann's house, why can't she...?"

"Oh no, white women don't do that."

"Well, why don't white women do that?"

"White women just don't scrub the toilet."

And I want to say, "But you use the toilet. If you use the toilet then you can clean it." So you had the discrimination, the belittlement, I guess, from both sides, and then as a black woman you were made to feel that you really weren't that good because you're going to be asked to do something that a white woman would never think of doing. So it perpetuated itself and in a lot of ways it was just always there and it just depended on how you decided to deal with it. And I just decided to deal with it right out in the open.

Julia Wells was born in 1936 and raised in Sumter County, South Carolina. She characterized her childhood as one of "extreme poverty." After her mother died, Wells was raised by her grandmother. She chose to marry when she was still in high school, a wedding that occurred on the day her husband shipped off to military service. During her husband's absence, Wells worked her way through college, and later returned to teach at the high school from which she had graduated. Here she recalls the tragedies that shaped her life as a child and the lessons that she learned from her grandmother. She also recalls the circumstances of her marriage when she was seventeen and how the lack of access to birth control impeded women's opportunities for employment, thereby constraining families that relied on women's income. Like Margaret Rogers in the previous interview, Wells describes how women's appearance, especially skin color, was treated within her community. Also like Rogers, Wells' interview reveals generational tensions about respectability and how younger women pushed back to create their own cultural mores.

My mother died in childbirth when I was three, having my baby brother. And my mother and father were very young. I was their second child. And they were sharecroppers and when she had the problem birth, the midwife noticed that something was going wrong with the pregnancy. They sent my daddy to town to get a doctor but he didn't get back until the next day with the doctor and she was dead by then. And I've heard the stories over and over of how his mother took me and my sister in her arms and how people got the baby and wrapped him and took him away. For the first six months after she died, my sister and I and the newborn baby lived with my daddy's mom.

My mother's mother was the third wife of an old man who I believe was nearly eighty when we were born, but my mother's mother was a fairly young woman. She could not hear, was hard of hearing. That was a phrase they used. And after we became adults, my sister and I, we came to realize that most people thought she was what they called "off," not really all there mentally. But she is the most significant other in my life and this is where poverty comes in. Out in the country with my daddy's people there were always a lot of people around because there were children and grandchildren and everything. And I think my

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

daddy and my mama sold liquor. And my daddy would take my sister and me around with him from one liquor house to the other. But I can remember one day my mother's mother came out to get us and it was an argument to no end between her and my father's mother. She was saying things like, "your son killed my daughter and I'm not going to let you kill her children. These are my children." But she took us up and took us back home with her. Well, she lived with this husband who was almost eighty then and he had a lot of extended family there. He had children and grandchildren from those second and third marriages, but he was a man of some means. In fact, he owned some of the choicest property in Sumter. We went to live with them over here in the Swan Lake area and he had three little houses and some of the relatives lived in the others.

We weren't there a few months before my grandmother left him. The thing that really made her leave him was he came home one night. On Saturday nights he'd come home singing. He was really a fun person. And she'd made some bread that smelled real good and she sat it on the window sill to cool, and we were going to have that with peaches or milk or something. And when he got home instead of coming in the house he walked around the house and he thought it was a joke, he chewed tobacco and he spit right in the middle of this freshly baked [bread]. After that argument we left. I mean it wasn't any violent and terrible abuse and that's the closest thing I've come to seeing abuse. But she was a woman I think who had a hard life and had strived for perfection a little bit too much. You know, the whole marriage was crummy. Then her only daughter, who she loved so much, somebody married her and, in her mind, killed her.

Now this is why I say she was one of the smartest persons. I learned from her that you don't take abuse from any man. He verbally abused her. We never saw them fight. But she left him and moved down to the woods with my sister and me when I was about five and my sister seven. After my grandmother walked away from this husband who had a decent house, land, and everything up there, my grandmother, my sister and I lived there in a one room house, no toilet. She made a living doing domestic work in the various people's houses. But I was trying to make a point that we were very, very poor, and we were poor because she walked away from him and stayed down in the woods with us.

