

University of Texas at San Antonio Archives and Special Collections

MS 317. Archives for Research on Women and Gender Oral History Project

Hattie Elam Briscoe Transcript, February 21, 1997

Ruthe Winegarten interview with Hattie E. Briscoe (tape I)

RW: This is Ruthe Winegarten, this is a test, I'm sitting in the lovely home of Hattie Briscoe in San Antonio on Friday, February twenty-first, nineteen ninety-seven.

RW: Well, right now I'm just testing the microphone to see if it's working, Miss Briscoe, would you speak into it and see?

HB: My name is Hattie Ruth Elam Briscoe. I live at 453 Gulf Street, San Antonio, Texas.

RW: So I think you're going to have to speak up just a little bit. Um, what would you like to talk about today? Your life has been so interesting and you have achieved in so many areas, I have read quite a bit about you. I don't know whether you would like to review those things, or whether you would like to just tell me what you've been doing more recently? Um, I'm going to guess that we're going to get together more than just this one time, maybe, you know, two or three more times if you will allow me to do so. So, how would you like to handle this process?

HB: Well, I had thought about it. I was going to do it whatever way you wanted me to do it. And, uh, so, whatever...you wanted to ask me questions, uh, if you want me to expound on a question that you ask me? That's all well and good. Um, what I've been thinking about, um, recently, is, um, every year I go down to Wylie College, in Marshall Texas, where I graduated from college. And this time is approaching in March. But I won't be able to go this year, so I've been kind of sad about that, I always have such a good time. I graduated from Wylie in thirty-seven, but it's still very close to my heart. Um, I always tell people that we need our black colleges. Because you are a human being in your black school. And, um, that might be a little bit selfish, but you are somebody, you're not just a number, and

uh, and at Wylie, we dearly loved our school. So that's been on my mind, and uh, we now have a new president, Dr. Scott. His father was president of Wylie, and now he is a legacy.

RW: What was his father's name?

HB: Doctor Julius Scott, I think it was.

RW: And this gentleman's name is what?

HB: The same thing, Julius Scott, uh-huh. And, I guess I got that correct, if not I will correct it before you leave. Um...

RW: What were some of the...memories about Wylie that makes you remember it so fondly?

HB: Oh, well, number one, when I finished high school, uh, I had signed up to go to Bishop College, that was a Baptist School. And I was a Baptist, and uh, I was at the top of the list at that school, and I knew I was going to get the first scholarship. That night, when they called off all of the students who were getting scholarships, my name was not called. And, in the very end, one of my professors got up and said, "Will Hattie Ruth Elam come to the stage?" And he had said to me before that, "How would you like to go to Wylie College?" I told him "My people don't have any money, I can't go to Wylie College. I've signed up for Bishop." He says "That's not what I asked you. How would you like to go to Wylie College?" I said "I'm not giving the right answer here." I said "Oh, I would love to go to Wylie College, but I know I can't go because my people don't have any money." He said, "All I wanted to know is how would you like to go to Wylie College." And so he says "The one-year scholarship from the Wylie Club goes to Hattie Ruth Elam." And you don't know, I was really happy.

RW: Was, was Wylie considered a better school?

HB: Oh, yes, uh-huh, it was. They, I don't know if you knew about Fisk University, used to call them, call us "Little Fisk."

RW: I see, yes I do know about Fisk.

HB: Uh-huh. Now, the, the Wylie girls were always well-dressed, I knew I didn't have any clothes to

go to Wylie, but that didn't worry me too much. Um, but they always looked good, and uh, they had the best football team, and the best basketball team, and the best band, and we had what we called the Wylie Collegians there, they played for the dances and what have you. So Wylie was just a school that you just really thought was "it."

RW: It was more of an elite school?

HB: Yes.

RW: Well, uh, was it a denominational...

HB: Yeah, it was Methodist...

RW: It was Methodist...

HB: And see, I was Baptist.

RW: Okay, and how...

HB: So I just knew I'm 'on get the scholarship at Bishop.

RW: Was it more expensive at Wylie? Um...

HB: Um, I, I, I don't know, really, because I never had to pay anything. I...

RW: You had a scholarship all the years...

HB: Well, I don't know where I was getting my, my money from. I had gotten a job, uh, for my board. And that was the expensive thing at school at that time, back in the thirties. And, uh, I didn't, uh, well I had this year's scholarship, all I needed was ternty-five dollars for entrance fee, and uh, so at, uh, my step-mother kept saying that "You are going to come home at the end of your scholarship." And I said to myself, "No, I'm not coming home at the end of my scholarship." And, uh, my daddy came home, this particular night, and she just said, "Whip Hattie Ruth." And that was all she had to say, I don't know what he's whipping me for, he doesn't either. But she had told him that, uh, "You know, uh, I offered to whip Hattie Ruth and she told me that I better not whip her, because if I did, she would kill me." So, daddy said, "Well, you know, she's awful mean so if she needs a whipping, you

tell me and I will whip her.” Well, my daddy was the sort of person that, if he whipped you, he didn’t hurt you. So I didn’t care, I said “Goody, goody, goody.” So this particular night, I’m in college now, sixtenn, and this particular night, when he whipped me, I told my sisters and brothers, “Well, I’m going to run away from home tonight at midnight.” I don’t know why I picked midnight, ‘cause it was awful dark out there. But I did pick midnight and I don’t really know why, and I don’t really know where I’m going...

