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NAME: PERKINS, Ellen Stevens
DATE: December 16, 1980
INTERVIEWER: Mateo Osa
LOCATION: Boise, Idaho

DA 561

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MINUTE

MANUSCRIPT
PAGE

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12:16-14:45	Found work during Depression, polishing silver, friends found work also, hotel work, shoe shining, domestic work.
14:46-19:20	Cheaper rent in neighborhood, no problems getting services; most Black people of Boise located in area; now Black people everywhere in Boise; Mrs. Green, Stevens family, Mr. Hanna.
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21:36-25:10	Social activities, house parties, luncheons, card parties; Rosebud Women's Club, good turnout at functions.
25:11-28:30	Big house on River Street, often helped strangers, food baskets, lodging, group effort, friends help each other; Ellen's brother's death; basket for the nursing home.
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11:06-14:30		Not familiar with any covenants, Blacks live everywhere, no class structure among Black community.
14:31-18:45		Men need recreation; gambling activities.

NAME: PERKINS, Ellen Stevens
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INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Ellen Perkins conducted on
December 16, 1980 by Mateo Osa at 1628 Longmont in Boise, Idaho.

EP: My dad owned that corner.

MO: What's that -- the corner of...

EP: Of Pioneer and Grant.

MO: Oh sure, right there where those new apartments are?

EP: Yes, and he owned a house on Miller Street right across Pioneer.
Then my mother...

MO: What's your grandfather's name?

EP: My dad's name?

MO: Or, your...

EP: Luther Johnson.

MO: And he's deceased?

EP: Uh-huh.

MO: And then your mother had land too?

EP: Yeah, she owned a house on the corner of the alley of Miller Street
there, 1114 Miller.

MO: So evidently they came to Boise at what time then?

EP: Well, I'm sure I was here two years before they came. Two good years.

MO: How is that now? You came here ahead of your parents?

EP: Oh yeah.

MO: Before they came from Van Buren?

EP: Yeah.

MO: Oh, I see. And you came because your what, your sister?

EP: Well I had a sister living in Nampa and some guy that Mama and
Papa used to go to school with came back to Arkansas from Minidoka

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and married her. (Chuckles)

MO: He did huh?

EP: Yeah and brought her to Idaho. Then they brought her to Minidoka, and then they moved to Nampa. He was a railroad man, a section man. And I came out here to see her -- to visit with her and I liked it. I liked Idaho. I still do.

MO: What did you like about it?

EP: Oh, I don't know, I just liked Idaho. It was so different from the south and I found that you could get work here. Of course, I had work -- I was working down there.

MO: You had work in Arkansas?

EP: Yeah.

MO: What did you do here when you first came here?

EP: Well, I visited with my sister and then I went home. I went back to Arkansas. I stayed out here about a month, I think, and then I went back home to Arkie and I just wasn't satisfied there, so I came back. I came back and I moved over to Boise, from Nampa.

MO: Particular reason for moving to Boise?

EP: Well, just to get work, you know.

MO: It was pretty easy to find work here?

EP: Yeah, yeah.

MO: What did you do?

EP: I'm a domestic worker. Let's see, who were the first people I worked for. I think -- oh, the Cranstons. What was his name? He had Cranston Chevrolet Company. I can't think of that man's name. Anyhow, they're the first people I worked for here. I worked for them, I'm sure I must have worked for them a year. I'm pretty sure I did.

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MO: Did you live in with them?

EP: Yeah. Yep, I lived in -- housekeeping, you know. Finally we had a flare-up there. I quit. Then I -- where did I go from there? That's a long time ago. I know I worked for the Woods. Worked so darn many places, you know.

MO: Yeah. Did you usually work for one person at a time or did you usually, say, work two or three different places at a time.

EP: Most of the time I had a steady job. I worked for one family. Gee, I wish I'd known about this -- I could have had some notes, because my memory just doesn't work very well. See that's what, forty some years ago.

MO: Well we have lots of time -- we can tape more and more as we go. How about your wages -- do you remember anything specific about your -- what was your average, do you remember? About so many dollars. Did you get paid by the day or the hour or the month or the week.

EP: Well when I had housekeeping jobs I worked by the month, by the week. And I've got lots of day work too. Gosh, I've worked for so many different people and they kind of run together. Why can't I think of Cranston's name? I can't.

MO: Well, it's a problem -- an old directory or something. What I'm interested in when you came here -- was there already a considerable Black community over on River Street or...