Grandma Laura,[22] the woman who kind of really shaped our values, she knew everything. She had all the answers to teen pregnancy. She had all the answers to AIDS and everything, you know. And she really was a feminist in a way because after she moved us back there in that hole, she [figured out how to] cut through the tape and get an allotment made out to us from my daddy's military service so she wouldn't have to be up there begging his wife, our stepmama, to support us. And just looking back on that, that was really interesting. And then she would let us sometimes babysit. We were in a neighborhood where there was nothing but whites, people who were from Shaw Air Base mostly.[23] It

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

was an area where people from Shaw rented, but then it was a segregated Army so you're really talking about white people. But she never would let us go babysit alone. Two of us would have to do it, because she didn't want any sexual molestation. She was a smart woman, I'm telling you.

She did domestic work and she did field work. Now I can remember how she cussed this man out when he wanted us to start school late and stay home and pick his cotton. I mean my grandmother had a mouth. She smoked a pipe, by the way. She was a petite woman. Very chocolate and dark. And she could tell us these stories about how "cleanliness is next to godliness. It's no sin to be poor but it is a sin to be nasty." She could tell us how black people always had time to sit on the front porch and the dishes are in the sink dirty. But she was a very cultured woman, now, even with all of this. On summer evenings my grandma and my sister and me, we would walk up to the road and we'd get right on the edge of where the whites had a pavilion and a jukebox and they'd be dancing in their swimming suits, and it was just a grand hangout for hillbilly white people. She'd walk up there with us, spread out our stuff, open our box of cookies and milk, and we'd sit up there and listen to all the big band music on the jukebox until we got tired, and about ten o'clock at night we'd go home. That's the way we were entertained.

Coming up then, during segregation, black girls had to suffer the humiliation of being black and dark-skinned. Even when Wells was dating me he would say, and these were jokes, "I'd rather see a black girl"—that means dark-skinned—"lying in a ditch with her leg broken than to see a red bone[24] with a run in her stockings." That was supposed to be funny. "If you black, get back. If you're brown, stick around. If you're white, you're all right." When I was in high school every year there would be the Irish festival parade in Sumter. That was the white parade. But they would let the black high school have a float. And custom had it that the smartest four girls in twelfth grade would ride on that float. When I got to twelfth grade all the smartest four girls were my color and darker and those people changed the rules and went to ninth grade and got the cream-colored girl and put one gorgeous-looking cream-colored curly-haired girl on the front. Oh, that thing has worried me 'til this day. I went to the blackest teacher we had, and she loved me to death. She gave the dark-skinned children the lead in the senior class play to try to make up for it. Those were things we had to live with. Grandma Laura would tell my sister and me that we had pimples on our skin because we had bad blood in us, and it was that white blood that came from my grandmother, my daddy's family. My daddy was a very nice man as far as I'm concerned. He was the one who made my sister and me feel beautiful when the whole world was telling us we were not. Oh, my God, he'd call us the prettiest children in the world.

I went to Lincoln High School in Sumter. That's where I met Wells. They got school buses the first year I went to Lincoln, so he was a school bus

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

driver when I got there. And they drafted him. He was in twelfth grade when I was in eleventh grade, and they were drafting for the Korean War. When he got drafted, he had the idea to elope. It wasn't my idea. [On the day] he got drafted he took the kids to school on the bus that morning, went home and got his daddy's car, and we went down to the courthouse. And he told me to tell the people I was eighteen, to lie. He got in there and said he was nineteen.

I said, "Well, he told his right age, I'm going to give mine."

And the man said, "Sorry, you've got to get your parent's permission."

I said, "Okay, we can't get married." But Wells was a smart sucker. We walked two blocks down the street, went in the post office, and he wrote my daddy's name on that thing, and we went straight back and the man married us. And as soon as we walked out of the office, here came my daddy walking up the courthouse steps, chewing on a toothpick. Somebody had called him and told him we were up there. But he did not kick up a fuss. He shook his finger in Wells' face and said, "you'd better let her finish high school." Anyway, that summer he was in basic training down in Alabama. Gone to Alabama and I had visions of traveling all around the world with my soldier husband. All I wanted was a house full of children and that's how I wanted to get out of Sumter. But Wells was thinking about what my daddy said, and he sent me back home to finish high school. So he was in Korea when I graduated from high school. And back then birth control pills had not been invented yet. So Gloria was at my graduation, my oldest daughter. He spent something like fifteen months over there. And when he came back [from Korea] it was 1953 and I'll be darned if he wasn't back a month before I was pregnant again.

