

BAYSHORE CENTER AT BIVALVE
DELAWARE BAY MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION

DATE: August 26, 2009

TIME:

SUBJECT: Memories growing up and working in Port Norris, NJ

NARRATOR: Barry Ballard – Superintendent of Schools for Commercial Township

INTERVIEWER: Bill May – Volunteer for Bayshore

ATTENDEES: Barry Ballard, Bill May

TRANSCRIBED BY: Pat Moore, Volunteer for Delaware Bay Museum

DATE: MAY, 2021

ACCESSION #: 2009.04

May ([00:03](#)):

It's Wednesday, August 26, 2009. I'm with Mr. Barry Ballard here at one 132 Wharton Street in Millville, New Jersey, Mr. Ballard, would you just give us a little background about yourself, where you were born and where you grew up and some of your experiences?

Ballard ([00:23](#)):

Okay. Well, my name is Barry L Ballard. I was actually born in Bridgeton Hospital because at that time, Port Norris had no hospital. And, I did my early childhood education all in the Port Norris school system. And at that time I think Port Norris had this one school, uh, which is currently, still standing as part of our current school district, where I started my kindergarten experience. My parents came here originally from Maryland, Crisfield, Maryland, that is and, mother was from Crisfield Maryland. My stepfather was from Virginia and they got together at Crisfield Maryland. They came here in the year, 1928. They were following the oyster industry, which at that time in Port Norris had a big booming oyster industry. During those days and up into, uh, I would say the late middle fifties Port Norris had made millions of dollars off the oysters beds.

Ballard ([01:33](#)):

At one time there were more millionaires per capita in Port Norris than any other city in the state of New Jersey. A lot of people came in, particularly from Eastern side of Maryland to work in the, in the oyster, clams, etc., in the Port Norris area, particularly down at South Port Norris. What happened on that time, I was born in 1945 and then in the late fifties, early sixties, the disease called MSX disease, hit our, oyster beds and to this day that we have not recovered from that MSX Disease, the oysters have not come back. Unemployment is pretty high in Port Norris. Uh, during that time I was going to school in elementary school. I went to elementary school in the Port Norris school district from, uh, kindergarten all the way through, uh, eighth grade. Our district sends its students, which granted me a way to go to the Millville high school where I also attended.

Ballard ([02:49](#)):

And during that time, I, I realized of course back in elementary school, luckily for me, I realized at an early age what wanted I to do later in life. I always wanted to be a teacher and I was inspired by one of my teachers who taught me at Port Norris in eighth grade her name was Mrs. Newcomb. I'm not sure if she's still alive. She inspired me to go on and be an educated person beyond high school. I always kept that thought in mind and decided I want to be a teacher, went to Millville High school from Millville High school to Cheyney. What is now Cheyney University. I then matriculated elementary education from the years, 1964 to 1968. And in 1968, I graduated with my bachelor's degree in elementary education and made a decision to come back Port Norris, my hometown and teach school there. I taught school in the elementary school from 1968 to 1973.

Ballard ([03:52](#)):

At that time I was approached by the administration to become part of the administration rather than teach school. So I thought about it. And at first I had made a decision not to do that because I enjoy teaching so much. I enjoyed being with kids. And then I thought about having a bigger impact on the district and on the children in the district by being part of administration. So for five years, I was administrative assistant while I went to school to get my master's degree in educational administration, which I did.

May ([04:29](#)):

From where?

Ballard ([04:31](#)):

Well at that time with Glassboro State College, which is now called, Rowan University. So for five years, I was administrative assistant to the superintendent while I went to school. And then in 1978, I received my master's degree. I went to school from 1974 to 1978 at night.

Ballard ([04:57](#)):

I was named assistant principal in the Port Norris school for two years. I did that job. And then in 1980, I became the principal of what is now the Haleyville-Mauricetown school. The Haleyville-Mauricetown school was established in 1968. That was the year I got out of college. We went from one school to the two schools in Commercial Township. Uh, Commercial Township consists of four small communities, Port Norris, Haleyville, Mauricetown and the south side of Laurel Lake. I remained as Principal of the Haleyville-Mauricetown school for seven years. And after that seven year period, I applied and became the superintendent of schools in 1987. At that point on up until now, which is currently my last year. I've been Superintendent of schools with Commercial Township school district. This is my last year. I'll be

retiring in June, 2010 and a lot of good memories. but going back home, a lot of people have given me a lot of accolades for going to college and then going back to my hometown and staying there my entire career, what was easy for me to do because I was always like a hometown kid. I wasn't one of those city boys. And, uh, I enjoyed the, the country, the quietness of the country and Port Norris. And I got married in 1971, moved to Millville and I've been here ever since. My late wife, died back in June, 2008.