RW: And it’s Marshall, Texas...

HB: Marshall, Texas, a little old town, I had to walk about four miles to get where I was goin’. I had some friends, I didn’t know that they were really poor, but they were, and I didn’t know it, but I went to their house to wait ‘til the next day to go up on the campus and talk to Doctor Dogan about letting me stay on the campus and what have you. And, uh, so when I, he...everybody was “daughter” and “son,” he didn’t know your name, but you were his “daughter” or his “son.” Dr. Dogan, he was such a wonderful man. And he said, when I asked him, um, could I stay in North Cottage, that was one of the cottages that...and I said, “Because your, your maid lives there and she says I can live with her.” Now, I’m sixteen, I’m making all these plans. And, uh, he said, “Okay, daughter.” And, uh, I said “And I already have a job where I could get my food and everything,” and, uh, so then I moved up on the campus. And, um, I’m really happy now, you know, I’m on the campus. And my daddy came up there and uh, that Monday, ‘cause like, I left on a Friday. And somebody said “The policeman’s out here to see you, Miss Elam.” I said, I said, “Does he have on a blue serge suit?” “Yeah.” I said, “That’s my daddy, not a police...” Daddy was very, very fair with red hair and he kept it cut close. So he told me he came to get me, and I said, “Daddy, I’m not going back home.” I said, “Do you know what you whipped me for?” “Well, your stepmother said you didn’t wash the cup towels clean.” I said, “I did. I, I boiled them in lye, you know, I think that’s about the best I could do, you know.” And, um, ‘cause I didn’t know whether he even knew what he whipped me for, just said, “Whip Hattie

Ruth,” you know. So I said “But I’m not comin’ home, daddy.” So that’s how I started off at Wylie. And the people that I worked for...(uh, you can just answer the phone and tell them to call...) Now where were we?

RW: Where you were glad to be living on the campus, and how were you earning money for your board, you were cleaning houses or something?

HB: No. I was washing, ironing, cooking and cleaning up for a family of three. And I had to do the shirts for the two men, I did all the ironing for the lady. And I planned all the meals, I bought all the, I ordered all the groceries, and she played bridge. And when she had her bridge parties, I’d serve her bridge parties and...

RW: How did you know how to do all that? Who taught you all that?

HB: Well, my grandmother started off teaching me how to cook. Uh, but granna didn’t get any further than teaching me how to make...we started off making cornbread. Then the next thing, you graduated to biscuits. And my mother died when I was nine years old. Now, my stepmother was a very good cook, and she did teach me how to cook. Now, so far as serving bridge parties, I had never seen a bridge party. And, uh, but, uh, but Miss Mason loved to play bridge. And so then I decided, well, you, you get you some menus that will be good for bridge parties, and that’s what I did. And I would, everytime she would have a bridge party, I would have a different menu, you know. For, I’m just sixteen, seventeen, just old in the head, you know. And then I liked the people. And, uh, Mr. Mason I called him Uncle Henry and called her Aunt Trudy.

RW: Were these black or white people?

HB: Black people. Uh, Aunt Trudy was, is white as white with blonde hair and blue eyes, but she was black. And, um, Uncle Henry, he liked biscuits. That was how I got that job. She says, uh, the lady next door said, uh, I went to her to get a job, she says, “I have three sons.” I said to myself, “What does that have to do with me getting a job?” you know. She said, “Well the lady next door just lost her girl,”

you know, “so you may be able to get a job over there.” So she was out there hanging up clothes, so I went and I helped her hang up clothes. And I told her what my story was, told her the truth, that I had run away, and how old I was and... And then she said--I told her that I could cook. “Now little girl, you know you can’t cook.” And I said, “Yes, I can.” I said “What are you having for lunch?” And she told me. I never have remembered what it was. But she, I said, “You know, biscuits would be good with that.” She says, “Can you make biscuits?” She said, “I have never learned how to make biscuits.” I said, “Well, let me make you some biscuits.” I said, “Oh, dear God, let these be the best biscuits I ever made in my life.” And they were good, and I got that job from them biscuits that my grandmother taught me how to make. And so, uh, then of course, uh, just, just being like I was, I was determined that I was going to keep this job, you know.

RW: And how much did you get paid?

HB: Nothing. Nothing.

RW: Oh, just, she gave you your board, I mean, she fed you...

HB: Yeah, yeah. And, uh, whatever I needed, whatever I needed, I could get it. If I needed a book that I couldn’t find second-hand, then they would pay for my book. If I needed a special dress to be on a program, they would see to it that I got that dress. When I went there, I didn’t have an evening dress or anything, so for the first formal—freshman formal—I told Aunt Trudy, I said, “I have to have a dress.” So she said, “Okay, let me see what can I do.” And she had a dress that she took it up for me, so that I could wear that dress. But I was always able to get whatever I needed, if I had to borrow that dress, I borrowed it, you know. I didn’t have any feelings about borrowing from students, because they understood that I didn’t have any clothes, and I was not ashamed of that. I just didn’t have any clothes. I took my clothes to the campus in a quilt. That’s how many clothes I had.

