



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Alice Van Brakle

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[TAPE 1/SIDE 1]

MINGO: It's Monday morning, December 3rd, 2001, and we're 429 5th Street, SE. I'm going to be talking with Mrs. Alice Van Brakle, who's a longtime resident of Capitol Hill and this interview is being done in my home. My name is Marie Mingo.

Okay now, good morning. I would like to start out, if you would too, talking about when you first moved to Capitol Hill.

VAN BRAKLE: I moved to Capitol Hill in August of 1944. I lived in an apartment on 10th Street near C and that was when I first got married.

MINGO: You came here from Oklahoma, I think you said?

VAN BRAKLE: I'm originally from Kansas.

MINGO: Kansas.

VAN BRAKLE: A little town called Perry, Kansas which is between Topeka and Lawrence, Kansas and about 75 miles west of Kansas City. I came here in 1942 to go to college right out of high school at 17 years old and I've been here ever since. In 1944, I got married and moved to 10th and C. I'd never heard of Southeast before, I'd never been to that part of town before, didn't know it existed. I found it wonderful and now all these years later I can't possibly think of living any place else. [both laugh]

MINGO: Wonderful.

VAN BRAKLE: My husband and I lived on 10th Street until September of 1948. Then we moved in the 300 block of 5th Street, Southeast and have been there ever since.

I've seen many, many changes over that period of time and probably the one change that I miss most was our beautiful Safeway store that we had on 7th Street across the street from the Market. It wasn't that large, but it was adequate and those days most people didn't have a car and it was beautiful. I hated to see that leave. We also had William E. Miller Furniture Company which was on the corner of 8th and Pennsylvania and I've never found a furniture store since they left to equal it.

MINGO: They had all kinds of furnishings? Household items also?

VAN BRAKLE: Oh yes. And the very best quality. Well, now I go out on Rockville Pike to, what's it called, Masterpiece or whatever and not William E. Miller. You cannot find the quality that William E.

Miller had of every [item]—they had inexpensive things and they had whatever you wanted to pay depending on the brand name that you were looking for. Their quality was top, they didn't carry junk.

We also had a wonderful dress shop on Pennsylvania Avenue near the corner of 7th. They had good quality women's clothes. At all the shops at that time everyone knew everyone. I used to come from my office and stop there and look in the shop and select two or three items and just take them home. Try them on at my leisure when I changed clothes from the office and what I didn't want I took back. What I wanted I paid for.

MINGO: [laughs] Good system.

VAN BRAKLE: Things don't work like that these days [laughs].

MINGO: Well the Miller store, Miller was that what it is?

VAN BRAKLE: William E. Miller.

MINGO: Just William E.? Okay. When did it close?

VAN BRAKLE: [laughs] Oh probably ten or fifteen years ago.

MINGO: And the Safeway also?

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, Safeway was probably—oh my husband has been dead for fifteen years and both of those events happened before he died. So a little more than fifteen years ago those stores left the area. On the corner of 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue was Woolworths [ed: actually Kresges].

MINGO: Really?

VAN BRAKLE: It was—they had a little bit of everything there. It was a wonderful five and ten. They even had a cafeteria with food. It was sort of the place—when my mother lived with me that was her Saturday event—to get dressed up and go to the five and ten and meet her friends and have lunch. When they finished lunch they walked on out to JFK [ed: RFK] to the baseball game.

MINGO: Oh gosh, how fun.

VAN BRAKLE: No dangers, now I'm hesitant to drive through the area [both laugh] with my doors locked and the windows closed in my car. My mother could walk—she was an avid baseball fan. If no one else wanted to go she walked by herself and she went on out to the ballgame and when the ballgame was over she walked back home and she'd had a beautiful Saturday.

MINGO: And that's about what, about a mile walk?

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, it's probably further than that.

MINGO: Probably closer to two mile—to RFK.

VAN BRAKLE: Right, but my mother was an avid walker. During the week, she walked downtown to Kann's and Lansburgh's and those stores were on 7th Street from Pennsylvania up to F. Kann's, Lansburgh's, and Hecht's. And she would get up in the morning, get dressed, and walk downtown and spend the day and come back with a bag of peanuts [both laugh]. She had a wonderful day, but she did much better than I. In my walking days, I would walk down to, of course those stores were gone by the time I retired and had time to walk, but I would walk down to the National Theater. But I walk down, but I'd ride back up the Hill I don't walk down and back up like my Mother did.

MINGO: And you'd ride back on the bus?

VAN BRAKLE: Get on the bus and come back up. My mother passed away when she was 85 and when we'd walk together, she would say "Come on, you're so slow." So, she was of different stock than me.

MINGO: Right [laughs]. Well, these stores, why did they close?

VAN BRAKLE: Well, Mr. William E. Miller was an older gentleman and after his wife passed away he was going to, in fact he did, retire. But before he retired he built the racetrack. What's the name of the racetrack down here like in Temple Hills. It's not a horse racing, but a trotter...

MINGO: I'm sorry, I don't know.

VAN BRAKLE: I can't think of the name of it right now, but he built that racetrack. As he got older and retired, he did away with the business. My husband at that time, was superintendent of the Southeast post office which at that time was located next to the firehouse on 8th Street.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: He and Mr. Miller were friends/acquaintances. In fact, my husband knew everybody from working at the post office. When Mr. Miller opened the Rosecroft, that's the name of the racetrack...

MINGO: Rosecroft.

VAN BRAKLE: Rosecroft Racetrack, it's still there. When Mr. Miller opened the racetrack he gave my husband a permanent pass for himself and me so we could go to the races anytime we wanted to. When my two older sons were little, my husband enjoyed the racetrack. So that was after we were able to afford a car, in the evenings we'd just take the two boys and go to the racetrack and see two races and come back home [laughs].

MINGO: Great [laughs].

VAN BRAKLE: And get back home in time enough for the boys to make their bedtime deadline. So William E. Miller, the Safeway, the People's Drugstore at 7th Street was the only People's Drugstore in the area at that time and it was much more complete than it is now. Again, you knew everyone, all the people that worked there.

The pharmacist, I could call him up if I was home by myself or one of my boys was having a problem. On his lunch break, he'd walk over and pick up my prescription and take it back and fill it [laughs]. There's just all kinds of things that don't happen now because the world's a complete different place. We don't get to become acquainted with the people in the businesses because the turnover is so great.

MINGO: Do you think those people at that time did they also live on the Hill or they were just more steady in their jobs and so you knew them?

VAN BRAKLE: They were far more steady. Their jobs were more secure and dependable. The turnover was not like it is today.

MINGO: But, they probably didn't live in the area.

VAN BRAKLE: They did not live here, no. In fact, one of the ladies that worked on the counter at the drugstore, she lived way down in southern Maryland somewhere and she took the bus up every morning. She was just a part of the Hill even though she did not live here and when she passed away there was as many people from the Hill at her funeral as there were her neighbors where she lived.

MINGO: Do you remember her name?

VAN BRAKLE: I do not remember her name.

MINGO: It may come. Did Mr. Miller live on the Hill too, the furniture man?

VAN BRAKLE: He lived in Maryland, he did not live on the Hill, but he didn't live far away. I've been to his house, but I don't remember where it was at the time, but it was nearby Maryland. And the gentleman that I spoke of about that used to come, I don't remember his name, that used to come to my house to pick up my prescription for me. He lived in Virginia, but just nearby Virginia. They worked on the same jobs—now when you go to take a prescription to People's, you never see the same person twice. The turnover is so great and it is very difficult for the employees as well as the customers, but it's a way of life.

The dress shop went out of business, the owner of the dress shop died. They went out of business and of course you couldn't run a business like that anyway. They knew their customers, my husband was not a shopper and when Christmas time came he would just go there and ask them "Pick something out for Alice." And they would. [both laugh]

MINGO: Wonderful, personal shoppers.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, personal shoppers. We had those back in those days, but not in the same level that they are today [interviewer laughs]. And then—what other stores did we have? Well, the Chinese restaurant moved away recently, I'd say in the last three, four years. That was there in the 600 block, a couple of doors from the corner, Sampan. They have a store in Virginia and they told me that they were going to close the one here on the Hill and just have the one in Virginia. And, many of the stores left the area because of the high rentals. They just could not cope with the—we used to have a very good travel agency a couple of doors from Citibank. And oh, they were fantastic, but they just couldn't cope with the prices.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: The rents kept going up, up, up and so they had a shop up in American University Park, which you would think would have been far more expensive, but they said that it was not. So they left the Hill and kept their place at American University Park.

MINGO: Now how about the Woolworth's, why did they close do you think? [Ed: store was Kresge.]

VAN BRAKLE: Well, Woolworth's went by the way of all Woolworth's all Woolworth's anywhere.

MINGO: Okay, I remember this. But nobody came with a similar business?

VAN BRAKLE: No, now we have the restaurant there that, what is it, Bread and Chocolate?

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: That's there. We also had the Penn Flower Shop which was a wonderful family-owned flower shop. They were about, oh about where Riggs Bank is now.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: They too, you could depend on—you knew them and they knew you. I was working then and I could call from work and you knew everyone who worked there, and you'd just say, "Hey, such and such person needs some flowers and they're this way and they're that." And you'd know that you got top quality going out and they sent you a bill and you paid it at the end of the month. I had a

monthly flower bill [interviewer laughs] because there was always something going on, but I was always completely satisfied.

And when they restored that block and tore down all the things there, they said “No”—they couldn’t afford to come back because they had just priced them out and so they went to their other store which is down 301 past Marlow Heights. I can’t think of the name of the street down in Maryland where they had a store. So they just had to close this branch and go back there.

Now, I really have not found a florist in the area that I’m completely satisfied with. I either call them down in Maryland which I do sometimes because it’s too far to go down there but I can depend upon them. Or I have a store up in Silver Spring that my son uses and he lives up there and so I sort of do business there. But you miss the good ol’ family businesses that were in that area.

Of course, District Lock and Hardware is still available with everything that you possibly could want, if you know what you want.

MINGO: Now, is that Frager’s?

VAN BRAKLE: No, no. District Lock and Hardware is on 8th Street.

MINGO: Oh, yes. Okay, yeah.

VAN BRAKLE: But, again, I think the last time I was there I bumped into a young man who said he went to high school with one of my sons. But, you don’t know the people like you used to be able to call. And, after my husband died, I depended upon them because I had no idea what I was looking for. So, I could just go—as those people got older and started working one day a week or something, I’m lost in there now because I don’t know what I want and there’s no one there that knows enough about me to know what I want. [both laugh] But, family owned businesses that knew families on the Hill—when my youngest son, who is now 45, when he was coming along, the person who was manager, owner, whatever of District Lock and Hardware said “Hey, you got somebody at your house that needs a job and I need his energy. So, send him around.” So, he worked summers, for a couple of summers, at District Lock and Hardware. Lee was the person in charge at that time. And Lee would look out for my 15- or 16-year old, however old he was. And those kinds of things don’t happen anymore. We don’t have the relationship between businesses and our upcoming teenagers that need that kind of support to keep them occupied and use up some of that energy that they have in a constructive way, instead of standing on the corner, begging for money or hitting someone in the head.

MINGO: Now, with the passing of the Woolworth’s, this is intriguing. Was that before your mother died? I mean, did she have that meeting place all through her life?

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, my mother lived with me from—my father died in 1954 and she came to live with me the next year, because we lived on a 640 acre farm, which is a mile square. My mother was not a farmer, she had never lived on a farm before she married my dad fifty years before or more. But, she did not drive a car, she was total—my father did everything. So, there was no way she could live two miles from the little town alone and, so, she rented the farm and came to live with me in 1955. And she lived with me until about '77, early '78, I guess. And she had—if she was living today they would probably diagnose her as Alzheimer's, but in those days they called it senility. And I had—I retired in 1979 and I was so close to retirement I was trying to make that final year. And it was getting a bit scary that she was opening the door for everybody. Of course, we didn't have the crime that we have today. But, it was still not—I wasn't comfortable with it. So, I had an older brother who had retired. And, so, we took my mother to Kansas to live with my older brother who was at home all day. And, then, after a year I was going to go and get her and bring her back. But, during that year, her condition worsened and she passed away in October of '78. Which, things have a way of working out for the best because she would have wanted, or she planned to be buried there in Perry, Kansas, with my dad. And, so, she was already there. She was with her oldest son, whom she was very fond of, and, so, it all worked out for the best. And, it so happened that I spent every available holiday weekend or whatnot that I had off from work and I would just run out there for a few days. And I happened to be there when she had her final sickness, and so I stayed a week or ten days until she passed. And, so, it all worked out for the better. But, by this time, I don't remember if—I think Woolworth's was still there. But, she had slowed down, of course, and was not able to keep up her pace with all her friends, And she was sort of in the neighborhood. Everybody on the block knew who she was and she walked around the neighborhood. But, she didn't—wasn't as active as she had been. And, she would—when she first came here, she was United Methodist, but in Perry, Kansas, there wasn't too much happening. So, she had not had an opportunity to be active in her church prior to her coming to live with me. So, she was very active in her church and she had her church friends. And, when she was younger and able to do things, she was sort of in charge of their trips. In the meantime, when she came to live with me in '55, my older boys were 8 and 11. In '56, they were 8 and 11. And I had a new baby. So, that, again, was a blessing because—and I have great faith in saying things work for the best because my mother had lived on a farm all her adult life. She left her friends, her home, and came halfway across the country to live with me and it was a big adjustment. So, along came my baby which solved all those problems, because I didn't quit work. I just went on back to the office. So, she had, took care of him, she thought he was hers [interviewer laughs]. And, so, as a little boy she had him around going on her church trips and day trips and things.

MINGO: Oh, wonderful.

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, they were very, very close. And he had just finished college by the time she passed away. So, things have a way of working out for the best. But, she was a very—she wasn't too active in neighborhood—she wasn't too interested in neighborhood, you know, community organizations and whatnot. But, she knew the neighbors and they knew her, and she was busy with her church and she knew those church members. And, many of them didn't live on the Hill. And, so, she had her own little set of friends or whatever. But, the church was nearby so she could go as many times as she wanted to go for programs and various things without having to ask "Will you take me across town?" or whatever, which made it—in fact, we have everything here on the Hill. You really don't have to leave. This is the most ideal spot, and that's why I'm still here. When my husband died fifteen year ago in 1986, I thought, I can't live here by myself. I'm going to move to an apartment. But, where? There is no place in the area. I have been looking for fifteen years and I haven't found a location that is as convenient for walking to things. Even though I am fortunate enough to still be able to drive, many times my car sits out and I say I have to go take my car for a walk because it's been sitting there for a week, because I can walk to everything that I need, the post office, the drug store, the book store.

MINGO: And you always could. I mean, there always were all those things available.

VAN BRAKLE: And, when I lived on 10th Street, I still was walking distance to the drug store, the market, and all these things. And, so, all my adult life I have been able to do this and I do not want to move where I have to get in my car to get a loaf of bread. So, it's the most convenient area. And many people that I have talked with, young people that are in the working world, they have moved to the area and they get rid of their cars because they don't really—they go to work on the subway or they walk to work and they just don't need a car, the expense and all, of keeping a car up. So, it does make a big, big difference. I just can't find that location. My sons have found—"Oh, I found just the apartment for you on Connecticut Avenue." I don't want to live on Connecticut Avenue.

MINGO: [Laughing] You want to be here.

VAN BRAKLE: It doesn't compare to Capitol Hill.

MINGO: Well, now, this Woolworth's was a meeting place. Were there other places that you would classify as kind of community meeting places?

VAN BRAKLE: Me, personally, no. I think today's young people, you know, they meet—I know when my son comes home now, he'll tell his friends, "Oh, meet me at the Tune Inn or the Hawk 'n Dove or Mr. Henry's," you know. But, those places weren't—well, the Tune Inn was there, but it wasn't too much of a place. It wasn't a place that you enjoyed going to in my younger days, and it was a bit rowdy.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: There weren't too many places that my husband and I frequented around here, no. And, then you had—well, the activities that I did in the area were connected more with school because you were—even though I worked at that time. I was working at Quartermaster Corps which at that time was located in the “tempo” buildings in back of Ft. McNair, so it was just a very short distance away. So, for the luncheons and the ball games and all these things, I could hop in my car and be home in five minutes and take part in those. And, so, your life was geared, our lives, were geared more around what the children were doing. And, when they left St. Peter's School, they went to Carroll. And, so, you got involved in the ball games and the programs that—so, our life was more into what the children were doing and the little groups, because, again, you were trying to keep them occupied and busy and into nice things to give them a chance. This particular neighborhood, at that time—my older sons are now 56 and 53—and when they were 10, 12 years old or early teens, before they were out on their own so to speak, to go places on their own, this neighborhood was not the best.