May ([06:58](#)):

Okay.

Ballard ([06:58](#)):

And I just remarried last month, but all that time, she also taught kindergarten for 30 years in my district. Same district that I was in. It's been a wonderful experience. And the thing about being back home is just, It just gave me a lot of pride, just made me feel so good to see so many kids that I knew their families and the parents through the grandparents and see so many will go on and be successful. And I worked with them and they would let me know that, well, you now have my kid and you have my grandkids. And I knew the background and their families and all, you can't do that somewhere else. And I hadn't, I was able to touch the lives of so many children, of people who I have known all my life, which you could not have done anywhere else. It was a great experience for me. And if I had it to do over, I would do it all over again. The Commercial Township school district has a great board of education who have always believed in me. We hired you as a superintendent to run the schools. We're here to support you. And that's sometimes unheard of anymore. They never tried to micromanage. They've done nothing but support me, which made it difficult to leave, but it's time to go after 42 years of service.

Ballard ([08:17](#)):

As far as my life, as, as a kid in Port Norris, I wouldn't trade it for anything on this earth. Of course after the MSX disease struck the oyster beds, Port Norris and Commercial Township took a serious blow as far as employment was concerned. And a lot of activities that went on are not there anymore. A lot of resources aren't there and whatever at that time, and I was growing up, there were, I mean, there were, stores or there were a lot of activity, a lot of things for the children to do in commercial township that are not available anymore because, uh, funds are not available. Matter of fact, the school district itself or that area itself is considered as a depressed area, economically challenged area, which it is. But the things we're proud of is we still have a great school district.

May ([09:13](#)):

Thank you. Growing up in Port Norris, right? Was the school system integrated at that time?

Ballard ([09:23](#)):

For some in South Port Norris, there was a school they call the Brown School. That was totally an African American school. A lot of my friends were there, but by me being from, uh, another section of Port Norris, I went to what'd they call it the Port Norris brick school. That's where I started kindergarten. I never went to the Brown school because that was students who lived in South Port Norris. I'll put it this way. The African American kids who lived in South Port Norris. If you lived in that area and you weren't African American, you went to the brick school where I matriculated at that time,

May ([10:09](#)):

Those buildings still exist or....

Ballard ([10:11](#)):

No, the Brown school that was there, they made that as part of a restaurant. That's still in Port Norris. I don't think they're functioning right now. It's closed as of right now, but they, started a restaurant from that Brown school, uh, part of it. And it's still there. Uh, the restaurant, the restaurant is, but they haven't, I don't think, I think it's closed at this period of time.

May ([10:33](#)):

What... describe that Brown school in terms of its as a facility or the classrooms, was it a one room?

Ballard ([10:42](#)):

I think they had to my knowledge, two rooms, but, there was two magnificent teachers, one teacher who will be forever remembered by the name of Jean Lewis, who now resides in Millville because she'd been retired for, I think she was a part of system for 43 years and she taught a number of grades and she had a sister-in-law Hattie Lewis she was, uh, who taught a number of grades. They added another teacher who went away as I didn't come back home. Her name was now Mary Carmichael. At that time, it was Mary Cornish. The three of those women ran the, uh, what was called a Brown school at that time with African American, all three were African Americans. And, but

May ([11:26](#)):

What, um, is the students who attended the Brown school, and you were in the brick school, right? Was there any kind of rivalry or did you want them to want one was higher up than the other, but it was just like equal across the board? Yes. Cause the brick school was what, um, what, what did that a facility look like?