EP: No, no there wasn't many. There was more white people over there than Black people.

MO: You lived right where River...

EP: Where River crosses Ash.

MO: Where River crosses Ash and you had to clear your house.

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EP: You hear some funny noises out here.

MO: You had to move your house to make it through...

EP: Yeah, the city bought it.

MO: There were, you say, as many whites down there as colored folks.

EP: Oh yes, there was at that time, yes.

MO: Approximately how many colored folk would you say were down there?

EP: Oh gosh, let's see. I can't...

MO: Maybe a certain number of families, or...

EP: You mean when I moved from down there?

MO: When you moved to Ash...

EP: Ash Street. Oh. Well let's see, there was the Haymans. You mean, the deceased ones also? That were living there, that have deceased since then?

MO: Sure, yeah.

EP: Well, there was Mr. Grimes, Miss Hayman -- there's been so many that have left and I can't recall those people.

MO: Yeah yeah.

EP: Because you see so many of them come in and out.

MO: Oh, is that right? Coming and going, huh? Well, that was the middle of the Depression when you went in -- and you could still find work?

EP: Oh yeah.

MO: Was that pretty normal for the Black people and those guys always found work?

EP: Well I have found that anybody that want to work that is really serious about working here in Boise, can find something to do. You may not find exactly what you want, yet, you can find work here. As a -- you know, as a whole you can. I have never had any problem

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getting work. Right now if I was able to work, I could find work. In fact, I go out once in a while and work for a woman that I worked for -- doing day work, I worked for a woman about. Well, tell you what -- I started working for her family before my son started to school, because I used to take him with me. And this year, I've been to her house and worked a little bit for her. It wasn't hard work, it was polishing silver. She likes the way I polish silver, so she always calls me to polish her silver. And my son is forty-one. So, work -- if you are a good worker and really sincerely want work, you can find work here. Like today, you can still find work. I can.

MO: Yeah, I believe it. What about in those times, did any of your friends have -- you didn't, about your friends, did most of the people down there find work?

EP: Yeah, yeah.

MO: What sorts of things did they do?

EP: Well, hotel work and shoe shining and domestic work. Different types of work. I wish I could remember more things, but I had quite a shock in '77 and I've noticed since then my memory just isn't any good. Just isn't. I can't bring things back into focus.

MO: Did you ever hear any talk about when or why a number of Black people ended up settling in that area? Was it for any particular reason?

EP: I really don't know. I assume that maybe rent was cheaper. I just don't know why.

MO: Did you have pretty good relationship with, say, your landowners and...

EP: Oh yes, uh-huh.

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MO: You didn't have any trouble getting any services or...

EP: We've never had problems like that -- I mean I have never had problems like that.

MO: So you can't really think of a reason, or even, for example, have you heard of when a lot of Black people have, maybe, first arrived to that area? What years it was -- obviously before you got there?

EP: Well, there was some there. Most of the Black people of the city lived there, you know, lived in that area when I came here. Most of them. We have a family, the Buckners -- they lived out on Bannock and they still live out on Bannock.

MO: Yeah, I've spoken with them.

EP: You have? Oh good. I wondered why you were coming to me instead of them.

MO: Oh, I'm going to speak with a lot of people.

EP: Oh, I see, I see.

MO: That's something we really like to try...

EP: Put it all together.

MO: Put it all together and that's thing -- why did the Lee Street area become particularly attractive to the Black community, or when did it become...

EP: Well I don't really see why it attracts anybody right now because the houses are not up to par. Well they have redone some of them, I think, but... I don't know why they moved down there. I don't think, unless I lived in one of those new apartments.

MO: So, do you remember, was there any other area around Boise where there was any concentration of Black people like that?

EP: Huh-uh.

MO: Just there?

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EP: Just there.

MO: Were there...

EP: Now people live everywhere, anywhere, everywhere, all over Boise.
The hilltop to this hilltop back over here.

MO: So there weren't many scattered families at that time?

EP: No, there wasn't that many here.

MO: You can only think of the Buckners and...

EP: Oh, there was Mrs. Green and there was, the Stevens -- that's the family I married into, and Mr. Hanna -- you've heard of all of them I know, because Mary probably gave you that information -- Mary Buckner.

MO: Uh-huh -- she's mentioned some of those names.

EP: And oh, there was -- this is ridiculous. I can see these faces but I can't recall the names.