MINGO: Oh, really.

VAN BRAKLE: And the children that lived in the neighborhood weren't headed anywhere. [laughs]

MINGO: Really?

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes.

MINGO: Oh. Now, excuse me, Well, we are about to run out of a tape, I think. [pause]

VAN BRAKLE: The children that lived in our block, and there were quite a number at that time, and a lot of the people that lived in the block were renters and really not interested in what their kids were going to do or what their future was about.

MINGO: This is about the late '50s, early '60s?

VAN BRAKLE: Mm-hmm.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, as a result, school was fine. But after school the things that my boys were involved in—I really didn't want them hanging out with the kids who were—my kids were the ones that had to come in the house when the street light came on. But, they could stay out forever. And this was when they got into difficulty because they were running up around the drug store and picking up things. But, these—just little—no one was doing the things that they do now with a gun or anything. But, they

were trouble-bound. And, so, my boys had to come in when the street light came on. That was their signal if they were still out there. And, of course, we all left the doors open. Nobody locked their door. But, when the street light came on, that's when they came in, and that's when the door got locked for the first time that day. [laughs] Now, I don't even go upstairs without my door being locked with bars on the windows. But, as a result, we got our boys involved in things in other areas, because...

MINGO: Other parts of the city?

VAN BRAKLE: Other parts of the city.

MINGO: Other parts of the city. Okay.

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, they went to, across town. I spent half my life driving them to birthday parties and different other groups across town that were more to my liking for what I wanted, the type of thing I wanted them involved in, programs that were healthy and gave you a better outlook on life. And, of course, this was at the very turn of the segregation—well, it's still here, but it was much more prominent at that time. Schools were just becoming integrated and this type of thing. And, also, in the neighborhood, there were people who were resentful to the changeover of—well, our block has always been integrated, but a very small number of black people lived in the neighborhood, in the block. But, anyway, many of the people were unhappy and moved away, moved out into Maryland and Virginia. Of course, I laugh and say I waved goodbye to them and now I'm saying hello as they try to come back. But, it's difficult for them to come back, because our price range has changed a little bit from when they left. And it's not the same. And, of course, it has improved and done much better. It's a much better neighborhood and many of them would never be able to be back. But, occasionally, I hear from people who lived in the neighborhood many, many years ago one way or another. My son that lives in Silver Spring is the one I was telling you about that's one of the directors of the U. S. Maritime Commission. And his office is there at North Capitol and H, but he lives in Silver Spring. And he lives in a house that he had built when he got married and it has many, many trees. And, unfortunately, one of these trees fell and crashed into his house and luckily no one was injured. But, they were put in a hotel and lived from June, May or, June I think until Thanksgiving. So, that's how long it took to repair the house and put it back in liveable condition. And, of course, this made the front page of The Washington Post. And, this lady saw the article, and she used to live straight across the street from me, and she called my son and said "Are you the same Van Brakle that used to live on 5th Street?" And, he said, "Yes."

[TAPE 1/SIDE 2]

MINGO: Was St. Peter's a segregated school?

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, I was talking about the lady who called my son.

MINGO: Yes, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And she said, “Where is your mother? Is she still living?” And, he said “Yes, and in the same house.” And, so, he gave her my number and she called and she came over and we were reacquainted. And, since then she has left this area and moved to a senior citizen home in Annapolis. But—and this happens occasionally. People will come back and say “Are you still living here?” [both laugh] So, everybody remarks that this is—and my walking partner, who lived three or four doors up the street from me, she cried so terribly much when she had to leave the area. And, when she came back to visit her daughter who lives on 11th Street, she wouldn’t let her daughter bring her in the neighborhood. She called us and we went to 11th Street to see her, the neighbors that were friendly with her, because she said she just couldn’t bear to see the house. She could not come back because [she had been renting and the house was sold].

MINGO: Is this the lady named Thelma?

VAN BRAKLE: Thelma Weiss.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And Thelma had lived there, oh, probably thirty, thirty-five years. And her husband and my husband were golfing friends.

MINGO: Oh, wonderful.

VAN BRAKLE: And Art died, he died like a year or so before my husband did. And I didn’t realize—well, I knew it but I’d forgotten it—that they had rented this house all the time.

MINGO: Really?

VAN BRAKLE: And the person who owned the house, the two little gingerbread-looking houses that... [310 and 312 Fifth Street SE].

MINGO: Yes, where Christin lives in one of them now.

VAN BRAKLE: Right.

MINGO: That’s right, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And Nan in the other one.

MINGO: Yes, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And Nan lives in the one that Thelma lived in.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: And the owner was Mr. Tom Sheridan. And Tom Sheridan worked over at the House Office Building. They were from Pennsylvania. I've forgotten which congressman he worked for, but, many, many years ago. And he and his wife lived in the one that Christin lives in. But, they owned both of them. And they also owned the next two houses going toward Seward Square. They eventually sold those two house to Gene Arnold, who was a retired Marine colonel. And Gene was—we called Gene the mayor of 5th Street because he took care of everybody's problems and he was a wonderful, wonderful man, and died suddenly with a heart attack, oh, probably, ten, twelve years ago. But, Mr. & Mrs. Sheridan, beautiful people, and Mr. Sheridan eventually passed away and Mrs. Sheridan wound up going to California where Mr. Sheridan's son lived, which she was very unhappy about having to do. She didn't want to relocate but it was easier for the stepson to care for her. And I was fortunate enough to—I used to spend a lot of time in California 'cause my younger son was there and I have lots of relatives there. And, so, I was fortunate enough to be able to go visit her a couple of times while she lived in California back when my husband lived. We'd go and my son would take us out to the area where she was staying with her stepson. But, anyway, after she passed away, I guess the stepson was really getting tired of renting long distance, which isn't an easy thing to do. So, he decided to get rid of those houses. And, so, he sold the one that Christin lived in, which had been, sort of, rental for a long time and hadn't been too well cared for over the various rentals. So, he sold it to Christin. But, then, soon thereafter, his wife was getting sick and she had problems and he decided to sell Thelma's house. And he upset Thelma by just writing her a letter and saying I'm going to sell the house. And it—she had kept it in immaculate condition and all these years anything that needed to be done, she did, and, as a result, she had a very low rent, because she took such wonderful care of it. But, at the same time, I guess he was just tired of having rental property. So, he sold it. And I said, "Well, oh, Thelma, you must write to him and tell him, or call him up and tell him, you'll buy it." Well, I don't know what her personal life was like but she was angry that he didn't suggest this to her. And, so, she said, "No, I'm just going to move. I don't care what he does with it. I'm just going to move." So, her daughter, who lived in New Jersey, retired and moved to Rehoboth Beach. And, so, they moved into an apartment development. So, they have an apartment and, so, they got another apartment for Thelma. So, that's where she moved to.

MINGO: So she's down there.

VAN BRAKLE: She's happy, but she still thinks of 5th Street as home. I guess we all, who have ever lived there for a long period of time, that's the way it will be. [both laugh]

MINGO: Well, now, we spoke of Christin. That's Christin Engelhardt.

VAN BRAKLE: Right.

MINGO: And Nan. What's Nan's last name?

VAN BRAKLE: I can tell you because I have the list with me that has all the neighbors' names on it.

MINGO: Oh, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: But, Nan is a young lawyer, I understand. And, she and her boyfr—she bought the house and she and her boyfriend live there. But, I really don't know Nan other than to say hello to her. But, her name is Nan Pell, P-E-L-L.

MINGO: Okay, thank you.

VAN BRAKLE: And her boyfriend's name is Chris Sumner.

MINGO: Okay, thank you. Sumner. I just thought we should—now, you're talking about Thelma being a renter. When you moved here or during the time that you were here, did more people own the houses? I mean, how was ownership and renting balanced through the span that you've been here?

VAN BRAKLE: When we first came, there were a number of rentals. But, I'd say probably—maybe not fifty-fifty, but almost. And the apartment on the corner there was filled with—I don't know how many people possibly lived in there.

MINGO: That Seward Square apartment.

VAN BRAKLE: No.

MINGO: No.

VAN BRAKLE: Right here on 5th Street.

MINGO: Oh, this one. At 5th and D on the southwest corner.

VAN BRAKLE: No. That corner.

MINGO: Oh, that building. On the...

VAN BRAKLE: Right down the street from me on my side of the street.

MINGO: Yes. On the northeast corner.

VAN BRAKLE: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Right.

MINGO: Okay. I don't think of that as an apartment building. I'm sorry.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, it is. And the owner of that apartment lives in back of me [on 6th Street].

MINGO: Oh. Oh, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: Jerry. What's Jerry's last name? Moise—M-O-I-S-E or something like that.

MINGO: Right. Mm-hmm.

VAN BRAKLE: And, of course, it has been restored and done over and all during the period that I lived there. But, when I first moved here it was just an apartment packed with, pardon the expression, poor whites.

MINGO: Really? [laughs] And, of course, obviously, they were renting and...

VAN BRAKLE: Yes.

MINGO: And that was part of the school population, too.

VAN BRAKLE: And lots of children there and it was an eyesore. Now the one on this side, the apartment on this side [southwest side], has always been—I don't know anyone that lives there, but it appears to be better kept. And, at that time, I still didn't know anybody that lived there, but it was better kept. Now I know the person that owns it now, or at least I think he still owns it, is a golf friend of my husband. Marks, the elec—he owns Marks Electric.

MINGO: Oh, Marks Electric.

VAN BRAKLE: I think that's one of the sons because I think the original Marks is dead, but—the one that was my husband's golf friend. But, this is his son I think that lives in here now. And you see the Marks Electric truck around.

MINGO: Right.

VAN BRAKLE: But, that apartment has always been better maintained and appeared to have a better class of tenants way back than the one on this side. This side was a terror. And there were a couple of rental houses within the block that were pretty careless about their property. In fact, a house two doors from me—this would probably have been, like, maybe before even 1950, late '40's or maybe 1950, but

nothing more. It had been rented and the people had just really wrecked it. And they just sort of left. They didn't move, they just left. And the house was for sale for \$7,500.

MINGO: \$7,500. [laughs]

VAN BRAKLE: And I said to my husband "Oh, we've got to have this house." And I didn't have a job. My two younger sons were preschoolers and so I was home with them. And my husband said to me, "Now, wait a minute. Just get your thoughts together. You're going to try to do too much and wind up losing the one you're living in." [both laugh] "So, don't try to think in—try to think in terms of keeping this one and not—" Oh, that broke my heart to see that house go for \$7,500, which it did. And the person who bought it backed a truck up there and scooped out everything and paint—that's all he did was clean it up. And he just took out the trash, which included everything in the house. Painted it inside and out, and sold it for \$14,500. [both laugh] So, oh, it broke my heart to—and he was a person that—we didn't have too many of those kind of people that just sort of—he was just looking for a fast buck. So, he wasn't interested in a place to live. He was interested in...

MINGO: Speculation.

VAN BRAKLE: Fast money. And, so, he came in, cleaned it up, made his money, and he was gone.

MINGO: And what year was this that this \$7,500...

VAN BRAKLE: Probably 1948, '50.

MINGO: 1950.

VAN BRAKLE: I'd say 1950 as an estimate. And then, of course, it sold a couple of more times. At least one other time, I think. And then the couple that live there now, the Lanouettes, Bill and JoAnne Lanouette, they've been there about—well, their daughter is in, finishing up medical school, and she was born there.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: So, they've been there closing in on thirty years, I would think, twenty-five, at least.

MINGO: They've been there a long time.

VAN BRAKLE: And, of course, Sharon and Mike Ambrose have been there about thirty years, because I've seen their family grow up.

MINGO: Yes. That's wonderful.

VAN BRAKLE: Beatrice Cooper, who lives across the street from me, she's been there—well, I think she's in her eighties now and she was teaching school when she first moved there.

MINGO: Was she teaching at St. Peter's? No.

VAN BRAKLE: She was teaching in far southeast somewhere in a public school.

MINGO: Right. Now, your boys going to St. Peter's—was that considered a desirable school to go to at the time? Or...

VAN BRAKLE: Yes.

MINGO: I realize you're also Roman Catholic, I think, so that's a reason for them to go.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes. I've been Catholic since 1985. My husband was born and raised Catholic in Emmitsburg, Maryland, which is totally Catholic. But, I had a few qualms about the Catholic religion. Well, it wasn't really but one. I'm not a person that—today's kids get married and say "Oh, if I don't like it, I'll get a divorce." That's not my theory, but I think some divorces are necessary. I don't think every marriage is made in heaven. And, if a divorce is necessary, you must do it. [both laugh] You know, don't just stay there if there's violence or whatever. And, so, I could not—I told my husband "I don't like being anything unless I'm a good one and I cannot be Catholic and say I would not divorce somebody if it was necessary. So, I just can't be Catholic." But, I was very active. I went to—nine o'clock Mass was for the children and we were there every Sunday at nine o'clock Mass. Of course, I don't think my husband ever missed a Mass in his whole life. But, when my children were small, I didn't either. And I know at one time something was to be done and somebody said "Well, let Alice do it." Said "Well, she's not a member. She can't do it." And, so the priest said "What do you mean she's not a member? She's here as the door opens." [both laugh] But, I was not—he didn't even realize that I was not an active member. I was just where my boys were. And that's where my support was to be. And, as a result, the boys grew up and I still was not a member. So, as my husband—that was always his desire for me to be a member. And when he finally developed—his cancer was diagnosed in September '85. And, so, he again started talking about, oh, he wished I had become a member of the church. So, I thought, hey, that's the least I can do. And, in the meantime, the religion had changed a bit and the rules on divorce are not quite as strict as they used to be. So, I said "I think I'm going to go over and take the classes and become Catholic." So, I did and I was baptized in the spring of '86. My husband was able to attend in a wheelchair.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: So, we got that out of the way. [both laugh] But, I have always been—it's the only church I attended, but I just couldn't make myself be a member unless I was going to be a good member.

So, that's the way that went. But, at—and, again, as segregation raised its ugly head and my son, our older son, got to be five years old, ready to go to school, schools were not integrated at that time.

MINGO: Even St. Peter's?

VAN BRAKLE: No.

MINGO: Really?

VAN BRAKLE: So, he...

MINGO: Is 1960 when this was?

VAN BRAKLE: 19—my son was born in '45, so this would have been 1950.

MINGO: 1950.

VAN BRAKLE: He would have been five years old in 1950. And, so, he went to first—to kindergarten and first grade at Giddings, which is now the gym [at 4th and G Streets SE].

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, at the—my husband was quite upset about this and so he went over and asked the priest, you know, when will they wake up and change this. And they said we have. Bring your son to Sunday School and regular school. And, so, he started second grade there.

MINGO: At St. Peter's. Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, of course, a year later, my next boy was five so he started there. He did not go any other place. And, then, my afterthought [third son, Michael], who was not until 1956 when he was born, of course, he went there. Of course, he, to this day, does not understand segregation. "What do you mean you couldn't go downtown and eat? Why didn't you just go anyway?" [laughs] So, the afterthought doesn't understand all these problems that were in existence because Washington is a Southern town.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: So, but, St. Peter's was—this was before Brent was revived, because now Brent carries a pretty high rating. But, back in those days, Brent was just average and St. Peter's was the outstanding, the better school. And...

MINGO: So it—did it—it quickly integrated, then, I would think, wouldn't you. There was a good balance and...