RW: The other students were a little bit more...their parents had a little bit more money...

HB: Oh, yes, oh yes. A lot of them came from wealthy parents, and uh, if I needed something real

special, uh, I'd get a doctor's daughter's—get her to let me wear her clothes. Anybody's clothes that fit me and I needed it I wore 'em, and I didn't feel any pain. And, uh, now I went all the way through school feeling just that way. And I would go to whatever affairs they were having, and even though I didn't have the clothes to wear, I would borrow them. And, uh, it was a, it depends on how you feel about yourself in life, as to how you move about in life. So, that, Wylie was a school that had always appealed to me, and uh, I loved it, because it was such an outstanding school and they did such marvelous things, and uh, I was actually in heaven at Wylie.

RW: What were some of the subjects that you remember you liked?

HB: Well, back then, the only thing that blacks could do, more or less, was to teach school. So I majored in education, 'cause I knew I could get me a permanent certificate in education. And, uh, I minored in German, which didn't mean a thing, but I knew that I was going to make good grades in German. Then, of course, you had to take math, you had to take English, there were certain subjects that you had to take. But that was, uh, the most that we did back there, as blacks, we majored in education so we could get a job teaching school. So when I graduated from Wylie, uh, Uncle Henry—Mr. Mason had a job waiting for me in Wichita Falls, Texas. I taught the fourth grade in Wichita Falls, Texas. I lived right across the street from the school and just walked across the street. If you've ever been to Wichita Falls, Texas, you know that it is very cold. Very dusty. Oh yeah.

RW: Did you feel you were well prepared all right to teach the fourth grade, did you do any...

HB: Oh, yeah, I had no problems with that. Not at all. Of course, as I say, that was my major, was education.

RW: Where do you think you got this desire for education, from obviously your stepmother didn't want you to get an education.

HB: My mother always told us, there were five of us, "I want all of my children to rub their heads against the college wall." I never forgot that, and I would always tell her, "Oh, I'm going to do better

than that, mama, I'm going to graduate from college." She said, "And I bet you will, I bet you will."

RW: Were you the oldest, or the middle, or...

HB: I was the next to the oldest. Uh-huh. Now the oldest child was just wrapped up in my grandmother, because she was the first grandchild. She didn't even play with us, you know, she'd stay in the house with granny. And we'd be out climbing the trees and shooting marbles and having fun, and she'd be in the house with granny. But the college, that was instilled in me by my mother. That's why I tell parents that "You don't know what you are doing to your children when you seek to inspire them." 'Cause that's the only reason I thought about college, was because of her. And she had gone to Wylie to take, uh, they called it, they didn't call it home economics. Uh, whatever they called it, they taught 'em how to...

RW: Extension service, home demonstration or...

HB: Something like that, yeah, uh-huh. They taught them how to sew and how to cook.

RW: Was she, after you all moved from Shreveport to Marshall she went to Wylie, or was that before...

HB: That was before.

RW: Before she got married?

HB: Yeah, uh-huh.

RW: She was sent from Shreveport?

HB: No.

RW: She was from Marshall?

HB: No, she wasn't from Marshall. My grandmother lived in—now, I don't know how she got to Wylie, uh, 'cause grandmother lived in Oklahoma.

RW: Well, you mother must have been one of the first students to go to Wylie, because...

HB: Well, I don't know that, either, but my mother could, uh, people could come and take her

downtown and let her look at a dress, and she could make it for them.

RW: I've heard of other people who could, who had that talent...

HB: It was a talent, yes...

RW: Yes, so she was a seamstress.

HB: Yeah.

RW: Or a modiste.

HB: Yeah, and she, mother didn't like to work. And she didn't like to cook. She was an intellectual. She played the piano, she played the violin, and uh, she, uh, taught music and she would train the choir, and she didn't want to work. My daddy told her, "You have some children for me," and said, "I'll let your mother come and take care of them." And that's what she did. And she didn't do anything for us. I don't ever remember mother cooking a meal for us even.

RW: Your grandmother did the cooking?

HB: Yeah.

RW: What were your mother and daddy's names?

HB: Mother's name was, uh, Cloral Burton Elam, her name was Burton when she was a, Burton was her maiden name. And my daddy's name was Willy Perry Elam.

RW: And the grandmother came from Oklahoma, you mother's mother?

HB: Uh-huh, my mother's mother came from Oklahoma and I'll never forget, her name was Abrilla, that was an odd name, Abrilla Burton.

RW: How do you spell that?

HB: A-b-r-i-l-l-a. Abrilla. And granny could really cook, and she taught me how to iron. See, that was another reason I could get this job, 'cause I knew how to iron, too. Granny taught me how to iron, she would do all these shirts for white people and she taught us how to what you call "backing" the shirts.

RW: What's that?

HB: That's, uh, you iron this thing across the back of it, you know, and you, you did everything but the cuffs and the collar. You did the whole shirt with the exception of the cuffs and the collar. And then she would do that.

RW: That would be finishing work?