My sister took care of my children while I lived in a teacher's cottage and taught at Roberts High School during the year [after I graduated from Morris College].[25] The teacher's cottage[26] had three bedrooms. And another girl who had finished Morris College, she had a job down there too and we had a little room together. [Living at] the cottage was my first encounter with lesbians. There were six women who lived in the house now. One was me, one was that other girl, and then there were four other women. I used to come home every weekend because I had a family. But one weekend I didn't come home and I noticed they were having a party. The music was getting louder and there were a lot of people coming; they were all women. Okay, that was fine too. But I was standing there with my coat on [ready] to walk outside because it wasn't my party and all these women were older than me. And somebody came up to me and said, "Wells, come on, let's dance." That still didn't strike me. And then she said, "Take off your coat so I can feel you."

And I kind of looked around and I said, "Oh my God." So I decided to go visit somebody who lived nearby for the whole party.

She said, "That whole house is full [of lesbians]. You mean you didn't know that?" Anyway, that was real interesting. And after that year I came here and I taught at Lincoln where I graduated high school.

By 1964 I was in higher education and I was there simply because of sexism. In South Carolina they had laws on the books that paid male teachers a thousand dollars a year more because they were head of household. They had laws on the books that said if you became pregnant you were supposed to inform your principal before you started showing. And certainly not later than the fifth month, [you had to] resign your position, go home, take care of your baby for a year, and then when the baby was a year old you could come back and compete for a position in the public school system. Now this is no joke. Okay, remember birth control pills had not been invented.[27] So I was twenty when I graduated college. I had two children when I graduated college because Wells came back from over there in 1953 and in 1955 I had the second child. And when the third child was born, I was teaching at Lincoln. The baby came in August but, being very thin and tiny, I managed to make it to the end of the [school] year. And of course I told the principal, but I had to resign. The baby came in August; school started in September. I could not go back to work. At the end of the year I went back and applied for my job and I went back to the public schools and I taught from 1960 to 1964 and got pregnant again. That rule was still in when I got pregnant again. And by this time I was chairman of the English department of the school. And I'll never forget the ten women who were there, most of them had been my teachers. They liked me a lot. One of them offered to pay for an abortion for me so I wouldn't have to leave. And I can tell you there are women who were my friends when they were teenagers, but they're dead today because they wanted those jobs and they'd go to them back alley abortionists to get those abortions and they're dead. One best friend had a sister who was a nurse somewhere up north, and she'd go up there and her sister would give her [an] abortion so she wouldn't have to lose her job. So these are experiences that I've lived through.

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

CHAPTER 3

You Are All Under Bondage, Which Is True: Working Lives

"I knew I wasn't ever going to be rich. I just wanted a good education so I could get a good job, a better job, paid more than what my mother was making," Rodie Veazy said in her interview. "But I have worked as hard as my mother," she concluded. Here Veazy and other narrators tell about what work meant, what it was like, and how it changed, or didn't, across the generations of women in their families. Work was one of the defining features of black women's lives in the Jim Crow South, and all of our informants were employed in at least one job throughout their lives, while also carrying responsibilities for work in their own homes.

Given the constancy of work, our narrators realized the tensions between economic and educational imperatives. But learning to work was as important in African American children's preparation for adulthood as formal schooling, paving the way for future employment. On farms, girls shouldered responsibility for household chores but like their brothers, they also learned how to plant, hoe and weed, and pick cotton, tie tobacco, or shake peanuts alongside their elders.[1] Girls learned from older women how to perform the domestic chores which transferred to wage work and marriage. Lessons about dealing with difficult white folk blended with lessons about seasoning and healing. By age seven African American girls were prepared to seek paid employment—light cleaning, yard work, delivering papers, gathering coal, or selling farm products—to provide cash for family needs. And by their preteen years many girls had gone to work in private homes for white families.[2]

As children grew older, their work expanded in hours and strenuousness, cutting short the times they had no responsibilities. Young people replaced

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

school and play with employment as they neared their teenage years. Children seldom kept their wages but instead contributed to the family coffers from which adults paid for food, clothes, or school tuition for other siblings. Older siblings sometimes discontinued their own schooling so that younger brothers and sisters could attend school. Even then, most girls who attended school, even private school, worked before and after the school day. They spent summers employed full time in fields, factories, and homes. The requisite and constant demands for their labor denied many young men and women the opportunity to pursue—or even consider—careers or employment based on personal preference or individual interest. Instead, economic privations forced most black folk to take whatever jobs they could find. There is no doubt that prioritizing work over education compromised the ability of many black southerners to prepare themselves for desirable or lucrative positions, should they ever become available. As our narrators explain, they had few choices: "doing better" or "doing well" meant finding enough work to prevent hunger, to buy clothing, to educate children.