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, right. And, as I said, they went on from there. They both went to Carroll. But, my middle son was not too interested in school. My older son [Bryant] could have been a professional student. He loved school, finished high school, finished college with a history degree, went to law school, got his law degree. But, the next son [Craig] was—even though the teachers at Carroll that had both boys said Craig had the better mind of the two, but his whole theory was he knew that if you got two F's at Carroll you could not come back. So, that was his ambition, was to get those two F's, which he did. But, I think at that age of about 15 he thought if he flunked out of Carroll he wouldn't have to go anywhere. [laughs]

MINGO: Which was probably wrong. [both laugh]

VAN BRAKLE: So, then we had to put him in public school because he couldn't go to Carroll because he had gotten those two F's. So, he graduated from Dunbar, which—many years ago when segregation was in full force Dunbar was a top school. But, it fell by the wayside after integration and it wasn't—in my opinion it was average when my son was there. But, in the interest of doing the best I could for him, I volunteered to become president of the PTA. And, so, I was [PTA president] those two years he was there, which let me be on the inside and know exactly what was going on and get the best out of it I could under the situation he had put himself in. So, then, I said “Well, please go to college for one year.” And I was in hopes that he would get involved in college and have a turnaround and enjoy school. But, I was young and naive and wasn't as up on this as I should have been. And his grades were so lukewarm 'til it was a miracle that he got in any college. And he was accepted in a college in North Carolina. And this was, again, the opening of integration. And, they were welcoming—they wanted to go on record as being integrated. He was the only [non-white] student there.

MINGO: Really? The only African American.

VAN BRAKLE: Mm-hmm. And, as a result, he was most unhappy.

MINGO: Of course.

VAN BRAKLE: And, at the end of that year, he said “Okay, now, I did what you asked me. I did it a year. Don't ask me to go anymore 'cause I'm not going back.” [laughs] So, that was the end of his career. And, of course, twenty years later, he wishes he had gone. But, he does all right. In fact, when he married, he married a girl he met at high school. And he got married at St. Peter's. They've been married—they got married in '69, so they've been married thirty-two years.

MINGO: Thirty-two years, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And I guess a couple of years after they were married they had a house. And, then, when my older son, who was fresh out of law school, he has an apartment when he gets married. And, I have one nephew who was a financial major in college, who lives in Topeka, Kansas. When he got married, he was living in an apartment. So, we tried to get the afterthought to think big and go to college. He said “Why do I want to go to college? My nephew and my older son, they’re living in apartments with college degrees and Craig’s the only one with a house and he didn’t go to school. So, what do you preach school so hard for?” [both laugh] “Just go. You’ll learn later why.” So, he luckily was a good student. He finished college at Delaware State. He was a basketball fiend and they had promised him some benefits. So, he went there for that and they didn’t come through with that, so he wouldn’t play anymore. But, I think that, again, good old things working out for the best. When he stopped playing basketball, he had more time, so he started being a tutor ‘cause he had very good grades. And, when he graduated, there were all kinds of job offers that might not have been there had he fooled with the basketball. So, he took a job with—one of the offers was Eastman Kodak in Rochester, New York, and so he went up there. And they sent him to the University of Rochester and he got his M.B.A. up there. And then when—he just didn’t like it up there, it was too cold.

MINGO: Oh, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: So, he’s a beach boy, so he went to California and stayed, worked as a financial analyst for Digital Equipment. And they were beginning to have layoffs and whatnot. So, meantime, he met this young lady from South America that lived in Florida. So, he decided to go down there where she was. So, now he’s the comptroller for Xerox in Miami Lakes. And he and the young lady did not get married, which is the modern way. But, they were together about six or seven years and she was about to graduate—in fact, she did actually graduate from the University of Miami. Thirty-two years old, she had been working and going to school, working and going to school. And, during that last bit of her senior year, she developed cancer. And at the age of thirty-two she died from cancer.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: My son had been sent to Europe on a business trip and—it was during her spring break and so he took her with him. And, oh, they had a wonderful—he said, “I’m not going to Madrid, Spain for one day.” That’s what he was being sent for. He said, “I’m not going to do that. I’m going to take three weeks off and have a vacation.” So, they stayed over in Europe for three weeks and went here, there and yon, and had a wonderful trip. And, when she came back, about three weeks later, she had just gone back to school, and she had a terrible pain in her shoulder. And I said, “Oh,”—she was a little thing in size—and I said “You just pulled a muscle with a bag, pulling a bag off the carousel or something.” And

it got worse and got better, worse and worse and got better. It went from her shoulder down her, down this way [her chest]. Anyway, it was finally diagnosed as lymphoma.

MINGO: Oh, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, they gave her chemo and she lost all her hair. But it went away. That's it, they had it all. And that was—they went on the trip in May and she was diagnosed in July. By September she was fine. She went back to school for her last year and everything was beautiful. Of course, they were keeping close watch on her. And by December or January it was back. And they said "Oh, no problem, we'll just give you the same medication that we gave you last time." And it was like they fed it. It just spread throughout her body. So, my son took her to Houston, Texas, with her mother and father and they went there desperately looking for any kind of help. But, nothing worked. So, she graduated, she got her diploma. She had been named the senior of the year or something. She got an award. None of these things she was able to attend. She was just too sick.

MINGO: Isn't that tragic.

VAN BRAKLE: But, she had them. She had her cap and gown. Only time she wore her cap and gown was in the casket [she died in September]. But, she graduated. [laughs] That's what she wanted to do so very, very badly. But, that ended that. She was a lovely girl.

MINGO: Indeed. Very hard to lose her.

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, it's been very difficult for my son. He just sort of thought he was the only person in the world who ever lost a loved one. And he's had some girlfriends that mother didn't approve of. But, for Thanksgiving he surprised me and came home unexpectedly...

MINGO: Came up here, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: ...with a young lady from Ecuador.

MINGO: Oh

VAN BRAKLE: And she reminds me so much of the girlfriend that died. So, we'll see. [both laugh]

MINGO: So, they grew up and did all of their...

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, they all three grew up right here in this block and they say "Oh, Mom, don't sell the house, don't sell the house." So, I think that even if I move I will not sell the house. And I don't know what they're going to do with it because Craig has a nice house out by Catholic U. and Bryant has a nice house in Silver Spring and Michael doesn't like Washington, period. It's too cold. He wants to live right

on the ocean somewhere. So, he'll probably always be in Florida. And, so, I don't know what's—I'm not going to worry about that. [interviewer laughs]

MINGO: Now, having their activities away from the Hill, did they—as youngsters, did they have any activities on the Hill or were there things that were interesting for them?

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes, yes. My younger son, you know, they had playmates that lived in the area. But, as I said, this area was just not what it is today as far as making permanent friends. And especially with my older boys. And, as they went—well, my younger son didn't develop, the younger of those two older ones, he didn't develop any college friends. But, my older son developed friends in college and he moved on. By the time he finished law school, he moved into an apartment with one of his school friends, up in Northwest. And then he married, he married a young lady from, at that time she was over at Georgetown in medical school. And they thought they were the greatest things since ever. She was going to be the doctor and he was the lawyer. But, I think their careers—they were too career minded. They just couldn't make it because each one was more interested in their career than they were in their marriage. So, they had a daughter and then they got a divorce. And she's now very well known and doing well as an eye surgeon in—I can't think of it, anyway, up in Maryland. And, so, a good medical facility up there, I can't think of it, about two hours from here. And, then, he eventually married his secretary. And she's doing very well. She's the congressional affairs officer for her agency and he's eligible to retire. Tried to talk him into retiring but he hasn't done it as yet because they have two children. He has a daughter by his first marriage who is now living in New York and his two younger children, one is a freshman at the University of Maryland, a girl, and the boy is a freshman at Gonzaga. So, he's got tuition bills keeping him on his job. But, they grew up here, they still think of this as home, they are still familiar, because they come often, you know, they're here. In fact, my older son was here for the block party.

MINGO: Oh, good.

VAN BRAKLE: He came by for a little while. Of course, he doesn't know too many people now but everybody knows him.

MINGO: That was the block party in...

VAN BRAKLE: September.

MINGO: September it was, of this year.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. These two blocks. And he knows a few of the neighbors. But, my younger son, even though he was much younger, this neighborhood had still not developed into what it is today, and I say he knew all the thugs on the block. But, kids go out and there's no difference to a child. They're

playing whatever game they're playing. They couldn't care less who they're playing with. I know on one occasion I told him I sure was glad he knew all the thugs. As the neighborhood changed and improved we still have problems, as we all know. And I was coming home one day and I was coming down Seward Square and, as I turned into 5th Street, just as I got ready to turn, here was this group of four or five young men. And I thought "Oh, my God, here goes my pocket book." But, it was too late for me to make a change in my direction. I had to continue and hope for the best. And, as I turned this corner, I thought "Oh, my God, look what I'm running into." And, with that, somebody said "Hi, Mrs. Van Brakle, how's Michael?" [both laugh] I'm glad I know these thugs.

MINGO: Yes, wonderful.

VAN BRAKLE: So, it, you know, now, when they come home, as I say, there's not too many people that they know except my immediate neighbors who they know are the most wonderful neighbors in the world and take care of their mom. And so they know them and, of course, Mike and Sharon have been there...

MINGO: A long time, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: ...for so long that they know that whole family.

MINGO: Yes, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: But, we do have new people in the area. But most of the people that have moved into the area new are nice people with nice jobs because they can't afford to come here otherwise.

[TAPE 2/SIDE 1]

VAN BRAKLE: Some of the good things on Fifth Street include...

MINGO: Yes, on the 300 block?

VAN BRAKLE: Some of the good things of the 300 block of 5th Street are the togetherness of the neighbors. Even though we have a few new young neighbors that we don't see a lot of, those of us that have been there a long time look out for each other. And my—I particularly want to mention, first of all, my next door neighbor Bruce and Susan Borchardt, who, when my husband died and my next door neighbor started cutting my grass for me. And I cut my back [yard] myself. But, then, as I got older and wasn't really up to cutting the back, I thought "What am I going to do with the yard?" And today's world doesn't permit you to invite the person knocking on the door to cut your grass into your home, which you have to do to get to my back yard. So I thought, "What am I going to do with this yard? I have to have a landscaper come and do something of a permanent nature that won't require cutting." And Bruce Borchardt said, "Don't worry about it." So, from that day on, he has cut my front yard. There's a gate

between our houses in the back. He comes and cuts my back yard. Never misses, takes complete care of it. I tried to do little—he said “I wouldn’t take any money.” So, I said, “Well, I’ll just give him gifts.” And, so, the last—I gave him two or three gifts and then he called and said could he and his wife come over to visit. And I said “Sure.” So, they came over and said “Well, we really came to thank you for a gift certificate” that I had put in the mail slot. But, to tell me that if I gave him one more gift, they would quit cutting the grass. [interviewer laughs] They refused to take anything in any way. And they have a cat. So, they asked me to feed the cat, and had nerve enough to bring me a gift. And it was around Christmas time and I said, “Well, you just started your Christmas shopping because I refuse to take this gift.” [laughs] So, those are the kind of people that live on 5th Street. And, whenever something goes wrong, such as a death in our block, Bea Cooper takes care of her side of the street and I take care of my side. And we collect money from each person and then, depending upon the circumstance, we either give flowers and give the rest of the money or give the whole amount to the family to do what they see fit.

MINGO: Excuse me, I...

[Taping interrupted briefly.]

VAN BRAKLE: And then the other good thing is, when there’s something to celebrate, we also celebrate that. If somebody graduates or does something interesting we’ll have a little party. And usually JoAnne and Bill Lanouette will host the party and everybody brings an item and we celebrate whatever there is to celebrate or cry when somebody is leaving.

MINGO: Now, I know you say that, you know, that just the activities of home and work and whatnot as always with people kept you very busy, but you were involved in this, civic things like the—could you tell me a little bit more about that Community Council?

VAN BRAKLE: The Council...

MINGO: Now, that started in the ‘50s again, or in the ‘60s?

VAN BRAKLE: I would say the ‘50s, but I really don’t remember the exact time. But, it was a very—well, it was very similar to the Capitol Hill Restoration Society.

MINGO: Okay.

VAN BRAKLE: Very similar to that, but it was before that group got organized.

MINGO: It was a voluntary group.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And we had a little newspaper similar to The Hill Rag or The Voice or one of those papers. We had the Capitol Hill Community Council was the name of the little newspaper and it required a lot of time and effort and we tried to keep track of the problems and the good things that went on on the Hill and improve, help out—oh, one of the problems that we were trying to deal with that I can remember was parking, which at one time was positively terrible. And it got to the point of where, in the mornings at 7:00, 7:30, people would come and double park by the car they recognized as one going out shortly.

MINGO: Oh, my goodness.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, as soon as that car pulled out, they pulled in and then they went off to their jobs. And that was one of my husband's pet peeves. And he was forever out taking the tags of those cars that did this sort of thing and coming down to the precinct to see what could be done by giving these people a ticket because there was absolutely no where to park when you went to the grocery store and came back. Forget it. So, my husband even had a reputation that somebody coming down the street would say "Yeah, that's him, that's him, that's the guy taking the tag numbers." [both laugh] I wouldn't feel as comfortable about that today, not when everybody seems to have a gun in their pocket. [both laugh] But, it was a very serious matter and we finally got it solved to the point of where you—of course, you had to pay for a [Ward] 6 sticker on your car, but it was helpful. And our parking got a bit under control.

MINGO: Oh, so you instigated that resident permit.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, right. And, then, now, since September 11th, we're really back in the same situation again. And I think it's because many streets are blocked off and parking lots are changed and whatnot since September 11th. And I don't know where the meter people are. They are not putting out tickets today like they were prior to September 11th. And when I had left to come down here this morning there was not one space in the block. And it really is a serious matter because I just don't feel comfortable. I hate to move my car. I went to the doctor one day last week and I got home about 11:30 and I had to park about four blocks away. And it was almost dark by the time there was space and that was because it's dark by the time people get off from work now.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, when they get off from their job—however, there are meter people available because, or maybe that may have not been meter people, it may have been the actual police, but my next door neighbor told me that she got a \$50 ticket for parking. She forgot something and she ran back to her house to get it in the middle of the day and it was on her computer and something happened to her

computer and she was about twenty minutes. She thought she would be two minutes and it turned into about a twenty minute trip in her house, and when she came out she had a \$50 ticket. She had parked hanging on the corner by the mailbox.

MINGO: But, she has a permit.

VAN BRAKLE: But she was illegally parked. And she realized she was. But, I told her, I said “Well, my son tells me why don’t you, when you come home, find a neighbor’s car that you know is your neighbor that will recognize you and double park.” But, then it’s a hassle because you’re constantly looking out the window watching for a space because you know you can’t double park forever. And not many of these cars are—Mike and Sharon’s car stays there all the time—but most of these cars are from Maryland and Virginia that you would be double parking by and you don’t which minute they’re going to be on their way out. So, it needs some attention right now but hopefully it will improve. But, with the world situation what it is, I hate to complain about anything that minor. I’m just happy to be here. One thing I did want to say that is a big change, but, of course, that goes with the change of the world, prior to everybody having air conditioning...

MINGO: Oh, yes, tell me about what that was like in Washington in the summer.

VAN BRAKLE: The humid nights would come and you would just take your kids and walk up to the park up by Pennsylvania Avenue or this one right over here. And you’d take a blanket and you’d lay out and it would be 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and...

MINGO: That’s Marion Park.

VAN BRAKLE: ...think nothing about it. And now I don’t like to go through the park in the day time. And so that is a big change, that—but we’d go to Hains Point, once we were fortunate enough and had been married long enough to have a car. We’d put the kids in the car and drive down to Hains Point and stay til 2:00 and 3:00. There was a nice breeze because your house was terribly warm. But those day have all gone.

MINGO: Then you got back at 4:00 in the morning and it was fairly liveable.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, you’d come back once your house had had a chance to cool off. Of course, you left the window open because nobody was going to break in. And so when the house cooled off at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning then you’d come back home and go to bed.

MINGO: Now, people probably had fans in their houses.

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes.

MINGO: Not electric but circulating fans.

VAN BRAKLE: We had fans but we did not have [any type of air conditioning]...

MINGO: Now, in climates like this, did it really kind of slow down a little bit when it got to be really hot and humid?