HB: The finishing work. And I was always good, I could really do that. I always took so much pride in whatever I had to do. And, uh, so I would take pride in fixing these shirts and things for granny. But, uh, my grandmother played a big part in my life. And, uh, we, we loved her dearly, we did. My daddy, when mother died, he moved us from Shreveport, Louisiana to Marshall, Texas because of the schools in Marshall. And, um, so, anyway, they did, they had very good schools in Marshall, Texas, and that was where we moved to. And then, as I say, my granddaddy, now he didn't go to school at all, but he built us a house. You know, those old people could do that. A big house, with three bedrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen and a bath, even though you didn't have running water, but he had built a bath. We kept part of our fruit that we canned in that bedroom with built shelves in there.

RW: You had some little acreage for a garden or...

HB: Thirteen acres, thirteen and a half acres. And we worked on that garden, in that garden. Uh, that, uh, if my mother had been alive, that portion of my life would have been very beautiful, because we had or—my granddaddy, you know, fixed the orchards. We had peaches and plums and pears and everything that goes in an orchard we had it in there.

RW: What were your grandparents' names?

HB: My granddaddy's name was Willy Perry Elam, 'cause my daddy was named after him. And, uh, my mother's father, I never knew him. But her mother was Abrilla, but I never knew my—I didn't know my grandmother on my father's side, but her name was Harriet Elam. And I more or less was kind of named after her, Hattie. But I was around my granddaddy on my father's side, because

granddaddy had been born during slavery. And he could tell you the most beautiful stories about slavery. Uh, because he was the old marster's son. And he would dress him up--he was good-looking--dress him up and take him—he was a judge—take him to court with him every day.

RW: In Marshall?

HB: No, in Shreveport, down in Mansfield, Louisiana. And, uh, he would take him to court with him, and granddaddy could tell you—and course he say he ate at his feet. And he, granddaddy would keep up spellbound about slavery.

RW: What were some of the other stories he told you about slavery?

HB: Well, the main thing that impressed him was the fact that he would be dressed up every day and taken to court with his father.

RW: So he was recognized, do you think the other people in town knew he was the son of ol' marster?

I mean...

HB: Oh yeah.

RW: He didn't, his father didn't deny him.

HB: No. Yeah, took him with him, in his buggy. You know what a buggy is? Took him into his buggy with him into court, and everything. Granddaddy made you feel like slavery was wonderful, you know? 'Cause he never suffered any bad things during slavery, you know, and we'd just sit there and be spellbound at what granny—granddaddy—would be telling us about slavery.

RW: So he was the one that built y'all the house.

HB: Yeah.

RW: And then your father was also a builder or what?

HB: No.

RW: No, what did your father do?

HB: My daddy was a blacksmith. My daddy was a blacksmith. But my grandfather—I often

wonder, how could he build that house without an education?

RW: He probably didn't have blueprints, either, did he?

HB: No. I just don't know how he did it.

RW: Well, he must have been very, very talented.

HB: Yeah. And must have been very, very smart, too, you know. And, uh, as I say, you didn't understand those old folk back there, and how they could do the things they did.

RW: What did your mother die of?

HB: She had a stroke.

RW: And she was how old when she died?

HB: Uh, just thirty-three years old. My sister was scared, all until she passed thirty-three, that she was going to die at age thirty-two.

RW: And you were only nine years old, right?

HB: Yeah, when mother died.

RW: When did your mother die?

HB: Uh, I think in nineteen twenty nine, I believe it was.

RW: So you were born in what, nineteen...

HB: Nineteen sixteen.

RW: What is your birthday?

HB: Thirteenth November.

RW: So you met your husband, I think I read someplace, at Wylie...

HB: At Wylie College. Uh, he was from San Antonio, and I met him in nineteen thirty five at Wylie College. We had, at Wylie, what we called the Wildcat Inn. And the kids now, they call it the union building, that was kind of like what it was [end of tape]

{new tape} ...where kids got together, and we would go to the Wildcat Inn and they served hot dogs and

hamburgers and sandwiches and things like that and ice cream sodas. And you'd go into the—those who had money would go and play the jukebox and this fellow would come in every day, he'd have on a white shirt and black pants and he'd go up to the uh. Counter, soda counter and get him a Coca-Cola. And, uh, I told my roommate, "That's a cute little old boy, and I'm gonna go with him." She said, "How you gonna go with him, he hasn't even seen you." I said, "You just watch my smoke." And so the next day when he came in, I was standing up there where he always came in. I said, "Hi, little old boy." He said [deep voice] "Hello." I said, "What's your name?" And he told me, "William Briscoe." I said, "Where you from?" "San Antonio." I knew so many people in San Antonio, then we got it made, then, you know. I went on to tell him who I knew from San Antonio and he said, "Would you like a ice cream soda?" I said, "No thank you." He told me later he thought I was crazy because that was the most expensive thing you could order. He said, "Would you like to sit down?" I said, "Yeah." Then he said, "Do you come down here every day?" I said, "Yeah, every day." He said, "Well, can I see you down here tomorrow?" and I said, "Yeah." And then he walked me back to the dorm, you know, and that's how we met. He was always telling people that I flirted with him. I said, "I got you, too, didn't I?"