Yet each generation sought to improve the circumstances of the next. Mindful of history, our interviewees frame their hopes and measure their experiences relative to the opportunities available to their parents and grandparents. Rather than dwell on their lack of opportunity relative to their white counterparts, narrators quickly remind us that bondage was not so distant for black people, and that the further African Americans moved from slavery, the greater their freedom to leave unsatisfactory jobs. Few of our informants voice complaints about the amount of physical strain entailed in their work. They frequently express pride in their speed, endurance, and resourcefulness. They speak of wages, however, mostly with outrage, as evidence of race and gender exploitation, resenting white employers' capriciousness about black women's pay.

These interviews tell us even more about the ironies of gender—or better, the vicissitudes of Jim Crow—as applied to African American women's lives. For instance, these interviews reveal that professional women did not necessarily confront a lesser financial strain than farmers or domestics. Communities expected educated women to give themselves over to the work of uplift through teaching or nursing, and our narrators speak here of seeking positions that allowed them to make contribution to a larger community's welfare. For teachers, the opportunity to nurture a future generation was poorly remunerated. By law, black teachers were paid less than white teachers, even in the same school system. In addition, except in urban public schools, teaching was not always a steady job. It was seasonal. In rural areas the school year ran only three or four months, and then not in succession. Teachers moved from assignment to assignment, paid at the whim of white officials or by the ability of local families and communities to raise funds. Married women in the professions were expected to leave work, which stopped one income stream while pregnancy added another

Copyright © 2010. Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

expense. As the stories of teachers remind us, Jim Crow reinforced race and gender inequalities in income and opportunity, disadvantaging African Americans, and especially women. Under these constraints, poverty abated slowly. Unable to accumulate capital and purchase property, African Americans hoped that through hard work and struggle their children and grandchildren might acquire money, education, or luck that might bring greater financial security.

As to work itself, for most black women farming and domestic labor (including child care, nursing, cooking, and laundering) were the most viable means of earning a living. According to decennial censuses, more than half of African American women worked as domestic servants in 1900, a proportion that increased, rather than decreased as the mid-twentieth century approached.[3] According to these interviews, black women worked two or three jobs, even as the census counted only one. Household labor provided the fallback position for many who could find no other work, including women employed in teaching. As late as 1960, nearly one-third of African American women continued to be employed in domestic work.[4]

The conventions surrounding domestic work played out the South's race/gender order in the place of employment. Not surprisingly, low pay and other forms of exploitation made domestic work the last choice, even though it was the position they were mostly likely to get. Sometimes women were denied wages from domestic work altogether, or might be paid with leftover food or used clothing instead of money. Although some women found "good" situations working for white families, as our narrators tell, household labor also exposed girls and women to insult, abuse, and even molestation by their employers. Employees had to enter white household through the back door, rather than the front. Employers often refused to use women's correct names. Women recall their attempts to assert their dignity in these situations by refusing to answer to names other than their own and insisting on entering homes through the front door; they also left jobs when employers treated them intolerably or when better positions came along.

Tellingly, domestic service was excluded, along with farming, from federal legislation passed in the 1930s that established a minimum wage and Social Security and disability benefits, thereby increasing the chances that African American women would become mired in life-long poverty. This exclusion may explain why one narrator, Cleaster Mitchell, recalls the ritual of applying for a Social Security card, an important moment in her transition out of agricultural and domestic work when she left the rural South.[5]

As Mitchell's story demonstrates, women found a greater range of choices in southern and northern cities. Throughout the twentieth century, increased mechanization, such as the introduction of tractors, brought some changes to farm work, but greater reliance on machines over manual labor did push some black southerners off the farm. When the Depression, droughts, or periods of