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, but everybody had the same problem because you didn't have—no one had air conditioning.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: When I worked at—as I say, when I first went back to work after the children started school, I was down here in the tempo buildings and they weren't air conditioned. So, you sort of hope that it was going to get terribly warm because they had this thing that they would come around and swing this thing and it did the humidity bit. And, so, when you saw him coming, everybody got excited. "Hey, we might get off." "What is it?" "Oh, it's such-and-such." And it had a certain temperature it had to reach before the government was closed. And, so, everybody was following the guy around, you know. "What does it say? What does it say?" [interviewer laughs] "Oh, it's two points too short." So, we'd go back to work. An hour later he comes back, he's swinging it again. Everybody's running. "Oh, yes, it's—hey, we're going, we're going." [both laugh] So, everybody would get off at 2:00 in the afternoon or 3:00 in the afternoon or whatever when it reached this unbearable point. And then you rushed home to your unbearable house. [both laugh]

MINGO: And if you could, you went to the park.

VAN BRAKLE: Well, even in the park, in the middle of the afternoon, you just sort of—but, at least you could go home. And people weren't as casually dressed at the office as they are now. And so at least you could go home and get out of your office clothes and put on a pair of shorts and a top and chill out a little bit.

MINGO: Now where is the building you were working at? You said the tempo...

VAN BRAKLE: It was a temporary building at 2nd and T, Southwest, which is directly behind the wall of Fort McNair.

MINGO: Okay.

VAN BRAKLE: Because there was an opening there in the wall and we could go over to Fort McNair, back and forth. But I don't even know if the temporary buildings are still down there. But 2nd and T,

Southwest, was our address and that was the Quartermaster Corps. But, then, of course, the Quartermaster Corps was done away with and—this is all Department of Army—and Department of Army had tech services, Quartermaster Corps, Engineer Corps, Ordnance, Chemical, all these different services. And they combined all the services and—I was in research and development in the Quartermaster Corps. And they made a new office, Navy Research Labs up in Natick, Massachusetts. And a lot of research and development went up there. And, of course, I didn't want to go up there. And, so, I took a secretarial job in this new agency called the U.S. Army Materiel Command which combined all these different services together and brought Engineers and Ordnance and Chemical and all the people from the Pentagon over here to these tempo buildings and wherever they were located. And we went into the temporary buildings that used to be across the street from National Airport. And we stayed there, we went over there in '62, and we stayed there til, I don't know, about three years, I guess. And, by that time, they had built the high rise on Eisenhower Avenue in Alexandria and that's where the headquarters of U.S. Army Materiel Command is today. So, that's—we moved down there and that's where I retired from in 1979.

MINGO: When you went for your employment there, I'm thinking about, you know, about women's issues in hiring. Was there any problem in, you know, becoming employed at the Department of Army or...

VAN BRAKLE: No.

MINGO: No.

VAN BRAKLE: Because this started with World War II. And after World War II women found their place. And, so, there was no problem. In fact, I worked when they were first building the Pentagon.

MINGO: Really?

VAN BRAKLE: And I was just a kid then. And this was World War II time and they were begging for people. And I was in school.

MINGO: You were in college at the time.

VAN BRAKLE: Mm-hmm. But, they didn't care if you worked two hours, four hours, whatever. So, they were just begging for people. So, of course, you didn't appreciate this job. You were like my son who didn't want to go to college. You were young and silly and it really wasn't important. I can remember being in, taking this job as, like, in a typing pool or something in the Pentagon. And there was a young girl my age that, we were in this pool together. The Pentagon was being constructed and the—of course, anybody who's familiar with the Pentagon knows all the millions of miles of halls there are there. And the messengers rode bicycles to get around to deliver the mail. So, this girl and I decided, boy,

wouldn't that be a great job. So, we went to Personnel and we told them that we didn't want to be in the typing pool, we wanted to be messengers. Well, messengers were in a complete different pay scale and made less than the typing pool.

MINGO: [laughing] Less than the typing pool?

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, they said, "Oh, no, you don't want to be a messenger. Messengers only get..." Oh, who cares, you know. We'd get to ride the bicycles. [both laughing]

MINGO: So, you did that.

VAN BRAKLE: No, they wouldn't let us. [laughter]

MINGO: Wiser heads.

VAN BRAKLE: The people in the Personnel Office were older and more mature and they said, "No, no, no. Just go back to your typing pool. Be happy. You don't want to be messengers." So, that was my life in the Pentagon. And then to show how important my job was, that was probably my first year here and I was homesick anyway, and so I had this little job but I quit to go back to Kansas to the senior prom. [both laugh] That's how important this job was to me. And, of course, my dad said "Oh, come on." He was glad I came home anyway. So I got to see, go home. So, I quit that job. But jobs were very...

MINGO: Easy to come by apparently.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. But, now, then, by 1950 when I—well, I worked at Office of Price Administration because there were different agencies that were wartime agencies and I worked there. My friend was working there and she said "Oh, come down here and work with me." And jobs were available everywhere. So, I went down there and I worked there until my first son was born and then when he was born I quit. And then I didn't work after '45, 1945. And I didn't work anymore until 1950. And my next door neighbor was working down here [at Quartermaster Corps], my next door neighbor at that time was working. I said you know, I think now that Craig was in preschool and Bryant was in kindergarten, I said, "I think I'm going to see about getting a job." So, she said, "Oh, let me see if they're hiring down here." So, she came back and she told me, "Yeah they're hiring secretaries," just a secretary job. So, I went—and again I don't know how old I was in 1950 but not too mature. But, I took—my husband had a daughter by his previous marriage and she was in high school. And, of course, there was not a job program for teenagers then like there is today. So, she had no chance for having a summer job. So, I said "I'm going to take a job and you keep Bryant and Craig for me, babysit Bryant and Craig, and I'll pay you and then we'll both have extra money for the summer." But, I wasn't bright enough to start looking for this job early enough. So, this was a very good idea and everybody agreed to it and she was a

very—she was probably like a senior in high school or something—she was a very mature person. And when she graduated she knew exactly what she wanted to do. She wanted to become a nun. And she did. She was a nun for fifteen years after she finished high school. But, this was agreed upon, so—and I should have been looking for this job, like, February, but I didn't look for it 'til summer. And by the time I did all the paper work and actually reported to the job it was the 17th of August. She has to go back to school in two weeks. [interviewer laughs] I said, "Oh, well, who cares. I'll have one paycheck so that's better than no paycheck." So, I took this job and they put me in this office. And the office was one lady, a Jewish lady, and an African American lady, and me. So, this lady was, the African American lady was teaching me what I was supposed to do. And, in our general conversation, she told me she was married to someone from Kansas City. And he had gone to the University of Kansas. And my brothers went to the University of Kansas. And, at that time, there weren't that many African American people at the University. So, I wondered why don't I know him. But, I didn't. And then I remembered my brothers belonged to the fraternity called Kappa Alpha Psi. Her husband belonged to Alpha Phi Alpha so they were not in the same fraternity. So, I knew all that my brothers friends are Kappas, but I didn't know any Alphas. So, eventually, I met her husband and he knew many people that I knew but I didn't know him. So, anyway, in our general conversation, she had two children, the same age as my two boys. She had a boy and a girl, same age as my two boys that I had at that time. This was 1950. And we became friends and, so, I told her, I said "Well, I don't have to order too much because I'm only going to be here two weeks." And, so, she said "Why are you only here two weeks?" I said, "I don't have a babysitter and I don't have any family or anybody here." I didn't have any relatives here that I could depend on. I said, "I don't have anybody to take my kids after my stepdaughter goes back to school." So, she said, "Well, you can't quit." I said, "Well, what am I going to do?" So, she said, "Let me go home and ask my babysitter if she knows anybody." So, she did and she came back and she gave me this name. So, my husband and I went to see this lady. And, it was—again, things work out for the best. This lady was just perfect. She lived with her son but she just wanted some additional money. So, she worked whenever my kids needed her. If it was Easter, she came. If they were in school, she didn't come. Christmastime she was there for two or three weeks and she'd be back—it was just perfect. Just a perfect match. And she kept them for a number of years. So, then, of course, I didn't have to quit. So, I didn't quit and I didn't—in fact, I never left employment until I retired in 1979. It was when—and I retired then because—I retired on my birthday. I was 55 that year. And my husband had been retired since '71 and we had begun to travel because now the kids were grown up and we had a bit more free time. And this same girl who got my babysitter for me, we became very close friends. She's like a sister now. And we began to plan these little trips with other friends and, not a club or anything, just she and I would decide where we wanted to go and say "Hey, we're going such-and-such a place. Does anybody want to go?" [interviewer laughs] And we had as few as—we went to the Far East for twenty-six days. We had eight, which we joined with

another group and made up about, I think there were about twenty-five of us all total. But, eight of us knew each other. And, we went to Venezuela one time. I think we had something like twenty-two or thirty-two or something. So, just whoever happened—we made plans and, whatever suited our husbands, and they got to be good friends, and golf friends. So, whatever pleased the four of us, that's where we were going. Anybody else who wanted to go with us could in our little circle of friends. So, they were retired and my friend, who is the same age as I am, this girl, she retired on an early out. So, she was already retired even though she wasn't fifty-five. So, they had all these trips planned and I didn't have time for that job. So, I retired on my birthday, twenty-two years ago. [both laugh] So, as far as doing things in the neighborhood, I personally didn't get that involved with—my close friends don't live on the Hill. I'll put it that way. I've got—this is why people say—I say, “Well, everybody has different friends. I've got church friends, I've got neighbors, I've got personal friends, and I've got co-workers.” And I still see my co-workers. We have a luncheon once a year. We get together.

MINGO: How nice.

VAN BRAKLE: So, you know, they're different types of different friends. But, still, you know, I love all of them but they're just a different—you can't have all your friends all at one time.

MINGO: No. The Community Council—did that evolve into the Restoration Society or is there a successor to the Community Council, do you think?

VAN BRAKLE: I don't know. And the way I dropped out of the Community Council was kind of strange. Because I really was very, very active in it and I don't really know anyone here on the Hill now—there are two people. Merrill Pregelj lives around here somewhere, I don't know where but I know he's still on the Hill. And Bill Driscoll. You know Bill Driscoll from church.

MINGO: Yes, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: Paul Beatley. They are probably the only people that I know on the Hill that were connected with Capitol Hill Community Council, that are still on the Hill. There may be others that I don't know that are still here. But, when my husband died, then I was a bit nervous. Also, the world had changed to where you weren't as safe after dark as you used to be. Because I used to go out—I belong to a card, a group of women that played cards. We had children, we had to see that the children were finished and in bed and we met on Saturday night at 9:00. And we played cards and came home at 2:00 in the morning. Thought nothing about it. But, heavens, I wouldn't do that now. But, when my husband died and the world had changed, now I'm concerned about going to the Capitol Hill meetings.

MINGO: Now, by this time it's called the Restoration Society. No, it's still Community Council.

VAN BRAKLE: And they're still meeting here, there, and yon, but always in the evenings, of course.

MINGO: Of course, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: So, now—and I probably had a bigger fear when my husband first died than—oh, I was by myself for the first time because I met my husband when I was eighteen and married him when I was twenty. And, so, he had always been in my life. So, I can't go to these meetings because they're after dark and I've got to go by myself. So, they said, "Oh, no problem, no problem. We'll come and pick you up and see that you get home. You can't drop out." Okay. So, I made this deal—this happened probably two or three months. And, then, they had a meeting at the Brethren Church here on 4th Street, which is a couple of blocks from my house. And I went to the meeting because it wasn't dark. But, when the meeting was over, and I said, "Okay, who's going to walk me home?" "Oh, Alice, you're just two blocks from home."

MINGO: Oh, dear.

VAN BRAKLE: I said, "Yes, you're right. I will walk home and I will be home." So, that's the way my life ended with the Community Council. They called two or three times after that, but this isn't going to work because this is a hassle for somebody to get me home and, so, I'm just going to drop out. And I did. So, I really don't know how it actually ended or if it merged with the Restoration Society or...

MINGO: Because this would have been mid-80's when you ceased being active.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, yes. Right. And so I—and I really haven't done a lot of community things since then. After my husband died, Harold Brazil, who is our Councilman-at-Large now—Harold is a member of Capitol Hill Kiwanis and he was a new member at the time. I didn't know him that well. But, Rob Robinson, who was at that time Marion Barry's right hand man, and Rob had agreed—Rob also is a member of Capitol Hill Kiwanis. And I saw him for the first time in several years yesterday. He was coming out of the bank. He called to me and I hadn't seen him in years. He also ran for Councilman in Ward 6 against Sharon Ambrose, but Sharon beat him. But, anyway, Rob and Harold both were members of Capitol Hill, are members of Capitol Hill Kiwanis. And right after my husband died, Rob was acting as Harold's campaign manager for his first time to run as, at that time for Ward 6 Councilperson, which he won and was that person for some time before he got Councilman-at-Large. So, Rob called me and, knowing I just lost my husband and had nothing to do, and said "Will you come help me with Harold's campaign?" So, I hadn't been active in community things and I had missed it. And, so, I said, "Okay. Let's see what you've got in mind." So, Harold's campaign office at that time was in the 1200 block of Pennsylvania Avenue. He had a house up there. And, so, Rob was trying to set this house up for this campaign. So, when I went over there, I thought, "Unh-uh. This isn't going to work. I'm going to be in

this house by myself.” I said, “No, Rob. I know you too well. You’re going to go off and leave me in this house with its fifteen doors and people coming and going and I won’t have the slightest idea where you are and this is more than I want to take on. I will help you but I will not be in charge of this house.” So, this is how I sort of started helping Harold because I went over there for a few hours at a time or I did things from the house or whatever, before Harold won that election. So, I sort of dabbled in that type of project with, but not too much. I’m too old to get too heavily involved and there’s too much nighttime stuff.

MINGO: Yes, yes. Let’s...

[TAPE 2/SIDE 2]

MINGO: This is a continuation of interview with Alice Van Brakle by Marie Mingo, interviewer. This is at 429 5th Street SE , and the date today is January 21, 2002. Okay, as I say, there are three sides for the first interview and this is an additional side now beginning a second interview date.

Okay, so, good afternoon, and I’m glad you’re here.

VAN BRAKLE: Well, I’m happy to be here and hopefully I won’t forget where we left off. But, I—not remembering where we left off I’ll backtrack to some things.

MINGO: Well, excuse me just a minute. We were at, you know, had gone around right at the end talking a little bit about one of Harold Brazil’s campaigns and that you did not work on that campaign because of difficulties.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes.

MINGO: And, also, we talked about your Community Council activities and that they had ceased. So, that was sort of where we were.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. Capitol Hill Community Council I was very active in and we had our newspaper and great membership at one time. But, it was taken over by Restoration Society and there was another community organization I don’t remember the name of, but, I stopped working with them at that time after my husband passed away and I didn’t have, didn’t feel comfortable attending the meetings at night. So, that sort of ended my active participation in the neighborhood community groups. However, I’m still a paid member but I’m not an active member. As far as Kiwanis is concerned, I still call them my other family and I do attend whatever they invite me to. And my husband was a very active member in Capitol Hill Community Council, one of the—he was taken into that group by Paul Beatley. And last fall sometime they had their annual awards night and they invited me down at Fort McNair. And they tried to

bring in the older members and spouses. And Paul Beatley attended that meeting, I saw him there. And, as I said, my husband was very active and when he passed away they [ed: Kiwanis] had a wonderful scholarship established in his name...

MINGO: Wonderful, wonderful.

VAN BRAKLE: ...which every now and then we discuss that with them. But, I don't know a lot of the newer members but the older members I'm still acquainted with.

MINGO: And the Kiwanis I think was an important community gathering place. Did you want to elaborate about that role in the life of the people on Capitol Hill?

VAN BRAKLE: Well, for instance, when they had the—I guess they still have it. What's the activity they have in the spring at the Market? Market Day.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: They were active in helping to put Market Day on and all of the fellows had to take turns working. Of course, now the Kiwanis is not fellows. They're fellows and girls. But, in those days, it was an all man's organization when my husband first joined. And they were helpful in putting on Market Day and various activities for the community. And those community programs were well attended by the neighborhood, people in the neighborhood.

MINGO: How large do you think the membership was and was it only people who lived on Capitol Hill?

VAN BRAKLE: No, no. No.