MO: But as far as the community down on Lee Street -- did that population there seem to fluctuate, or was it sort of caused into being. You mentioned something about people moving...

EP: Well, most of the people on Lee Street now have come in here since I moved away from there, right there on that area, that Lee Street area. There was no Black people living on Lee Street when I moved away from there, when I moved from Ash -- none.

MO: There were no Blacks on Lee Street when you left Ash, which was what -- what year?

EP: '64, '65. I think it was '65.

MO: What about Milla Mae Robinson -- she didn't live down there then?

EP: She lived down there, but she didn't live on Lee Street. She lived right on Pioneer, the corner of Pioneer and Miller Street at that time.

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MO: So there was -- they lived around that area, but just happened at that time there were no Blacks.

EP: On Lee Street.

MO: On Lee Street. So it seems like the population has at various times either been Black or White or maybe some of both.

EP: Are we still talking about Lee Street?

MO: Yeah.

EP: Yeah.

➤ MO: Can you remember times when there were Black families on Lee Street?

— EP: Well, not during the time I lived down there. And you see, I don't go down there very often, and I don't know who lives where.

— MO: But from 1935 to 1965 you don't remember any on Lee Street, huh?
That's interesting.

How about some of your social organizations for the Black community.
What did you do for your social life?

EP: Oh, we used to have house parties and things like that -- luncheons, we had lots of luncheons. Especially for Mother's Day and Easter, we did that. Sometimes through the church we'd have an Easter luncheon or tea or something like that. I used to always have Mother's Day tea during my mother's lifetime. Most of the time.

MO: That was through the church -- you'd have a, or those just in the community, you and your friends get together.

EP: Oh, different ways. Sometimes I would do it -- sometimes me and my friends. It was usually at my house -- I'd take care of it. Mother's Day is second Sunday in May and my mom's birthday was in May, so a lot of times we'd combine the two, and I would do it. We had lots of parties at that time -- card parties.

MO: Card parties?

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EP: Uh-huh.

MO: Was that mostly the women's events you're speaking about?

EP: Oh, we'd have men -- our husbands, when we had card parties. Our husbands would be there.

MO: How about any clubs. Did you have any clubs, maybe, organizations?

EP: Oh we women had a little club, but it went down. We called ourselves the Rosebuds, but it didn't last too long.

MO: What was your function?

EP: Oh, we'd just meet together and talk about things. That's about all. It didn't last long.

MO: Usually when you have these functions were most of the Black women in the area, were they usually involved?

EP: Oh yeah.

MO: So it was pretty sizeable affair.

EP: Well yeah.

MO: Twenty, thirty maybe.

EP: Our teas and luncheons and things?

MO: Yeah.

EP: Oh yeah. We had nice luncheons and teas. Yep, they were nice. And some of our kids, our relatives got married -- we'd have receptions at home for them. That was nice.

MO: Did you guys usually have your own music -- your own entertainment and stuff?

EP: Yeah, radios and record players.

MO: How about when, as far as your own community there -- how did you handle -- was there the aged, the sick, or the poor, did you have any particular practice for taking care of those people?

EP: Well you know, we don't have many aged people. (Chuckles) I'm one

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of the oldest settlers -- well, that's not true. Truthfully, if I know, well not now, but if somebody needs help or needs something or, we all just help. If a family comes here and didn't have a place to stay, for instance, we had a big house down there. We had an upstairs -- two bedrooms upstairs and, of course, one was my son's room, but we had that extra room. Anytime anybody came by they could find us. We'd just throw the door open, come on in. Fix them some food and put them up. If a family should come here that needed food, we'd fix a basket. I'd call up my friends and say "So and so is here." And she'd say "Oh no, where at such and such a place," and they were on their way. "Couldn't we fix them a basket of food," and we'd do it. Or if someone was sick, we'd go to them -- clean up the house and wash their clothes, wash them if they needed it. Whatever needs to be done, we were there to do it, and we did it. That's just one of the things that we do. Right today, if any of my friends thought that I needed help, something, they'd be here. That's right. I'll never forget -- I had a brother that lived right here with me and he was sick. I was going to take him to the doctor this particular day and he fell dead right there in the hall. I knew he was dead. Anyhow, called paramedics and they worked on him -- took him out of here. Well my mama was living here with me too. The man that was going to take him to the doctor that day, drove up just as the paramedics took him out of here -- took my brother out of here. And so he got on the phone and called this lady and she said to her daughter "Well Ellen has to go to the hospital so we better go out there and see about mama." Everybody called mama "mama." Without phoning to see what I was doing with

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mama, you see mama was in her nineties. They came out here to see about mama. I've said all that to bring out the point, that we look after each other.