RW: That's pretty romantic.

HB: Oh, God yeah. So, that was how we met and he would, in the dining hall, he always worked. And, uh, 'cause he had, 'cause his mother was the only person who could help him, so he was—and he'd come home in the summertime, here in San Antonio, and work at the hotels. And make him a little money. That was how he bought my ring for me, was working in the hotels. But anyway, he, uh, I liked the way that he looked, because he was always so neat. Uh, now he wasn't what you'd call a very good dancer, but he would try to dance, you know. And I liked to dance. And, well, we got along real good. Well, we courted—I was there from thirty five to, uh, thirty seven with him. And, uh, he came home one summer and I had a old boyfriend that came back. And I wrote him one of them Dear

John letters. He was the sort of fellow, he was not very, uh, expressive as related to his love. And, uh, this fellow who came back was always telling me how much he loved me, he was gonna marry me and all that, you know, and I liked to hear that. And, uh, so, uh, I wrote him that Dear John letter and he liked to had a fit. My friend told me, said “He came over to my house, and he sat down and he cried and he cried.” And she said “Well, she’s told you everything that you didn’t do, so now you just have to go back and try to court her all over again.”

RW: Did he try some more?

HB: Oh yeah, he came back. Just like, I quit him in the summer, and he came back, but I was going with this fellow that I told him I was going with. And, uh, he, uh, we were going to Texas College...

RW: In Tyler?

HB: Yes. What you knowin’ about East Texas? You ever been to east Texas?

RW: No, but I’m from Dallas...

HB: Oh, you know then.

RW: Uh, I’ve studied where all the colleges were.

HB: Yeah. Well, they were goin’ to—Wylie was goin’ to Texas College to play football, on a bus. And my, this so-called boyfriend was supposed to take me. And Briscoe says to me, uh, “If he”—we called him Patty—“if Patty doesn’t take you to Tyler, won’t you come and go to the movies with me, and then go the dance with me?” That night. I said “What makes you think he’s not gonna take me?” He says, “I just say if he doesn’t.” I says, “Well, O.K.” And, sure enough, I didn’t see Patrick. He had, uh, they told me later that he got on the bus under the football togs. And that was how he went over there and didn’t even tell me. So then, that’s how me and Briscoe got back together.

RW: Would you like to ask some questions? [To Third person in the room]

Third: Oh, it’s just fascinating. You were just, what, like nineteen or twenty, or...

HB: I was sixteen when I went to college.

Third: Sixteen, O.K.

HB: Uh-huh.

RW: They only had eleven years of school then, they don't have twelve.

Third: Oh, really?

HB: Well, when we started, what happened, the reason I was sixteen when I graduated, my mother taught us to read and write before we went to school. So when we went to school, they had to skip us because we were too smart for the first grade, you know.

RW: Got double promoted.

HB: That's right. That was because mother taught us. That was the kind of stuff that she'd like to do. She didn't want to cook or wash or iron or anything like that, she wanted to teach her children.

RW: I don't blame her.

HB: Uh-huh, she taught us so that was how, uh, we, I finished at sixteen. See, that made me graduate from college when I was twenty.

RW: And then you taught in Wichita Falls and you lived in somebody's house, like a boarding house?

HB: I just lived in a lady's house, and, uh, she had another teacher livin' there, too. And, uh, 'cause, you know, you didn't have any hotels or anything back there in the thirties.

RW: How much did they pay teachers back then?

HB: Sixty-five dollars a month. Wasn't that a whole lot of money?

RW: I think the white teachers got more.

HB: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Definitely. I don't know how much more, but they got more.

RW: Well, did you teach in like, a small school?

HB: No...

RW: You taught the fourth grade.

HB: I taught the fourth—it was in a school where they had all of the grades.

RW: I see.

HB: Through senior high, and everything. And, uh, so [unintelligible] was a nice big school.

RW: And did you all have plenty of school supplies and books, or did you...

HB: We had, we had, books—I don't think we had—I don't think they gave us any school supplies, I think you had to buy your own school supplies. I don't remember giving them school supplies, they did have the books. And, uh, I had fifty-four students.

RW: In the fourth grade?

HB: In the fourth grade. Age twenty, fifty-four students. Wasn't that a lot of kids? And, you know, it was the impossible for me to teach all of those children.

RW: Did you have them all day long, or did they go part of the day to another place, or...

HB: All day long. Uh-huh, all day long. And, uh...

RW: The teachers today think they're overworked.

HB: Well, then you had to improvise. I would get the smart ones to teach the ones that weren't so smart. 'Cause that was the only way you could give them the individual attention.

RW: You kind of divided them up and...

HB: Yeah. And, uh, they would get a kick out of teaching the kids, and the kids, I think, they related to them better than they would relate to me, you know. But, uh, that was how I learned the fundamentals about teaching. And I stayed there from thirty-seven to forty-one.

RW: And then you got married and moved to San Antonio?

HB: I got married in nineteen forty.

RW: Right before World War One?

HB: October twelfth, nineteen forty. And see, we married secretly, and stayed married up until, uh, well, when I left there, like, I left in May of forty-one, I announced my marriage.