MINGO: Oh, okay, because that's sort of something...

VAN BRAKLE: I don't know—oh, I'd hate to even guess. But, they had breakfast meetings. They had a meeting once a week at 7:00 in the morning with breakfast. And they met at various places. Over the years they've met at what used to be Capitol Hill Hospital and at the Armory and at St. Peter's Church and various places they have held their meetings. I don't know where they're holding them now. But, they meet at 7:00 a.m. on Thursdays. And, oh, I have been to those meetings and I would say they probably had like thirty-five or forty members. But, the Capitol Hill group is just one little segment because Eastern Branch is just right down Pennsylvania Avenue a bit. I don't know whether it's on this side of the bridge or the other side, but there are so many chapters of Kiwanis that they are next door to each other. And that was part of their business. Each member was to visit other chapters so many—you got an award if you visited other chapters during the course of a year. So, every couple of days my husband was off to a Kiwanis meeting somewhere. And downtown they might have the meetings at 12:00 because many of the

members were working people, so they had to have the meetings so that either before work or evening meetings or at lunch time. But it's a very, very active group. And, when they have their general meeting—I don't know whether that's once a year or when it is, I have forgotten—there are thousands because Kiwanis is all over the world.

MINGO: Oh, yes, it certainly is. Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, the last International Kiwanis that we had made plans to go to was in Vienna, Austria. And it was just at the time that my husband got sick and we had to cancel and we didn't get to go. But, the international meetings are thousands and thousands of people, but the little Capitol Hill group—but, it, the Kiwanis group, like everything else, changed. And when my husband first entered many of the members were neighbors.

MINGO: They were Capitol Hill residents, right.

VAN BRAKLE: Or working.

MINGO: Or working on the Hill.

VAN BRAKLE: They either worked on the Hill or lived on the Hill. But, now the members of Capitol Hill Kiwanis live everywhere, Maryland and Virginia. And I don't really know why, if you lived in Maryland or Virginia, why you would select Capitol Hill Kiwanis unless it's close to your work or—I really don't know the answer to that.

MINGO: Perhaps they work here. Do they have social functions that involve people who do live on the, or at that time, did live on the Hill? You know, was it an important social group also?

VAN BRAKLE: It was more service than social.

MINGO: Yes, okay. So, there wasn't...

VAN BRAKLE: You combined the service with the social. If they were having a benefit, something for a particular service, those attending, you turned it into a social function, but the intent was service.

MINGO: Was service, exactly.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. Because it's definitely a service organization. Such as, Thanksgiving time they were always getting together with baskets for the needy. But, in putting the baskets together, it turned into a social event.

MINGO: Yes, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: There was some social aspect to it, but the intention was service.

MINGO: Yes. Well, I think we talked before about the commercial aspects of the neighborhood. And are there other things that—talk about that.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, I wanted to get back to that because there were some places that I couldn't remember. And there was one thing that I wanted to point out that I don't think came to my mind. The stores that used to be here were more family owned.

MINGO: Yes, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: Family owned and operated. And about the only stores that I know of right now that are that type are—Frager's is sort of, Frager's Hardware, and District Lock is still that way.

MINGO: Yes, that's right.

VAN BRAKLE: But, they seem to—they are family owned type stores and they hire local people.

MINGO: Local people.

VAN BRAKLE: And when you went to shop the clerks were neighbors or church members...

MINGO: Right, so you knew them well.

VAN BRAKLE: ...that were working there. And District Lock and Hardware, for instance, was where my husband always went. And, when I was by myself and didn't know a nail from a hammer...

MINGO: You'd go there yourself.

VAN BRAKLE: I would go there and—I can't remember the two gentlemen's names that were the head people around there. I would just ask them for whatever my problem was and they gave me the right pieces and told me how to do and, if necessary, when they got off from work, they'd run around to put it in the proper place where I needed. [both laugh]

MINGO: They'd help you out in any way.

VAN BRAKLE: So, those type of businesses we don't have anymore because no one knows anyone anymore. It was the same way I think I had mentioned last time about the gentleman who used to be the pharmacist at the Peoples Drug Store at 7th Street. I could call him and tell him what ailments my kids had and he not only would tell me what I needed but bring it around on his lunch break or whatever to see that I got it so I didn't have to leave them alone to go pick up something or if it was cold or whatever. So,

those type of establishments we don't have. And I think I also remembered a few others that—oh, one other thing about the family owned and operated stores. The kids had jobs.

MINGO: Ah. Your children had jobs.

VAN BRAKLE: My children worked at various stores. Either at Roland's or District Lock and Hardware, Frager's, Distad's gasoline station at 9th and Pennsylvania Avenue, which was family owned.

MINGO: That's right, that's right. Distads own that.

VAN BRAKLE: Mr. and Mrs. Distad ran that and the children are still running it. And, you know, when you enjoyed having a—there wasn't a job program for teenagers at that time and so you wanted your children to be busy and not get into mischief during the summer. They all had jobs at one store or another and those owners of those stores helped to guide your children. They'd let you know if they got out of line and so you had assistance in...

MINGO: A lot of community support.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. Community support, that's exactly...

MINGO: And then there were the movie houses, too. There were movie houses on Pennsylvania Avenue.

VAN BRAKLE: Two movie houses where...

MINGO: Did those figure in your life, your family's?

VAN BRAKLE: You mean as far as—well, to attend the movies, yes. It was a ritual for Saturday. All the children were lined up outside the door to go to the movies on Saturday. It was the best babysitter in the neighborhood because you—everybody walked their kids up to the movie and then you walked back up and picked them up double feature time. So, you walked up four hours later...

MINGO: It was a good long time.

VAN BRAKLE: ...and picked them up and you had a chance then to get a lot of things done while they were well supervised, or you hoped they were, in the movie. So, for a few, fifteen cents or whatever the movie cost and some popcorn money and you had four hours to accomplish missions at home without the children. And, of course, then you get into the bit of segregation because the movies, up until—I don't remember when they were—and the reason why I don't know is because I didn't pay it any attention.

[laughs]

MINGO: Yes I gather that—fortunately, that was not a bar to your using the theatre.

VAN BRAKLE: My children happen to be fair skinned. No one knew the difference. My middle son has curly hair so he had to wear a hat.

MINGO: Oh, my goodness.

VAN BRAKLE: So no one would recognize that he was not a little white boy. But, other than that it was not an inconvenience for me because I just ignored it. It was a stupid rule and, so, I didn't grow up with it and, so, I ignored it, which may not have been the best thing to do but that was my opinion.

MINGO: And the other children must have ignored it also.

VAN BRAKLE: Children are all alike, they're all born the same. Children don't pay any attention if someone there as black as my shoes would have been welcomed by the children. It wasn't the children, it was the adults that created the problem.

MINGO: The ones who went to the theater or the ones who operated the theater?

VAN BRAKLE: Operated the theater. They were the ones who had the rule that you can't attend this because you're a black child. And because you were black, where did you go? I guess you had to go to U Street or there may have been a black movie on H, Northeast. I don't know because I didn't go.

MINGO: Okay. So, you yourself and your husband didn't go to movies.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, we went to the movies. We went to the Penn.

MINGO: Okay, so you went to the Penn also. I'm so glad to hear that.

VAN BRAKLE: Because my husband is the same complexion I am.

MINGO: Oh, I'm so glad to hear that.

VAN BRAKLE: So, we sort of ignored—we went anywhere we wanted. We went to—what's the name of the amusement park that you get on the streetcar and ride to? Glen Echo.

MINGO: Glen Echo, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: Glen Echo did not admit black people. But, we never paid any attention to it. We just went. If we had enough money to go to Glen Echo, we went, because as far as I was concerned it was a stupid rule and I ignored it.

MINGO: Now, when did this kind—when did the segregation stop?

VAN BRAKLE: I don't even remember because it was difficult for me to remember since it never was segregated for me. So, but as far as—and ironical enough we didn't have any black children on our block, I don't believe.

MINGO: Really. But, the neighborhood was mixed more so than it is now.

VAN BRAKLE: No, not my block.

MINGO: No. But, even in the general neighborhood it was not?

VAN BRAKLE: Well, my kids played with the kids that lived on the block and maybe a few from in this block. But, I don't remember any black children. Now there were a couple that used to come and spend the day. Somebody was taking care of—there was a young man that spent the day next door. In fact, he calls himself my fourth son. Right now he's a medical doctor here in town. And he came and spent the day next door to me where Bruce and Susan live. That was a black family at that time, but they had no children. But, there was an older lady there who kept, who was his babysitter. So, he came there and—his parents dropped him off in the morning and took him back in the, picked him up in the evening. And he went to school, he was about, like, six years old, six or seven years old when he started coming. But, he was never there on Saturdays to go to the movies.

MINGO: Oh, I see. So he was at home then.

VAN BRAKLE: He was there from Monday to Friday. And he and my son Craig are the same age, born the same month so they started St. Peter's together. And, in fact, he's Craig's children's godfather. They developed very good friends from those days. But, Gary was never here for the Saturday movie thing or, you know, Sunday if you went to Glen Echo or wherever you went. He was only there from Monday to Friday. But, children that lived in the block, they were all white. But, they were, most of them were, come from families that were renting and several lived in this apartment on the corner.

MINGO: Yes, you said home ownership at that time, I think...

VAN BRAKLE: Was low.

MINGO: ...was only about fifty per cent, maybe.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes.

MINGO: So, that made it very different from...

VAN BRAKLE: And they weren't, they weren't the children that I really wanted my children to play with.

MINGO: Right.

VAN BRAKLE: In fact, my boys now laugh about—because they remember their names and whatnot—and they’ll say, “I wonder what ever happened to...” They all had nicknames and they’ll call off the nicknames of these children that were little terrors. But, you put up with them. Of course, children were different then than they are now. If they didn’t do something correctly, you sort of took them by the shoulder and shook them a little bit and got them straightened out. [laughs]. But, they don’t do that in these days.

MINGO: Not so much now, no, no.

VAN BRAKLE: And when my boys got to be, like, teenagers then they had little jobs in the summer at the various stores around. And, as I said, you knew everybody who owned the stores. My husband knew everybody by being Superintendent of Southeast Post Office at one time. And, so, everybody had to come to the post office and especially the business people. So, he knew everybody and everybody knew him. And, so our boys always had jobs. But, most of the kids that were well behaved had little summer jobs around. Sharon and Mike Ambrose’s children are a little bit younger but as they came along it was the same way with their children. They had little summer jobs because they were good kids and they could—everybody wanted to help keep them good kids, so that worked out. And it, as I said, the District Lock and Hardware people helped me out tremendously when I was a widow and had no idea what I was doing. And Johnny Distad, I couldn’t have made it without him.

MINGO: With the cars, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: With the cars. On one occasion, my car was—I had a Cadillac and it stopped on me. I’m ready to give it away, no questions asked, just take it. And Johnny said, “Now, wait a minute, Mrs. Van Brakle. Don’t do like that. Let me take it.” So, he said, “Let me keep it over the weekend.” So, he kept it over the weekend. He took it home, he came back. He said he took his mother to a funeral. He told me where he went and he said I think this is wrong and this is wrong, but don’t give it away. It’s worth fixing. [laughs] And this kind of thing you can’t do without. And the same way with, this is broken, but fix this but don’t fix that. And you don’t need that anyway. You don’t play the radio, you don’t need an aerial. So, it got broken off, don’t worry about it. I’ll do something here. Oh, you appreciate these kinds of businesses. But—and also...

MINGO: This is—excuse me—but, this is the John Distad who is now the proprietor of the..

VAN BRAKLE: Right. Johnny and his brother and his sister are now running Distad’s at 9th Street and they have another one on Good Hope Road I think it is.

MINGO: Yes. Okay.

VAN BRAKLE: So, they're great people, great people. And also in the 600 block we had a High's, High's Ice Cream store.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: And then...

MINGO: Is that preceding Ben & Jerry's?

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, yes. Well, High's were all over town way back and we had one there in the 600 block. Also there was a—of course, the kids couldn't work there—oh, it's about a couple of doors from 6th Street on the south side of Pennsylvania Avenue, there was a big liquor store. And the guy that owned it—I don't know what his real name was but they called him Red because he had bright red hair. And everybody knew Red and he knew everybody. And it was, any help that you needed with anything, you could always get donations and everything. Red was always on the...

MINGO: Wonderful. Also community minded.

VAN BRAKLE: You started there for donations. You knew you were going to get a good donation from there. But, I don't—and, then, down in the—the other day I was trying to remember the name of the couple that owned and operated the restaurant in the 200 block. And I finally asked one of my children.

MINGO: Yes. Their connection with the football team.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. Mike Palm.

MINGO: Mike Palm. P-a-l-m?

VAN BRAKLE: P-a-l-m. Mike Palm. And Mike was a football player with the, I believe it was the New York Giants, but it was a pro team. And his wife had been at one time a dealer at a Las Vegas casino. And, in fact, they met there, she said. And they raised their children across the street, the house that faces St. Peter's Church, the big white house that faces St. Peter's Church. That's where Mike and his wife lived and their children. I've forgotten the children's names but they were the age of my children and went to school together. And, after Mike died, then his wife and children maintained the restaurant for a good number of years.

MINGO: Oh. It was in the 300 block? The restaurant.

VAN BRAKLE: In the 200 block.

MINGO: 200 block.

VAN BRAKLE: 200 block, mm-hmm. And she eventually, after the kids grew up and married and lived other places, she eventually sold the house and she lived in an apartment up by St. Mark's Church for a while. And she and the children weren't seeing eye-to-eye on how to manage the restaurant and, so they gave the restaurant up. And she moved to, I believe it was West Virginia. And I haven't seen any of the children for some time.

MINGO: Is there a restaurant in that location now?

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, but I've forgotten which one it is because they've changed so many up there in that block.

MINGO: Yes, there've been a lot of changes.

VAN BRAKLE: It may be the—no, it's not the Chinese restaurant I don't think. What's that—Hunan's or somebody?

MINGO: Yes, there's Hunan's.

VAN BRAKLE: It's right along in there somewhere but I'm not sure exactly which building it was. I don't think it's that building, I think it's—might be where Trover's is.

MINGO: Oh, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: But, it—along in there somewhere.

MINGO: Yes, on that block.

VAN BRAKLE: And I just don't remember the exact, what's exactly there now.

MINGO: Oh, that's okay.

VAN BRAKLE: But, it was a very, very popular restaurant all over town. People came not only from the area but everybody came to Mike Palm's to...

MINGO: And it was called Mike Palm's?

VAN BRAKLE: Mm-hmm.

MINGO: Oh, good.

VAN BRAKLE: There's another restaurant, in fact I think it's still in existence, called, I think it's called The Palm. The Palms, I think is the—but there's no connection.

MINGO: No connection, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: And, also, up in the 600 block of Pennsylvania Avenue there was a gift shop and it was gorgeous. It was run by a man and his sister.

MINGO: Oh

VAN BRAKLE: And it was up about two or three doors from Peoples at 7th Street. On this side of...

MINGO: On this side.

VAN BRAKLE: I can't visualize—maybe where that Chinese restaurant is there. There's a Chinese restaurant.

MINGO: Right, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: It might be along—and it was really a lovely card and gift shop. I can't recall the name, but better than Trover's. They had a wider selection. They had more space and it...

MINGO: More than stationery.

VAN BRAKLE: And their card and their gifts were really gorgeous gifts. I mean you could do your Christmas shopping there.

MINGO: Oh, so a variety of items then.

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes. In fact, they...

MINGO: Clothing also, or was it...

VAN BRAKLE: Just cards. Cards and gifts. No, no clothing. Things like crystalware, beautiful crystal. And some very expensive things. It was a wide price range. But, it wasn't token gifts. It wasn't a bunch of junk. It was really beautiful things that—you could buy a wedding present there for a dear friend. I mean, you could buy things there that cost almost a hundred dollars for a gift of crystalware or silver or beautiful gifts. And, then, some, you know, lesser priced items, smaller priced items on down to...

MINGO: Do you recall when it closed? Or what it was closed by?