MO: Yes. That's pretty obvious.

EP: But I had took Mama down to my sister's house -- with this man that was coming to take me and my brother to the doctor. So, that's how we do that. We have a feeling for each other. We do what we can for each other. Right now I'm going to call some of the ladies and they're going to fix a fruit basket to take to a couple in a nursing home.

MO:

EP: We do things like that. If one of them needed a nightgown we would buy her a nightgown or slippers or whatever was needed. You know, these old social security checks don't go very far. However, it beats nothing.

MO: Yeah, especially nowadays.

EP: It beats nothing.

MO: How about as far as disciplining your own or policing your own area. Do you remember whether you were more reliant on the city police or did you just sort of take care of your own at the time or was there much problem with that?

EP: Well, we haven't had much problem with that because we just didn't. Now I think, is about the worse time I've -- you know, witnessed. And I feel like here in my neighborhood, if any of my neighbors saw anything wrong over here, they would be here. They would call the police. I'm the only Black family in this neighborhood. I shall never forget when my husband died. The neighbors right straight across over there, came to me and said "We are not just

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your neighbors, we are your friends. If you need anything or want anything or anything comes up that you can't take care of, call us." And they have proved to be my friends. In fact, all the people around here in this vicinity are so nice to me. By golly, during the garden season, I had every kind of vegetable you could imagine. Even one of the neighbors would bring stuff over here early in the morning and just sit it out there on the back steps. I'd go out there and there'd be a big box of everything. In fact, yesterday I was going to take the garbage out and there was a Christmas package on my steps. And I know exactly who that's from. Isn't that wonderful?

MO: That's very nice. Was that...

END SIDE I

MO: seem to get along really well down in that area. And as far as the church role in your community, was it a prominent role or an underlying, secondary role. I'm speaking of this St. Paul's Baptist Church.

EP: Well I always felt that we have a front-line church. You ought to come out sometime.

MO: Yeah, I'd like sometime. Have you been in with the St. Paul's Church since you came to Boise?

EP: Uh-huh.

MO: Is that where you met Mrs. Buckner?

EP: Oh no, I met her before I started going to church. You see Mrs. Buckner's son is married to my sister. That's Cherie's mother.

MO: Oh, is that right? I didn't know that. I know Cherie.

EP: Well her mother is my sister and she's married to Mrs. Buckner's son.

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MO: Get these family groups straightened out yet.

EP: How long have you known Cherie?

MO: Oh...

EP: Did you go to school with her?

MO: No, I've only known her a couple of weeks.

EP: Oh, is that right? Well how did you meet her?

MO: Well, she sings with Lonnie Parlor -- and Lonnie is married to my cousin. It's another one of those things. So I met her, also, through one of my supervisors at the Historical Society in Boise, her best friend and Cherie were best friends, they went to high school together. Her name was Jody something.

EP: Uh-huh. I've heard her speak of Jody all the time.

MO: I guess Jody and Cherie are good friends and Jody and this other gal, who's my supervisor, are good friends. So I kind of know Cherie through two different ways.

EP: She's Mrs. Buckner's granddaughter.

MO: Right. I knew that.

EP: When you get to summing it up, it's a small world, isn't it?

MO: Oh, it sure is. So you never did any big events associated with the St. Paul's Church, stick high in your mind, any functions that you used to have?

EP: Well I don't remember any bad. We always had wonderful leaderships there and we still have. I had a brother that pastored out there for I think about eight years. He had a call to go to Seattle, Washington and he pastored this one church for twenty-six years in Seattle. Oh, we have our conventions come here and that's always a big affair.

MO: Conventions, what?

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EP: Oh, it was a convention of the Pacific Northwest which brings in Oregon, Washington -- Oregon and Washington.

MO: Idaho?

EP: Idaho. I think that's all.

MO: Pastor's convention...

EP: Church convention.

MO: Church convention, of the Baptist?

EP: Yeah, yeah, of the Pacific Northwest. Like maybe a couple of churches out of Portland. Maybe one at Walla Walla, Washington -- Spokane, Seattle. You know.