RW: I see, because they don't think that—do they let teachers—weren't, couldn't be married to the...

HB: Yeah, you sure do know about back then.

RW: Well, during the depression, I think they thought that they'd be taking jobs away from—I don't know, I don't know.

HB: I never did understand that, why they didn't want you to get married.

RW: It would be a bad influence on the kids, that might, oh, who knows?

HB: I don't know what the thinkin' was behind that, but I knew it was no good. And I went on and got married because I wasn't going to lose Briscoe, uh, because not getting married, you know. And, 'cause when he finished college, he decided he wanted to go into beauty work. So he went to beauty school over in Austin, uh, and then his mother helped him open a beauty shop here, he had a seven-chair beauty shop. And he taught me beauty work, and I went to the state board and passed the state board.

RW: Without going to beauty school?

HB: Uh-huh. He taught me.

RW: And you knew enough to pass the board.

HB: Yeah.

RW: And those were hard exams, they weren't easy.

HB: Oh, yeah. I know. But, I was a college graduate.

[Doorbell rings.]

RW: That might be those photographers...

HB: I was determined to lead a normal life, wasn't going to try to make the honor rolls, I always made the honor rolls in school. Just goin' to do what the rest of the kids did. [unintelligible conversation, laughter]

RW: I probably will want to get together three or four sessions, and uh... We're two black women who went off to school...to have...

HB: Now, baby, you want to turn the light on?

Photographer: Can I get you all to move just a little closer together? For me.

HB: You all right?

RW: ...to Howard University or to, uh—well, Howard University was about the only other place a black could get a law degree until, well, Boston University...

HB: And Lincoln, Lincoln University.

RW: And Lincoln in the Lincoln.

Photographer: You all just go ahead, like you were before...

RW: O.K. So, so...

HB: Come on, baby, so you could be in the picture with us.

RW: No, she's not supposed to be in this picture.

Third: Why? Oh, well, I got all dressed up for nothing.

RW: Oh. Well, we'll take a picture of you.

HB: [laughter]

Photographer: I want you all just talking, just like you are.

RW: So, you're husband...

Photographer: Yeah, I think we're supposed to have them in the picture, too.

HB: She was just kidding.

Photographer: Oh, O.K.

RW: But, uh, your husband—were you happy to be a cosmetologist, or were you interested in going back to school and teaching school, or...

HB: Well, I never wanted to teach again, never.

RW: Why?

HB: Because you had to do so many that did not have anything to do with teaching. For example, in Wichita Falls--you know how cold it is in Wichita Falls—I would have to sell football tickets at the

football games.

RW: Oh, wow, and that was cold wasn't it?

HB: Yes, ma'am, it really was. And then, um, when he was, uh, into cosmetology, I liked cosmetology, I had always messed with hair, you know. And so, I enjoyed learning cosmetology from him. And, uh, then the theory didn't bother me, because I had always been a good student and the theory is pretty, rugged, you know.

RW: I know it is, it's a very difficult course of study.

HB: Yeah, so, anyway, I was determined, though, that I was going to get it, so that's how I got involved in that. Now, then he had a seven-chair beauty shop here in San Antonio.

RW: Well, that's a pretty big shop.

HB: ...shop, yeah. On the corner of Pine and Alabama.

RW: Is that near here?

HB: Yes, Pine Street is uh...

Photographer: ...can I get you to step back a little? Yeah.

RW: Was this in, like the heart of the African American community?

HB: Yes, uh-huh.

RW: There were...were there other businesses around?

HB: Right, uh-huh.

RW: And who else? Were there some other beauticians, too?

HB: Oh, yeah. We had, we had, at one point we had all seven of the booths filled. And I enjoyed it because I didn't have to report to anybody, and I just enjoyed working in the shop with him. So, and then he decided that he wanted me to become an instructor. And, uh, I didn't want to, I didn't want to teach anymore, really. And he insisted, he says, "Well, maybe we'll get a beauty shop, a beauty school one of these days. So I'd like for you to get the instructor's course." I said, "Well, I'll get it if you get

it.” And so, he, he went and said, “O.K.” He didn’t even try to pass. He didn’t try to pass.

RW: So where did you study that? You had to go...

HB: Hicks beauty school.

RW: In San Antonio?

HB: Um-hmm.

RW: Did you pass?

HB: Oh, yeah.

RW: So you got to be an instructor. And did you then start working at the beauty school?

HB: I worked at Hicks Beauty School, and I taught over here at Wheatley School for six years.

RW: Right, in cosmetology.

HB: Um-hmm. Yeah, so...

RW: Morris (?) can I get a contact sheet, too?

Third: I’d like to get some pictures.

Photographer: Um, everything belongs to the Express, uh...

RW: I can’t even order one?

Photographer: You can order one through the newspaper. Whatever appears in the paper.

RW: Thanks, very much.

Photographer: Thank you all.

HB: O.K., thank you. Don’t forget how pretty your hat is.

Photographer: O.K., thank you very much.

HB: [laughter]

RW: Um, so, you taught at Phyllis Wheatley, but during World War Two was when you all first started in the beauty, around world war two...