VAN BRAKLE: The brother died and the sister—after the brother died, the sister worked at Roland's for a while.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: You got to know everybody in these stores. You knew them and knew their background and their families and whatnot. And one of the clerks that used to be at Peoples Drug Store, she lived down in southern Maryland somewhere and came up on the bus every day. When she passed away, it was like a longtime neighbor—she never lived in the neighborhood but she always worked there and she would—she kept track of everybody’s children. If I went to the drug store, she would beckon to me and say, “Craig was in here the other day and I told him to stop doing such-and-such.” [laughs]

MINGO: Sort of being aware of that they probably minded their p’s and q’s.

VAN BRAKLE: Well, they knew they couldn’t, whatever they did somebody was going—the news that they did anything wrong, the news beat them home. [both laugh]

MINGO: Great.

VAN BRAKLE: And that went, not only for my children, but for everybody who was trying to do a good job.

MINGO: Wonderful community.

VAN BRAKLE: And there was a pet shop up there in the middle of that block. The pet shop was long about, oh, probably where that Western store is up there in the 600 block. And they had all kinds of pets, from snakes to birds to—huh! My youngest son, I think my older boys knew better, but, my youngest son was there one day and talked the owner into letting him have the snake.

MINGO: Then he would bring it home. Were you pleased to see a snake come in the door?

VAN BRAKLE: I didn’t see it.

MINGO: Oh, you didn’t?

VAN BRAKLE: I probably wouldn’t have but two sons by now if I had. [both laugh] His father saw it and said “You know your mother is not going to let that snake be in this house.” Because I am deathly afraid of snakes even though I grew up on a 640-acre farm, which is a mile square. And I’m sure there were plenty of snakes there. But...

MINGO: But not in the house.

VAN BRAKLE: No, we didn’t have them in the house there and they weren’t go—I have a dread fear, almost uncanny. I can’t even look at them. When our children were little and we took them to the zoo on regular—I never went in the Snake House. My husband took the boys through the Snake House and I met them on the other end. I just can’t look at them. They make me sick. But, he talked this guy out of the

snake and he showed it to his dad and his dad said, “No, no. You just can’t have that snake in this house because it’s not going to work. So, you just have to take that snake back and say ‘Thanks, but, no thanks.’”

MINGO: So, he did.

VAN BRAKLE: He took it back and gave it back to the man and said his dad wouldn’t let him have it, so...

MINGO: Were there organizations that, where the children belonged to in the area that might, where they might have encountered things like learning about snakes or wildlife or, you know, like Scouts or anything about nature?

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes, Boy Scouts. Yes, yes. My husband was a Boy Scout leader and my boys were out of the troop out of St. Peter’s. And they went up to wherever you go on hikes and stuff with the boys.

MINGO: And those were integrated groups?

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes. Well, St. Peter’s School was integrated.

MINGO: About forty years ago, I think you said. Sixties, maybe.

VAN BRAKLE: My oldest son was born in ‘45 and he was five years old in ‘50.

MINGO: Oh, ‘50s then.

VAN BRAKLE: So, in 1950, when he started school, he started at Giddings, which is on G Street.

MINGO: Yes. Right.

VAN BRAKLE: And the next year, St. Peter’s changed. Whether other—I can’t tell you the years of other schools. Of course, the big segregation change came in 1954 with the Brown...

MINGO: Brown versus the Board of Education.

VAN BRAKLE: Right.

MINGO: Right, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: But, St. Peter’s—Bryant started first grade in St. Peter’s and that would have been in 1951. So, and Craig was three years younger, so when he started kindergarten, he started at St. Peter’s. So, I had no knowledge of public school other than that one year of kindergarten.

MINGO: At Giddings, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And the Scouts and all of their activities were at St. Peter's. And, then, after they were both in school, then I decided to go back to work. So, they went to school until three and then after, from three until five, they were at Friendship House. And they had their after school program.

MINGO: Which they still have, too, of course. Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, as a result, well, I've always been active in wherever the children were. So, with the things going on at St. Peter's and it spilled over into what was going on at Friendship House. And, so, I always had an active part in that. And then I went on to—well, when they left St. Peter's, Archbishop Carroll, St. Anthony's, whatever the next level of education. Then, that's the time to offer to be on the PTA. And, so, I was president of the PTA everywhere.

MINGO: I guess you—plenty of PTA experience.

VAN BRAKLE: Right.

[TAPE 3/SIDE 1]

MINGO: This is the second tape in the second interview with Alice Van Brakle. All right, on the preceding tape we were talking about sports activities at your children's schools.

VAN BRAKLE: And the schools. And I wanted to mention that the PTA bit. When my son started at St. Peter's in first grade, 1951, they did not have a PTA or any type of such organization, which I wasn't very happy about. And, so, Paul Beatley and I—Paul and Mary Ann's kids were also at St. Peter's. And Paul and I got together and did the necessary to establish St. Peter's first Home-School Association. I don't remember the fine details right now why it could not be a PTA, it had to be a Home-School Association for some reason. I don't remember the legalities of it.

MINGO: Oh, it wasn't part of the national PTA organization perhaps?

VAN BRAKLE: I don't remember. There was some reason why we could not introduce PTA, but we did the Home-School Association which was the same thing.

MINGO: And in fact was the same thing as PTA.

VAN BRAKLE: I don't know what they have down there now. They may have, still have Home-School or they may have PTA. But, it's the same difference.

MINGO: Yes, the same interaction.

VAN BRAKLE: And, you know, we started the Home-School Association and got the parents there involved. And those who really didn't want to be involved you encouraged them to, showed them the plusses of being involved with their children. So, that took care—and, then, I used to—when I first started working, I worked down in the temporary buildings back of Fort McNair, which is just less than ten minutes from here. And, so, I drove down there to the office and at lunch time, many times, when St. Peter's had—oh, they had all kinds of little teams of basketball and whatever. And they had little luncheons to support the teams and buy some uniforms and whatever. So, I would hop in my car at lunchtime and run up and sell the hot dogs and whatever was necessary. [laughs]

MINGO: Oh, you helped out even on your lunch hour.

VAN BRAKLE: Helping on—the Home-School Association would give the little luncheon and it needed all the parents to come and support. And, so, because my office was close, I could take my lunch period and fudge a bit or tell them I'd be an hour late or whatever and run up and do the luncheon and run back to work. [laughs]

MINGO: Such a good convenience.

VAN BRAKLE: So, you know, these were the type of things that really kept you busy. You were involved with whatever your children were doing. If they were involved in a sport, then that's where your interest was. But, as far as their social life, because our kids on the block were not what I wanted for my kids, then I pitched my kids in the car and took them across town to where my friends had something going on.

MINGO: Oh, okay. So their social life was not so much on the Hill.

VAN BRAKLE: No.

MINGO: No.

VAN BRAKLE: It was not. And, then, of course, when they went to high school then they developed friends from all over town because they went to Archbishop Carroll and there were kids there from all over the area. And they wanted to go to their birthday parties and whatever and, so, that was—and at that particular time my husband was working nights at the post office, Main Post Office, 2nd and Mass, so it was up to me to pitch them in the car and drive them across town, because they weren't sixteen so they weren't driving themselves. And, so, that was my chore to cart them all over town for the various activities that I approved of for them to participate in.

MINGO: Would that be often? I mean, would the...

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, no.

MINGO: ...like every weekend or...

VAN BRAKLE: Yes. Not every weekend, but usually there was something going on, if it wasn't—because my two older children are close. They're three years apart and they were eight and eleven when the last one was born. And, so, it was those two older ones that needed all this attention. And, you know, if it wasn't one going somewhere, it was the other one going somewhere. So, there was always something to take one or the other to. And, if it wasn't a birthday party, it was maybe a ball game or something. And you wanted them active in as many activities as possible. I recall one particular evening, I don't know what group—this was my oldest son—he was involved in, it was probably out of St. Peter's, a group that was doing something at the baseball game. And, at that time, the baseball park was at 7th and Florida Avenue.

MINGO: A bit of a distance from here.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes. Not the best neighborhood in the world.

MINGO: Oh, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: And they were to perform at a certain hour. So, you get so many things to do you can't always go and stay there, you have other things you...

MINGO: Right.

VAN BRAKLE: So, I took him there and dropped him off along with a—there was always a car full of kids. And took him there and dropped him off or he rode up there with somebody else or whatever, but I knew I was to pick him up at a certain time, which was, like, 10:30. Of course, it was safe to go out anytime then. And, so, I went up to the back of the baseball park and picked him up. Oh, whatever he was doing, he had his bicycle with him. And, so, I had to pick him and the bicycle up at 10:30 at night in the back of the baseball park. Fine, everything worked out beautiful. It was a two-day thing. The next night he went the same way, I'm scheduled to pick him up at the same spot, same time, but the—I don't remember the reasoning—but the performance was cut short and he was finished, like, an hour...

MINGO: Oh, my goodness.

VAN BRAKLE: ...ahead of time.

MINGO: And everybody wasn't meeting.

VAN BRAKLE: Or the game, maybe the game got called because of rain or something. I don't remember what it was, but he's stuck out there in a very bad dark street by himself...

MINGO: For an hour.

VAN BRAKLE: ...with his bicycle [laughs]...

MINGO: Did he just wait?

VAN BRAKLE: ...waiting for me.

MINGO: He just waited?

VAN BRAKLE: He was scared, he was crying. He didn't know what to do. And I'm not the least bit concerned because I'm on time. I'm going up to pick him up at this time, so I'm busy doing whatever else I was doing. And his babysitter—I had a babysitter that lived in that vicinity and he knew where she lived. And, so, he took his bicycle and pushed it four or five blocks to her house.

MINGO: Good thinking.

VAN BRAKLE: And he knocked on her door and, of course, it scared her to death because here's this child crying and she, at this hour of the night so far from home.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: What is wrong here? So, he told her what had happened. So, she called me and told me that he was at her house.

MINGO: Oh, good. So, she knew—you were somewhere where you could be called.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. He went to her house and she called me up and said that whatever the reason was this night had come to an end an hour earlier than it did the night before. And that he was there, he was safe. And, so, I said, "Be right there," you know. Hop in the car and zipped up to her house and picked him and the bicycle up. It was a busy, busy time that you were busy with your children. Whatever they were involved in, that's what you were involved in. You really didn't have a whole lot of time for other social things.

MINGO: 'Tis ever thus, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: You know, I belonged to a few little clubs. My husband was a golfer, so he had his golf clubs that he belonged to. And he played, you know, whenever he had a chance to play. And, so, we had, you know, a few things, social events, to go to out of the neighborhood. Our social life was out of the

neighborhood. And we would go to parties and whatnot and get a babysitter and attend a dinner or a dance or whatever. And then, of course, we didn't, as I say, we just didn't get involved in anything just for ourselves until the children were grown.

MINGO: It was all family activity, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, these same friends that we had developed through clubs that we belonged to or people you met at work or whatever we formed a little travel group. And my husband and I both loved to travel. So, when we finally got the children grown up, then we were free to get our little travel group going. And we put our trips together and that was what we enjoyed doing, which was certainly not anything, you know, that was neighborhood involved because we did our—oh, we had beautiful trips all throughout Europe, many, many times, cruises down through the islands, to the Far East, to Japan, South America, Alaska, Hawaii.

MINGO: Wonderful, wonderful. Well, now, the social clubs that you were involved with with the children, did you have to be invited to join particular ones? I mean, you know, were they really organized club sort of activity or was it just groups getting together from time to time?

VAN BRAKLE: The clubs that were—I can't say these clubs were really involved with children. They were more personal friends. Well, my sorority, for instance.

MINGO: Oh, from—you went to Howard.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes.

MINGO: And you were in a sorority.

VAN BRAKLE: And they were scattered all over the country. And you had friends—my husband belonged to a national group that I still to this day attend his club's convention which they have once each year. And it's in a different place each year. Last year we went on a cruise out of San Juan, Puerto Rico. This coming year we'll be in San Francisco. Year before last, we were in Memphis. So, every year we meet. And this is a group of guys that were—my husband was an associate member, he was not an original member. But, the original members were put together during World War II and they were scattered throughout the country in college. And a program that the military put together called the Armed Services Training Program selected top students from various colleges throughout the country and brought them as a group, the ASTP, the Armed Services Training Program, here to Howard University. And, as a group, they were studying, they were engineers at Howard. And, as the war—[coughs] Excuse me. As the war progressed, they had to break up that group, and they were all having a grand time going to Howard and living it up and everybody else was overseas. And, so, a lot of the mothers who were

losing their sons and whatnot were complaining about this program. So, they broke the program up and sent the guys overseas.

MINGO: Now, were they all African American?

VAN BRAKLE: Mm-hmm. And my closest friend, who I did not know, I met his wife at work, that's how—but, he was from my part of the country and went to the University of Kansas. And he was selected out of the University of Kansas as one of these guys. But, they came from colleges all over the county. And when the war was over and everybody came home, many of these guys came back to Howard to complete their study.

MINGO: At that time, then, they could use the G.I. Bill and they could come back and go to college.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes. And they were in college to begin with so they came back to finish their college.

MINGO: Ah, they had to finish, right.

VAN BRAKLE: They were in college before the Army...

MINGO: That's right.

VAN BRAKLE: ...took them out. And, so, they came back. Well, some of them are doctors, some of them are lawyers, some of them stayed in the engineering field.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: But, it was whatever they were interested in in the first place. But, when they came back, some came back to Howard to finish. Others went back to where they were in the first place to finish. And, as a result, the chapter of that group—well, I'm getting ahead of my story. When they came back, after a while, some came back to their girlfriends and got married and whatever. And down the road a few years, five or ten years down the road, some of these guys were getting together and they wanted to get everybody back together again. So, they made an effort to find as many of the ASTP members as they could and get in contact with them. And they formed this group and they called themselves The Prometheans, which is named after Prometheus.

MINGO: Oh, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, The Prometheans formed this group of, and the original members are all members of the ASTP group. So they'd search around. Every now and then they'd come up with a new person that they had lost contact with and fifty years later they're finding this person, you know. And, as a result, that, really, that nucleus was our social group. Of these guys, many of them are my husband's

golfing buddies or whatever. And, eventually, as they met at first and just sort of had a social get together, glad to see everybody who's still alive after the war...

MINGO: And that would be kind of at some sort of a public place perhaps?

VAN BRAKLE: Here we meet at the J. W. Marriott.

MINGO: I see. It wasn't in homes, right.

VAN BRAKLE: No. Well, I imagine when they first started it, it probably was at home because they probably didn't have more than four or five people. [laughs]

MINGO: It could be—yes, when it was really small. Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: But, once it got organized and they are—oh, they had beautiful grants from Labor Department and various things. Once they got established, they started doing service type things. And, at one point, they started—oh, I guess that must have run around, it probably ran around ten years. Once a year they had a Career Awareness Fair at the Armory.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: And it was for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders, with emphasis on eleventh and twelfth graders...

MINGO: Who are beginning to think of college and career, right.

VAN BRAKLE: ...of the public schools. And they had either government agencies or big corporations—you've been in the Armory. And around the outer wall of the Armory there were booths and each booth was manned by either a corporation or by a government agency. And the center of the floor was set up segregated to types, a medical group, a group of airline pilots or airline employees, and maybe pharmacy and maybe—any person who wanted to be a role model. And then they put those types together.

MINGO: And then the kids could come and talk to them, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And the kids came in and they ran as many as twenty thousand kids through there.

MINGO: My goodness.

VAN BRAKLE: The mayor always called it Promethean Day at the opening of the Career Awareness Fair and they had busses that—I mean, these guys did all the planning and all the...

MINGO: All the organization for a major effort.

VAN BRAKLE: Everything. And the busses would come in, and the children that were already in there, they would be on the floor visiting the booths or talking to the person. You know, many of these inner city kids had never sat down with a lawyer or a pilot.

MINGO: Or an architect or whatever.

VAN BRAKLE: And a one-on-one they could have with this person who was actually working in this field or visit the booths. And, of course, the booths gave them all kinds of literature to read and little goodies like ballpoint pens. And, so, all this stuff, you know, was there. And they were just on the floor. And, while this group was on the floor, the busses are coming in with a fresh group. And when the busses come in with a fresh group the kids would come in, sent upstairs in the seats upstairs for orientation. While they're up there for orientation, these on the floor get back on those busses and go back to their school.