MO: It must bring in an awful lot of people.

EP: It does. I think they're to come here in '81 sometime.

MO: Is it a yearly, every five years...

EP: No, it's a yearly but it -- see, last year I think it was in Portland, I mean this year it was in Portland. Next year it will be here.

MO: Do you remember, did that function take place here back in the early years, the first years you were here -- do you remember a similar thing?

EP: No.

MO: It's relatively new.

EP: Well not new, but not the first years I was here.

MO: Go back maybe what -- ten years, twenty years?

EP: Oh, I don't know -- I couldn't say how long it's been. We have active NAACP here.

MO: How long have they been here?

EP: Well, it's been kind of off and on. But it's alive and working now, I think.

MO: Who's in charge of that?

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EP: Well Bertha Edwards is the President of it now.

MO: Do you remember anything about the Afro-American League?

EP: Have they had one here?

MO: Yeah, I think so.

EP: When?

MO: I think it was before your time, it must have been. How about, have you noticed any problems, for example, getting services or housing in the Boise community when you were growing up here?

EP: I didn't grow up here.

MO: Well, after you moved here.

EP: Oh, not especially. I can remember when the city wanted to buy our property down there on Ash, my husband was ill, he had a bad heart and every day he would go out looking at houses. He was retired, because of his heart condition. He found a house that he just loved. It sounded to him and his sister like the people were willing to sell, and so he said "I'll go home and get my wife and bring her back and let her look at it." By the time he drove home to get me, the people in the neighborhood had changed this man's mind about selling to us. And that's the only, you know, incidence that I know of.

MO: That was too bad. What year was that anyway?

EP: That was, that must have been in '65, you know, just before we moved down here.

MO: So that's how you ended up coming here. You couldn't get that place there so you came here instead?

EP: Uh-huh. We were told by one of the people that lived out here that some of the neighbors didn't want us in here. But the woman that lived in this house before we got it, she and her old man

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were separated and they had three kids, I think, and the house was filthy and they had about four barrels of pure s-l-o-p out in the garage and evidently they had a dog and when she moved out of this house the dish was left there on the floor and all kinds of old milk bottles and jelly glasses and fruit jars, half empty, they were all in the cupboards, and dirty clothes in the closets and it was a mess. So this one particular person said to me "We're not just your neighbors." she said she told them "If you can stand that woman that's been living in here, how come you can't stand these colored people." she called us. Anyway, we've never had any problems here. No, never.

MO: Were you familiar with any covenants around the Boise area that forbid Black or any other ethnic groups from settling in certain neighborhoods?

EP: I'm not familiar with anything like that. I think, now, people live in all areas, as far as I know. I've never heard of any problems. I know that somebody lives up on that hillside, going out toward the dam, there are a couple of families up there. Skyline Drive or something like that.

MO: I'm not sure.

EP: Well, I know there is, I think they call it Skyline -- I know there's people live there. And I know there's Black people living over here out Gekeler Lane and in that area now, and on Linden, Charles Warren lives on Linden.

MO: Charles Warren, now was he the bricklayer?

EP: Uh-huh.

MO: He lives on Linden?

EP: Yeah.

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MO: I'll have to be sure and talk to him.

EP: That isn't far from here. Straight out Broadway.

MO: Did you notice anything like a class structure within your community or a structure as far as, you know, or Blacks or

EP: No, no. Nope, uh-huh.

MO: Everybody got along pretty good within the community?

EP: Sure. That's the way it's supposed to be.

MO: I've heard with some of the gambling that used to go down there on Ash or Lee Street or in the River Street area...

EP: Yeah.

MO: Do

EP: Uh-huh. That went on. Well, you know, your men have to have some kind of recreation or whatever you call it. Yeah, there was a lot of that.

MO: Is it usually just among friends there and they have places set up where they bet or...

EP: Those places don't exist any more.

MO: As far as at that time though?

EP: Oh, just at somebody's house. If they wanted to have a game, they had it.

MO: The card games that you and the husbands, or the wives and the husbands get together, were they the same type of gambling.

EP: No, it was just fun, it was just fun. It was no gambling. We didn't have gambling games. We played Whist and...

MO: Whist?

EP: W-H-I-S-T. Whist. And that was just a fun game. Pinochle or

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something like that. In fact, I never did learn to play pinochle.

END OF TAPE

Transcribed 3-19-81
Rough Draft
Karmen Harrison