HB: Forty, forty-one. Forty, he opened the beauty shop in nineteen forty.

RW: And times began getting better right around world war two, people had more money.

HB: Yeah, um-hmm, yeah. And we didn't have to worry about clients. Well, you know, during the war, you know how the girls were courting...

RW: Right. There were a lot of soldiers here.

HB: ...soldiers here, yeah. So we, uh, we did, we did alright. So then, um, while I never would have been a lawyer if I hadn't gone into teaching at Wheatley. Um, I, my husband says, "Hattie, you should go and get your master's degree." And I said, "I don't want a master's degree." "Yeah, go get your master's degree." And, uh, he insisted that I go get my master's degree and I did. And I, um, I taught over there—as soon as I got my master's degree, when I got back I didn't have a job.

RW: Why?

HB: I don't know, you tell me why. 'Cause I never got a letter telling me that I was fired and why, never.

RW: Why do you think?

HB: Well, somebody said to me, said, "Didn't you know that you had to get permission, uh, to get a master's degree in administration and supervision?" I said, "Spend my money?" I said, "Nobody tells me what to spend my money for when it comes to education," you know. And, so, uh, that's the one thing I can see they'd say, "Well," you know, "then you got the same degree that the superintendent of schools has.

RW: He was jealous.

HB: And the principal of the school. So, anyway, um, I fought 'em and took 'em over to Austin to try to find out why I was fired. I never did find out why. And then, 'cause, and then the commissioner of education said he did not have jurisdiction. And nobody had jurisdiction, so there I was. And then, um...

RW: You had a master's degree in education?

HB: Administration and supervision, with a minor in industrial education, 'cause I was teaching cosmetology. But I wasn't thinking about being principal or superintendent, I wanted to be the first black state supervisor in cosmetology. I never got a chance to do that, but that's how that started, you know. Where Dr. Bellinger, who, uh, had worked with me said, "Hattie, I want you to go to law school." I said, "What?" I said, "Honey, I have to have a I.Q. of a doctor or an engineer to go to law school." She said, "Well, you know my husband's a lawyer, my brother's a lawyer, and if I've ever seen legal ability, you have it."

RW: Who was this, now?

HB: Doctor Ruth Bellinger, Ruth Ann Bellinger. She was the...

RW: Not Josephine Bellinger...

HB: Josephine Bellinger's sister-in-law, she was the medical doctor. And, uh, she had heard, helped me, so I listened to her and I said, "Well, I'll be more than a school teacher if I go to law school." And that was how I went to law school. And, um, I got out of there—well, she had told me that, uh, they had one black man down there and that he was not going to graduate. I said, "How do you know that?" She said, "He does not have the ability."

RW: At Saint Mary's?

HB: Yeah. And, so, uh, every day when time for the break, he would rush to the library, so he wouldn't have to talk with me. And, uh, so I said to myself, "Well, just go ahead on if that's the way you feel, but we're the only two black people down there."

RW: He didn't think he could learn from you, or he was too embarrassed that you...

HB: I don't know. I think the school board, what the school board did tell him that if, if he didn't let the NAACP help me, that they would give his wife a job. So they gave his wife a job.

RW: I'm confused.

HB: O.K., now why are you confused? Uh, this, this fellow was the president of the NAACP.

RW: The one who was in law school but wasn't going to make it?

HB: Uh, I'll just say his name was Harry. And, um, so, sure enough, they gave his wife a job.

RW: In return for which he wasn't supposed to help you get your law degree, is that it?

HB: No, in return was the fact that he was not going to let the NAACP help me get, uh, my, my, uh, reason for my being fired, and then I would try again, and so...

RW: That's the way things worked, huh?

Third: Yeah, I think so...

RW: They still work that way, I don't know. But you—did he ever graduate from law school?

HB: No. She said he didn't have the ability, and he didn't. And, uh, and of course, you know, I hate to say this, but it is the truth, I finished at the top of my class.

RW: Why do you think they accepted you? I mean, you were obviously...

HB: At Saint Mary's?

RW: Uh-huh.

HB: Well, I think it, uh, might have looked like a challenge, um. I later found out that the dean of the school was a, a racist. I did not know that, at that time. And, um, I think he thought I was goin' to bust out.

RW: So he didn't have to worry about it, 'cause he didn't think you were gonna survive.

HB: He didn't think I was gonna make it. And I finished at the top of the class. At the top of the class. I wasn't tryin' to do that, I was just tryin' to do good.

RW: But you were also working full-time, weren't you?

HB: Oh, yeah, I was working.

RW: At the Air Force...

HB: At Kelly Air Force Base, yeah.

RW: Well, how did you get that job? I mean, there weren't very many black secretaries or

clerk-typists were there?

HB: Oh, right, I had to take the civil service exam. And I made 98.6.

RW: Wow, so they were afraid not to give the job.

HB: They called me, just like that.

RW: Wow, were you the only black, uh...

HB: The first...

RW: ...clerical person out there?