MINGO: So, they're rotating. They're using the busses again.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, when they go out the door to get on the busses, then orientation is over up here and they come down the steps and they're on the floor a required period of time and the busses have gone taking those kids back to their schools, pick up some kids that come in. And they come in and go upstairs and these go out. So, this is an all day, work, work, work. And this is when the wives all took off from their jobs to go and...

MINGO: To go help, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: ...work the information desk or whatever. We had a lounge for the teachers to come in. Some of the teachers were good teachers and stayed with their kids. And others came in and got a cup of coffee and faced the wall. And "Let me know when my bus is taking me back," you know. So, you could tell the quality of teachers by that.

MINGO: But this must have been very influential for their students.

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, it was. It became compulsory in all the schools in the city. Then we had all kinds of problems because the Catholic schools and the private schools, they wanted to send their kids.

MINGO: Oh, so, at first they were not included. It was all public schools.

VAN BRAKLE: No, it was strictly for the downtown public schools. And, then, in the meantime, before Reagan came up with the idea, he took credit for it, but before Reagan came up with the idea of adopt a

school, every city school had, the Prometheans had each high school and about fifty per cent of the junior highs adopted by a corporation. And the corporations that would adopt a school, they would come to the school for lectures. Sometimes they had programs where they could have the top students or whoever got the choice of going to the corporation for a day. It was a beautiful program, beautiful program.

MINGO: Does it continue?

VAN BRAKLE: No.

MINGO: No, it does not.

VAN BRAKLE: Now, that's when they needed additional people because this was just the Washington chapter doing this, because the people out in California and Texas and whatnot they—there aren't as many Prometheans in the other cities as there are here because when the war was over more came back here because they had almost finished Howard.

MINGO: Well, yes, right. So, they already had the tie.

VAN BRAKLE: More—there was a drawing card for them to come back and so there's more Prometheans here. And, then, after they got that program started, they needed help. So, they started taking in associate members.

MINGO: Oh, yes. Your husband was an associate member.

VAN BRAKLE: My husband was an associate member. And they needed all the help they could get to put on that program.

MINGO: I'm sure.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, you know, news leaks across the country and they—other cities heard about it. So, then they started doing—I've forgotten what it's called now. But, they went to other cities and assisted those cities in getting a similar type program started. So—San Francisco still has theirs going, I know. That's one. And they did one down in Eastern shore but I don't think it's still going. They also sent—representatives of the Prometheans went to Memphis, they went to Raleigh, and did assistance in helping people in those cities establish a similar type program. So, this was what our social life was, was with...

MINGO: With these people.

VAN BRAKLE: And you meet these people—I met this person I was talking about who was from Kansas City who went to the University of Kansas. When I went to work, I wanted—well, nobody had any money in those days. Everybody was broke and happy.

MINGO: Now, what—this was when? This was also the '50s, around in the '50s?

VAN BRAKLE: When I first—this was 1950. I started working August 1950. My husband had a daughter who lived with us and she was in high school. But, there was no job program for kids at that day, in that time. Especially black kids. So, as a result, I said to her “If you keep Bryant and Craig, [my boys] for the babysitter, I’ll go back to work and then we’ll both have money. I’ll have some extra money and I’ll pay you to babysit.” So, this was the deal. But, I wasn’t bright enough to start early. I thought I can just walk down and go to work one day. [interviewer laughs] How old was I then? In my twenties. But, anyway, I applied for this job but by the time I got it it was August.

MINGO: Prometheans led to other social involvement.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. And various Prometheans were fraternity guys. And the fraternity people had parties. There’s the Kappas, the Alphas, the Omegas. And each one belonged to a different sorority and so they would have—and to this day—I went up to Holiday Inn in Silver Spring to a dinner dance not too long ago with one of the Prometheans who, it was his group and he had two tables of ten each. And, so, he invited me to come. And I found a high school buddy that had lost his wife that lives up in Silver Spring to come and escort me and so...

MINGO: So, this connection has continued and been very wonderful.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. So, a lot of my activities are Prometheans.

MINGO: Now, that is just a fact. And that those people would now be up in years. And do they now have younger members also? Or has someone else taken over their kind of service?

VAN BRAKLE: When they had the Career Awareness Fair going, well, it’s always been—the progeny has always been invited to join.

MINGO: I see, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And when—and, you know, many of them have children eligible to participate. And, when the fair was going on, there were many of the children involved. They, also, the children brought their friends in. And they had a lot of young members.

MINGO: Oh, good.

VAN BRAKLE: But, young members want to do something. So, when the original members retired and were no longer—well, they needed their secretaries and everybody else to help with this project, you know.

MINGO: Yes, yes all this took a lot of time.

VAN BRAKLE: But, when they retired and didn't have a secretary to do the typing and to do all these things for them, then the Career Awareness Fair tapered away.

MINGO: I see.

VAN BRAKLE: And the school systems were so pleased with it they said they would continue it.

MINGO: Oh, okay, took it over.

VAN BRAKLE: And they did for a year or two but it wasn't at the depth that it had been and it sort of tapered away. And, when they stopped having something to do, the young Prometheans stopped coming.

MINGO: Oh, I see.

VAN BRAKLE: They lost interest.

MINGO: Because that was the activity.

VAN BRAKLE: Because there really wasn't anything going on.

MINGO: It was their service.

VAN BRAKLE: And, so, now, when we meet, it's like family reunion. And, so, we meet and we sit and we talk because some are not moving so fast. So, we aren't doing much and, so, the young people are really—not too many young people attend.

MINGO: So, they, perhaps, are in some other service organization.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes. Well, there are more things available because, at the time when this was starting, Washington's a southern town and segregated.

MINGO: Yes, that's right.

VAN BRAKLE: There weren't that many things available to do. There weren't that many big time jobs available for blacks. Now, kids aren't interested in going down to J. W. Marriott. They're on their way to Europe, you know. [laughs]

MINGO: So some measures of improvement have come along.

VAN BRAKLE: So, it's not as fascinating. You know, they've got other things to do that are, you know, when we were their age, we couldn't afford to do. And we have one member that, this guy from Kansas City, his son, he attends many of the Promethean conventions with his wife and daughter. But, I think they come because of their parents. They aren't really that interested in—but, we have nice trips, we have nice trips. They aren't dull. Like the cruise last year. But, when we were their age, we couldn't afford to go on a cruise and take the daughter, or if you've got two or three kids, you couldn't afford it.

MINGO: Couldn't do that, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: But, these kids today can afford anything they want and, so, he's really about the only young person. Once in a while my boys will go. But...

MINGO: Well, now, these activities all took away, you know, more or less, were not Capitol Hill centered...

VAN BRAKLE: No, they're not.

MINGO: Were there things that brought people on the Hill together? Or...

VAN BRAKLE: Not a whole lot because the change came about, probably, in the '60s or '70s. Because Capitol Hill, other than being a good, good community and people helping one another, you still had a lot of rental type people that really, they moved in and out, that you really didn't care to be bothered with.

MINGO: So, there weren't that many people that you were...

VAN BRAKLE: To socialize with.

MINGO: ...or associated over time.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, as the neighborhood changed, those people—well, the prices started going up so the (excuse me) those people moved to where they could get something cheaper. And they left. And, then, the people who moved in were a complete different breed.

MINGO: Really. They were...

VAN BRAKLE: Well, they're the ones who could afford to move in were young professionals and, as we see now, we don't have a whole lot of children.

MINGO: Well, no. But, there are—the numbers are increasing.

VAN BRAKLE: Well, our block is coming back.

MINGO: Yes, I was just going to say, this block is doing its part, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: Because there was a time when we didn't have any children in our block.

MINGO: So, it was mostly adults.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, JoAnne and Bill Lanouette and their two daughters, they were the first couple of children there for—they were there by themselves, so to speak. There weren't any other. Because Mike and Sharon's kids and my kids, they've grown up and gone.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, there was a period when there weren't any children. And, then, JoAnne and Bill came and then they had Kate and Nicole. And they were about the only two kids. But, now, we've got...

MINGO: Lots of kids, lots of families.

VAN BRAKLE: Well, we've got—Bob and Diane have three...

MINGO: Right.

VAN BRAKLE: ...a few doors up the street from me.

MINGO: Right.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, Fred and—I can't think of his wife's name—across the street, they have kids. And the girl in the little flat house, Nicole, she—he's, well, he doesn't want to be called a kid anymore. I guess he's getting to be about fourteen or something. [laughs]

MINGO: Yes, but there are, there are more.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, the people across the street from me have a baby, come to think of it. A couple of doors from Bea.

MINGO: And there is, now, also, there's also more home ownership than there was usually.

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

MINGO: Owner occupied, in that situation.

VAN BRAKLE: So, that has—so, the neighborhood has taken a change from that degree and now I'm at the other end of the podium. So, I'm not interested in being this active. I'm interested in watching out the

window and seeing what the kids are doing going up and down the street. [interviewer laughs] Because I've reached that end of my life.

MINGO: Excuse me. We'll stop this one.

[TAPE 3/SIDE 2]

MINGO: Okay, this is Side 3 of Interview 2 with Mrs. Alice Van Brakle and this is January 21, 2002. Now, a topic we've come around to is a community garden. You were going to tell me something about that and I'd like to hear it.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. The community garden was at 314 5th Street and it was brought about by the person that we lovingly call the Unofficial Mayor, Gene Arnold.

MINGO: Now, there's a house there. Was the house there at the time or was this a vacant lot?

VAN BRAKLE: Vacant lot.

MINGO: Just a vacant—okay.

VAN BRAKLE: And the two people that we have referred to as the Unofficial Mayor was Gene Arnold and Rita Mendez. Rita lived in the house next to the church.

MINGO: Next to the Methodist Church on the corner?

VAN BRAKLE: Yes.

MINGO: Yes

VAN BRAKLE: The green house where Bob lives now.

MINGO: Oh, mm-hmm.

VAN BRAKLE: And Gene lived in the first two houses on my side of 5th Street. What's that? About 308 and...

MINGO: On the east side.

VAN BRAKLE: 306 and 308.

MINGO: Oh, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: He had both of those houses and he took out a wall and made them all one.

MINGO: Oh, I see.

VAN BRAKLE: And he was retired military. And Rita and her family moved up by St. John's High School to—they wanted to be closer to better schools in the high school level. And Gene passed away suddenly with a heart attack. So, that's—but they were always home and they helped everyone. No matter what went on, you called Gene or Rita and they provided the necessary help, night, day or in-between. [both laugh] And Gene was responsible for getting the rights to the vacant lot at 314 5th Street which was ugly with weeds and neglect.

MINGO: Now, did somebody actually own that property or was the city...

VAN BRAKLE: Mm-hmm. And they did not take any care of it and the city would—everybody called and complained because it was such an ugly eyesore. And they would say they were going to send somebody out and clean it up and charge it to the owner, but they never did. It's typical District. They never got around to doing it. So, Gene went somewhere and got the necessary work done, paperwork, where we could use it as a garden.

MINGO: Oh, very enterprising.

VAN BRAKLE: So, once he got that legally cleared, and it's typical of lots in that block. They're narrow but kind of long.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: So, it was divided into sections starting from the back, sections going up so each person had however wide the lot is, they had about eight feet in depth, enough to plant several rows of things. And my husband loved it because he loved to garden. So, we had zucchini for everybody in Washington one year when he decided to plant zucchini. [both laugh]

MINGO: Did most people grow vegetables in the space?

VAN BRAKLE: And one of the funny things that I was going to remember was that the kids loved it because—these were the city kids who didn't know what dirt was for.

MINGO: This was their experience with agriculture, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And Mike Ambrose had all the children excited because he told them he planted pizza. [both laugh] So, they were all quite excited to see what was going to, when this pizza was supposed to pop up hot and ready, I guess. [both laugh] But, it was a wonderful learning experience for the city kids.

MINGO: Oh, I'm sure.

VAN BRAKLE: And Judge Rufus King was a participant.

MINGO: He lived on the opposite side of the street, I think, from you.

VAN BRAKLE: He lived next door to Bob. The house with the driveway [is next door to where he lived].

MINGO: Yes, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: Rufus lived on this side of the driveway. The driveway goes with Rita's house. And, at the time, Judge Richard Atkinson was living across the street from here.

MINGO: Yes. And this was one block down from your block.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes. Just straight across the street at 422. And he was living then. And he called me one day and he said something about Rufus was a friend of his at court. And I said, "There's no judge in this block." And he said, "Yes, there is, too." And, so, he starts describing him. And, anyone who knows Rufus King, he's easily spotted because he's extremely tall with snow white hair and he's still quite young.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And I said, "Oh, I know him." I said, "I didn't know he was a judge." I said, "I know what kind of spinach he likes." [both laugh] I said, "I know all kinds of vegetables he likes, but I didn't know he was a judge." Rufus was an avid gardener.

MINGO: Is that kind of true in the neighborhood? You kind of get to know people, but you don't really know, maybe, what their jobs are until you get to know them quite well.

VAN BRAKLE: No. One of the things that we used to have, don't have them too much anymore, are—Joanne and Bill have had several—parties where everybody comes and brings a dish. And they've sort of dwindled away now. Well, we've got new people that we don't even know in the block. And, so, it's not like they—some years back when everybody knew everybody, we'd often have a get-together at somebody's house and everybody brought a dish. The person who was giving the party would say "Well, we'll get the meat. You all bring the other stuff." So, somebody'd bring salad, somebody'd bring...

MINGO: Okay, so, you had sort of like a block party.

VAN BRAKLE: Right.

MINGO: From time to time.

VAN BRAKLE: Just within the house. And, you know, you met the neighbors and you knew them by their first name but you really had no idea where they worked or if they worked.

MINGO: No, you knew each other as neighbors.

VAN BRAKLE: In fact, I was talking to a neighbor the other day and she was so surprised. She knew Bruce and Susan but she had no idea that Susan was the Curator down at Gunston Hall or that Bruce was a biochemist. And, then, I went on to tell about Bruce being on Jeopardy. He was a five time champion on Jeopardy.

MINGO: He was?

VAN BRAKLE: Yes. But, he's quiet. And, so, you know, so, I saw him at the block party and he said, "Hi" and "I live right there," and that's the way it is.

MINGO: Was that recent that he was on Jeopardy?

VAN BRAKLE: About a year and a half ago, something like that. He was on—he won all five days and then he went back when, once you are an undefeated champion, you go back at the \$100,000 thing. So, he went back to the \$100,000 thing, but he lost on the very first day with the simplest question of all the questions he had. [both laugh]

MINGO: He just had bad luck.

VAN BRAKLE: Who was the author of "The Bridges of Madison County"?

MINGO: Oh, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And that was popular at this time.

MINGO: Oh, yes, very popular. But, perhaps he isn't into popular literature.

VAN BRAKLE: He knew it, he knew it. It just wouldn't come out.

MINGO: Oh.

VAN BRAKLE: He knew it, he—well, he and his wife have a—they're never home. I tell them they ought to rent their house because they don't need it. [both laugh] They're always—the weekend comes and they're off somewhere. And that's their pastime when they're driving. She reads the trivia book and he answers the questions.

MINGO: Oh, wonderful. It's a good preparation for that.

VAN BRAKLE: And Jeopardy was here one time, down in Constitution Hall. Constitution Hall? I think it was Constitution Hall. And they sent me a thing that I could have four tickets. No, I could have two tickets, I could have two tickets. Two or—yes, two tickets. So, I sent for my two tickets because I love that show. I never miss it. So, I got my two tickets and Bruce said he was going to get his two tickets because he got a notice, too. So, when it was time for the thing, I said, “Did you get your two tickets?” He said he forgot. He didn’t have them. So, I said, “Well, I’ve got two. You can come with me or Susan can come with me, but I can’t have both of you because I’ve only got two tickets.” So, Susan said, “Let him go. He loves to go.” So, Bruce and I went. She took us down to Constitution Hall, dropped us off. And we got in the line and went to the show. And he was so interesting because, when the show was on he was sitting next to me, and as soon as they said the question he was going [interviewee apparently makes visible motion]. He was hitting that button because he knew it. [laughs]

MINGO: This was before he had been on it.

VAN BRAKLE: No, it was after.

MINGO: It was after he had gone on it. Oh, okay.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, it was after.

MINGO: Oh, wonderful.

VAN BRAKLE: But...

MINGO: Well, that’s an event. There were, there had been—well, let’s go back. We were talking about the garden. Now, eventually someone bought the lot and built on it.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. It was—that was the end of the garden when they put it up for sale. The girl that owned it put it up for sale and it was for sale at the same time as the house next door to it. the big house where Bob and Diane live.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: In fact, my son attempted to buy those two pieces of property because he wanted to put, he wanted to turn Bob and Diane’s house into, like, an apartment and the empty lot he would be able to use for, have a side entrance. And he thought a parking space. But, you can’t break the curb and the prices got completely out of hand. At one time someone refused to pay twenty-five thousand for that lot.

MINGO: My goodness.

VAN BRAKLE: And he said that was too high and he wouldn't—that was before it turned to weeds. That person lived in the little gingerbread house at that time. And he was going to buy that lot but he wouldn't pay twenty-five thousand for it. So, I think it went for over a hundred.

MINGO: I'm sure, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: For the lot. And, then, of course, the house—the person who lived in the house was ill and the house had just really deteriorated because she could not—she was a single lady and she was ill and she had some—this was the kind of people that we had. Some old poor white guy came and she rented him a room. And he was angry with her. And when he left, he left the water running because he knew she couldn't get upstairs to do anything about it. That kind of thing.

MINGO: Oh, that did damage.

VAN BRAKLE: So, the house was in terrible condition. And, so, it should have gone for like \$100,000. But, it didn't. It went for, I don't know, a couple of hundred thousand even in its state. And then the people went in there and spent endless money. And I think Bob and Diane paid five twenty for it. So, it got out of hand. So, this was my son that lives in Florida. And, as a single man, it got out of his reach moneywise. So, he had to give it up as a bad thought. But, that ended the garden. So, we had two or three years of wonderful gardens, wonderful gardens.

MINGO: Wonderful vegetables and also it was bringing the community together.

VAN BRAKLE: Right. Oh, yes, there was always someone in the garden, you know, doing something to their plants. Every evening the garden was busy with people doing something. And Rufus had been there tending his garden and everybody pushed him out of the way to get to theirs or whatever and didn't anybody know whether he was the judge or the street sweeper. Who cares? [both laugh]

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: But, that's the way life should be. That's the way life should be.

MINGO: Yes. That is a lovely atmosphere, a lovely atmosphere.

VAN BRAKLE: He's really a wonderful man. I bump into him occasionally. I saw him at a party. My cousin is married to a judge and they invited me to a—I forgot what the party was now, but it was a party among the judges. And Rufus was there.

MINGO: Oh, great. Oh, another thing that I think you had mentioned before that you didn't like as much as the gardens perhaps. But that you said about the beginning of the brick sidewalk.

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes. We didn't get to the sidewalk [during the interview].

MINGO: The brick sidewalk.

VAN BRAKLE: That was sort of a surprise. A surprise to me. It might not—as I said, I'm not active anymore as I am older and I don't participate in what goes on anymore. But, so, it might have not been a surprise to everybody. But, it was to me. Because the sidewalk, especially the sidewalk on my side of the street, it was perfect.

MINGO: It was concrete and it was perfect.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes. It was concrete and it was perfect. There were a couple of bad spots across the street. But, they came in and ripped up our beautiful sidewalk and threw this down to give it the Georgetown atmosphere.

MINGO: That was the reason.

VAN BRAKLE: And I wanted to say, "If I wanted to move to Georgetown, I would have." [both laugh] "I don't need a Georgetown atmosphere. It's Capitol Hill." But, as I've lived around here long enough to see, in a few years those brick go astray and they're very difficult to walk on. When I have a choice, I pass up a brick street because it doesn't take—I don't know what it is. Maybe they're not laid properly. But, it doesn't take but a few years for them to raise up one way or the other and you have to be...

MINGO: Become uneven, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: In fact, since this one has been here, because they're still pretty smooth yet because it's reasonably new, but there's a spot on the other side of the street that has already raised up and Bea almost fell on that...

MINGO: Oh, really.

VAN BRAKLE: ...one day. And, of course, she had the same feeling that I did, that it doesn't add anything to it for me. Perhaps the historians and the people know better than I. But, as far as I'm concerned, they took away from our property instead of adding to it.

MINGO: But, apparently there was no great protest about putting them in.

VAN BRAKLE: Well, no one knew that it was to be done until they were on their way.

MINGO: Who do you suppose decided...

VAN BRAKLE: I don't really know. As I said, I really don't know the details of that. I'm sure Sharon probably knows the history of it, but I do not. They were there putting them in. You know. "What are you guys doing?" "Well, we're putting in these new brick side—" You know. It's a little late to complain.
[both laugh]

MINGO: So, you have to bear with them. I mean, obviously, the move is to extend them because now more of Pennsylvania Avenue is...

VAN BRAKLE: Yes.

MINGO: ...is brick than used to be.

VAN BRAKLE: I had noticed, you know, different places where they had put them in but I had no idea they would get to our block. But, as I said, I don't keep up anymore. So, I don't know how that came about. If there was any—there was nothing in the literature that I get from Restoration Society about its proposal. I didn't hear anything about its proposal. I didn't know anything about it 'til the trucks drove up taking out the brick. So, I said "Well, for my few years I have left, I guess I—I can cope with it."

MINGO: Yes, I think they are permanent.

VAN BRAKLE: They are what?

MINGO: They are at least relatively permanent and it looks to just move and to expand, so...

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, they're here to stay and, so, I won't say anything about it.

Well, one of my things that I was going to say was the difference in summarizing up things, differences from 1944 to 2002, was improvement of facilities such as the subway over the streetcar. However, the morning paper says the streetcars will be back.

MINGO: And you are not in favor of the return of the streetcar I guess.

VAN BRAKLE: Well, I don't think they—I thought we had improved. In fact, that's what the newspaper said. We thought we had improved above the streetcar. Now they're bringing it back. But, again, by the time they get that done, I won't be around to ride them anyway. [laughs] Because I'm not going to—lots of things I don't even think about anymore. If that's what they want to do, go ahead and do it.

MINGO: Well, to some extent, the streetcar now would be to replace busses, I thought.

VAN BRAKLE: Well.

MINGO: Is that what they're talking about?

VAN BRAKLE: This is the way they made it sound. The busses do puff out an awful lot of fumes and whatnot, this is true. But, at the same time, I wonder what all these tracks and all would do to the traffic pattern. Because the streetcar certainly can't move over. So,...

MINGO: So there's that difference, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: Well, you know, that's something that was interesting when I first moved on the Hill was the Car Barn.

MINGO: Oh, now, where was that? The Car Barn.

VAN BRAKLE: It's still there. It's an apartment complex right now.

MINGO: Oh, yes, I know where you're talking about, up on...

VAN BRAKLE: 15th and East Capitol.

MINGO: Yes, up on East Capitol.

VAN BRAKLE: The streetcars went—that's where the streetcars turned around. The streetcars went up there and went in the Car Barn and turned around and came back out and started over again. And that's also where the mechanical work was done on the streetcars, was inside the Car Barn.

MINGO: But, you didn't like the streetcars.

VAN BRAKLE: They're very slow and also they play havoc with the traffic pattern because they're there. You know, a bus does stop or move over or get out of the way but the streetcar's not going anywhere. Just down those tracks. [laughs] And, so, perhaps they will be improved over what used, what streetcars of yesteryear. We used to get on the streetcar and go to Glen Echo.

MINGO: Really. That's extensive.

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, the streetcar went forever. It went all the way out to Friendship Heights and you could get—that was an afternoon trip. You got on the streetcar for a nickel or whatever it was and took an hour to get there and an hour to get back. You'd had two hour afternoon rides. Most people didn't have cars and, so, there was not a problem. Because you didn't have a traffic problem, you didn't have enough cars to have traffic. So, the streetcars were fine. I just can't visualize a streetcar running through Georgetown. [both laugh] With the traffic pattern the way it is in Georgetown today. But, as I said, perhaps it will be different and faster or smaller or...

MINGO: Somehow it will have to be thought out. Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: I didn't even read that section. I scanned through it this morning and kept right on going. I said, "Oh, my, I've lived around the circle." [both laugh]

MINGO: True, true.

VAN BRAKLE: My mother used to say, "I've lived too long." [laughs]

MINGO: Well, things just come back.

VAN BRAKLE: They come back in a circle.

MINGO: The more things change, the more they remain the same.

VAN BRAKLE: Yes, there's a vicious circle. And the young people want something new. And you can only have so much new and pretty soon you're back to the old things. It's just new to them. so, it's sort of like my son, my younger son, who is now 45, but he just can't visualize that I'm talking about Washington being a Southern town because it was new to me, segregation was new to me.

MINGO: Because you came from the Middle West.

VAN BRAKLE: And it wasn't as much, and it was none [laughing] in my little town of Perry where I grew up. So, I was telling my son about not going into stores or not being welcome into—and he said, "Well, what'd you do that for? Why didn't you just go on in and sit down." And I said, "No, that wasn't the thing to do. You could wind up being hurt very badly if you were brown and you walked in and sat down and didn't get up when they told you to." And, so, he just couldn't visualize this because—well, number one, my son is—no one would ever know that he was anything but white, 'cause he's got blonde hair and, [laughs] and my complexion. And, so, he had never faced it. And by the time, he wasn't born until '56, and so he...

MINGO: Things had begun to change.

VAN BRAKLE: He couldn't visualize, you know, saying that you couldn't go in every restaurant, you know. "Just go on in and sit down." "What'd they stay out for? What's the matter with them?" No, no, no. It doesn't work like that. Couldn't visualize it. So, it's—and, of course, now, he's 45 years old. Think of what the kids who are now 15 are thinking.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: Because—and, so many, many are from mixed marriages and all different kinds of races. So, they're half black or half white or half Japanese and half—so, where, you know—it's impossible. How do you segregate today? I don't see how you can go back. There's nobody, well, there

never was. There's no such thing. People say they are white. Hoooo. I think I told you the incident of someone in my office saying something and I said "Are"—he was surprised I was black. And I said, "Well, are you white?" And he said, "Yes, I'm white." I said, "How do you know you"—oh, he said how do I know I was black.

MINGO: Oh, oh.

VAN BRAKLE: And I said, "Are you white?" He said, "Yes." I said, "How do you know?" And he said, "Well, I know." And I said, "Well, you know, my mother's relatives all married into the white race. You and I might be cousins."

MINGO: Yes. It's such an arbitrary thing.

VAN BRAKLE: No way. My mother had six brothers. Her father was married twice. One time he had six girls and a boy. The next time he had six boys and a girl. All these brothers and sisters she had and only two of them, other than my mother, married into the black race. All the rest of them are out here somewhere. And, they changed their name. My mother's name was Escoc, E-S-C-O-E. She was Indian. And they dropped the "e". So, they were showing up E-S-C-O, or adding a few other letters or whatever. No, there's no such thing as a pure anything.

MINGO: Well, that's for sure, that's for sure.

VAN BRAKLE: So, you just—and the little kids are all the same. Little kids all love each other. You go to the preschool and one as black as my shoes is hugging on the one that's snow white. And they just love each until somebody tells them, "Oh, you can't touch him." [laughs]

MINGO: Isn't that a sad commentary.

VAN BRAKLE: So, it's always the old folks who mess everything up.

MINGO: Yes, yes. It's a sad commentary.

VAN BRAKLE: They all love each other because everybody's born the same.

MINGO: Well, and in your talking about this neighborhood, I get that feeling, too. That people were very—at least the home owners, not necessarily the renting people, but the home owners—were [clears throat], excuse me, a very cohesive group and—did they ever have any divisions? Was there, you know, anything that happened within the city or the, sort of, where there were problems in the neighborhood?

VAN BRAKLE: Not in our neighborhood. But, in my neighborhood when we moved there—(no, it's not bothering me. I'm thinking.) When we moved in the 300 block of 5th Street in September 1948, there were one, two, three—three black people in the block.

MINGO: Including yourselves. No?

VAN BRAKLE: No. When we moved there, there were already three black people in the block. And about six months after we moved there, another black family moved next door to us.

MINGO: And these people were homeowners?

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, wait a minute, wait a minute. One—four. There were four. The house as you're walking up 5th Street, the first house you come to that's painted blue and white, that lady was black. Where Bruce and Susan are now those people were black. Next door to them was black. Next door to them, which is where Bob and Diane live, that lady was black. Those were the black people in the block.

MINGO: It isn't just by chance that they were all next door to each other.

VAN BRAKLE: I don't know how it got that way.

MINGO: Yes.

VAN BRAKLE: And, then, next door to us was a German couple. And—did they die or move? I think they moved. And, then, a black couple moved there. But, the ironical part of that is today the blue and white house, the daughter of that lady lives there.

MINGO: Oh, yes. This is the one you were telling me that there was some difficulty. And the house may be—the woman died, right? And they are probably going to sell the house.

VAN BRAKLE: Mm-mm.

MINGO: No.

VAN BRAKLE: Not that house. The lady who lived there was Mrs. Singletary. When Mrs. Singletary—before she died her daughter had lost her sight and the daughter came back to live with her mother because she lost her sight. And the mother, Mrs. Singletary, died and Jackie is still living there.

MINGO: It's apparent that you've really enjoyed neighbors here...

VAN BRAKLE: There're the best neighbors in the world.

MINGO: ...since, you know, since first coming here. And as we talk here I just wonder is there anything that you dislike about living on the Hill ?

VAN BRAKLE: That's the only thing I dislike is that I have no place to park.

MINGO: Oh, yes, this is a perennial problem I understand. Even before there were so many cars.

VAN BRAKLE: And that—I'm not the only person. Anyone who lives on the Hill understands that.

MINGO: Yes, that's a real problem.

VAN BRAKLE: But, I have looked—I've been moving every year since my husband died, but I—and I have looked. I haven't looked seriously but I have looked. I cannot find a place better.

MINGO: Well, certainly your neighbors feel that way, too. They like having you here, too, yes.

VAN BRAKLE: My neighbors—if I put out too much trash, I get a phone call. "You aren't thinking about moving, are you?" "We'll go to the store for you." "Well, what do you want? What do you want?" [laughs] So, my neighbors don't want me to move. I can vouch for that.

MINGO: No, no. I can—they certainly don't. Well, over time, I guess, home ownership has certainly increased, home...

VAN BRAKLE: Ownership.

MINGO: Owners occupying their houses has increased. And, as you say, now, what's coming about now is the return of families with younger children. So, there's a little more diversity than there used to be. And the parks—now they have playgrounds and things like that. Was that always true? These little—Marion Park and, you know, over there...

VAN BRAKLE: They were always better because they were safer.

MINGO: Ah.

VAN BRAKLE: And the park that's down here at—where am I? That way.

MINGO: Marion? Or Garfield?

VAN BRAKLE: Garfield.

MINGO: Down by the freeway.

VAN BRAKLE: My kids used to go there and play.

MINGO: Right.

VAN BRAKLE: But, I won't let my grand, wouldn't let my grandchildren go there to play.

MINGO: Unless you went with them. I mean, there's this beautiful playground down there, yes. Parks are certainly an asset and some people think the brick sidewalks, the new brick sidewalks are an asset. Over the time that you've lived here and the changes that you've seen and, keeping in mind that there are problems, particularly with parking, would you have anything to kind of sum it up. What your situation here has been.

VAN BRAKLE: Any place in the Washington, D. C. area has problems. But—and we know that. So, considering that, it's, Capitol Hill is still the best place in the city to live. And I have looked in other places since I have been a widow. I don't need to live in a four bedroom house by myself, so I have looked. But, I cannot find any place better than Capitol Hill. If I had a parking place, you couldn't get me away with a million dollars.

MINGO: [laughs] Well, I think—I think it's a wonderful experience. And I'm very glad that you're willing to share your lifetime here and things with the people who are working on this history project. I think you knew Ruth Ann Overbeck, I believe.

VAN BRAKLE: Oh, yes. I knew Ruth Ann very well. We were very good friends. I love Ruth Ann. She was a lovely, lovely person.

END OF INTERVIEW