HB: No, not the only one. Uh, the, uh, first time they called me, they called me to Randolph, Air Force Base, called me right away. And then, I didn't take that job, I wasn't really--and then they called me at Kelly, so I said, "I better go ahead and take this job, because, uh, I, I can see now that I'm not gonna be able to get back on teaching," you know. And I went on and took that job, because I said, "It will probably lead to something else." And it did, it led to my going to law school.

RW: And so you were, like—when were you working, at night? Or when were you going to law school?

HB: I was goin' to law school at night, and working at Kelly Field in the day.

RW: Weren't you pretty tired by the time night came? I mean, law school is hard enough when you're fresh, I mean, I can't imagine what it would be like to work all day and then have to go and sit in those classes.

HB: Well, if you're determined to do something, you just do it.

RW: What did you tell yourself when you were tired? I mean...

HB: Well, I didn't realize I was tired. It was a challenge, and I had never been in an integrated situation before. And I wanted to see how well I would do in a integrated situation. So, it was a challenge to me, you know. And then, it was a—I had selected to go this way and I was determined that I was going to be a success. So, when you have all those things behind you, and you know you've

been mistreated, then you just, you just forge ahead.

RW: Sounded like your husband was real supportive of everything you did.

HB: Everything I did. He was marvelous. Yeah, he really was. And that's, that was the [unintelligible] thing.

RW: You had trouble getting recognition as the number one student...

HB: ...number one student, yeah. They did not recognize...they didn't even mention it that night...

RW: When you graduated...

HB: ...when I graduated.

RW: They didn't put it on the program?

HB: Nothing, nobody else's name was on there as an honor student, 'cause they couldn't. 'Cause I'm at the top of the class. Saint Mary's tried to make up to me for that. Um, they had, um, a program and honored me as an outstanding alumnae down there at Saint Mary's.

RW: Well, it took thirty-six years.

Third: Took a long time.

HB: Yeah, yeah. But...

RW: When you were in law school, did the professors try to harass you or give you—I mean did they treat you like the other students, like they called on you in class and, I mean, how...

HB: Oh, yeah. They, well, they more or less had to call on me in class because I was a participating student, you know. I wasn't going to let anybody keep me back that way. I had one professor who was a judge. Became Carol Haberman...you know her? He came in, and he said, "Women don't have no business in law school. Women don't have no business in law school." I said, "You just wait 'til the recess comes." And so I told him, I said, "Judge, I heard what you said." "I was just playing Miz Briscoe." I said, "No, no no." I said, "I'm a woman, I'm in law school and I'm goin' to be a lawyer." Nobody else ever said anything like that. Nobody. But, uh, I, uh, I studied so hard that, um, they had

to recognize the fact that I was a good student and that I was sincere and that I was goin' to make it, goin' to make it. And, you know, when they see that in you, they, they boy, that's grand and let you alone.

RW: When did you study?

HB: Um, they would tell me at work, uh, when you get through doing your work, you can study your lesson. And then I would study on the days that we—well, we had a study group. Carol Haberman got me in on her study group. And, um, this same Harry, who wouldn't speak to me, tried to get in on the study group, and I told him, I said, "Well, I'm sorry, I was invited to that study group and I can't ask you in." 'Cause I wasn't going to help him do anything.

RW: So, was Carol Haberman a law student also?

HB: Yeah, we were classmates.

RW: So, the other students, some of them were friendly to you.

HB: Oh, yeah. I didn't have any problems with that.

RW: None of the other students...

HB: I didn't have any problems with the students bein' friendly towards me. And, then, when I got into study group, I was the teacher, of the study group.

RW: Wow, well, they were probably thrilled to be in your study group, because you were helping them.

HB: Yeah, oh, yeah. 'Cause, see, when I went into the study group, though, I wasn't the teacher then, but it wasn't long afterwards that I became the teacher of the study group. I can always thank Carol for inviting me into the group. Because, as a law student, you need somebody to study with. Somebody.

RW: Well, did Mister—did the judge Haberman ever recognize that you made it? I mean...

HB: Oh, we were, we were friends. She knew that, well, she never tried to compare herself with me, and so, we always...

RW: But who was it that said that you would never make a lawyer, that women didn't have any...

HB: That was Judge Haberman—that was Judge Gerhart.

RW: But did he ever live long enough to see you make a lawyer?

HB: Oh, yeah. When he died, his clerk told me, said "Miz Briscoe, I want you to come back to my office, I want to show you what the judge thought of you." He had my pleadings, copies of my pleadings in a file. Samples of good pleadings. Mmm.

RW: Well, he probably wouldn't admit it to you, but...

HB: That was a good feeling. I enjoyed that. But I tried to do, I really tried to do good in law school. Uh, because I wanted to prove to myself that I could become a lawyer.

RW: Well, you must have, I mean, when you saw that you were at the top of all the classes, I mean...

HB: Yeah, that was, that was a good feeling. It wasn't no good feeling that night when they didn't say nothing about it, though.

RW: That must have really hurt you.

HB: It did, it did, for a long time it hurt. And then I said, "Well, Hattie, you erased two myths of the white man. The white man says women don't have legal ability. And blacks are inferior. That was two myths at one time that I erased. That just probably was too much. Too much, yeah. But I, you know I have never gone through life hating anybody. 'Cause my father [end of tape]