Ballard ([11:50](#)):

Well, that facility is still there right now. It's not a school building anymore. It says offices for our current administration. We have a principal's office there our administrative guidance offices are there. Our child study team office is located in that brick building. I still say to this day, it is a bulldozer. What is the strongest building in the district? If a hurricane came or a tornado came, that building will be left, standing, the rest wiped out. They don't build buildings like that anymore, but it's not the most attractive building from the outside, but the strongest building in the district.

May ([12:24](#)):

And growing up. Um, did you have friends, uh, black and white friends or, um, what kind of activities did you get into?

Ballard ([12:33](#)):

Well, during that time they had a fantastic, they had a little league and babe Ruth league, uh, they had Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, a lot of things that are not there now. They did bring some back to the, uh, the little league baseball that's back there, but there so many things to do, uh, back there at that time that don't exist. Now,

May ([13:00](#)):

It was the baseball, um, was there football, basketball?

Ballard ([13:05](#)):

Yeah, we had midget league football for awhile. Uh, back in those days, we didn't have a formal basketball program, but everybody played basketball, you know, playground basketball, with a, we did a lot of that.

May ([13:18](#)):

Now, did you work in the oyster industry?

Ballard ([13:22](#)):

While I was in college the summers, when I came home from college, I worked in the oyster industry. I worked in a clam industry because once the MSX disease struck the oyster beds, uh, there was a period of time where the clam industry was big in Port Norris. I worked in a clam industry in the warehouse during the summers when I was not, uh, before I graduated from college

May ([13:43](#)):

And, and in doing so..... what describes the type of work you were doing?

Ballard ([13:47](#)):

Okay. I filled pots for the oysters at times. I cleaned oysters. I, uh, I worked at a warehouse where we, we, we canned and labeled clams the main thing I did working in the warehouse. Uh, the labeling can the clams and send them out all over the country.

May ([14:04](#)):

And, your parents, what did they do?

Ballard ([14:06](#)):

My parents at that time, uh, had graduated from being part of the oyster industry. My mother, uh, worked for a while. She worked for a cleaner in Vineland and she left there and she went, uh, at the Vineland State School [Developmental Center] where she worked until she retired. My stepfather held down two jobs. He worked at night at a, uh, a nursing home and he would come home in the morning and go to work in a clam house. He, they made soup. Uh, he was part of that, uh, situation that they made soup. Uh, uh, that's what he did for years until he retired

May ([14:46](#)):

Was your family typical, or are you an only child or...

Ballard ([14:51](#)):

Yes, I was an only child. Yes. my mother had me. That's it? That was it. And, uh,

May ([14:56](#)):

Uh, as a typical, again, in terms of, both parents working. Yes. Um, you know, so in a way, professionally, what about your friends who grown up with the African American?

Ballard ([15:10](#)):

Well, most of my friends, we all came from the same set of backgrounds and they, my, my parents were not professional people. There are very few professional people. African American professional people in Port Norris area. At that time,... but, uh, they were hard working people who had goals for their children, that my parents instilled in me to go on to be somebody. And, uh, I'm thankful to them to this day for what they instilled in me in that regard.

May ([15:38](#)):

And, um, I also assume that you got involved in church early on. Yes. Yes.

Ballard ([15:43](#)):

Yes, in fact, my mother is still living today, she's 93 and she still lives in Port Norris in our same house where I was born and raised. Um, the church was a very important part of my life. We went to John Wesley United Methodist church which is still standing. I, um, grew up in that church. I taught Sunday school. I was a member of the chancel choir was a member of the famous men's chorus. I'd always sang so well. Um, I grew up and became chair on that for 20 years before I left and went to and became Baptist of Union Baptist Temple. But the churches at that time, uh, maybe the leading black church in that area for what that's worth still standing today, don't have no membership. It used to have, but it's still there.

May ([16:30](#)):

How big a role did the church play in the lives of the community in general, the African American community.

Ballard ([16:36](#)):

It was one of the leading, uh, agencies of, of, of where you went, because we hated my parents. You go to, you're going to Sunday school, you're going to church, that's it, no question, no ifs, ands, or buts you're going. And that's the way it was the most of my friends at that time, uh, church was instilled in us, you know, thank you today for that too. Most of us went at that time with the Methodist church, a few of us went to the Baptist church. Shiloh Baptist church which still stands. Also, uh, matter of fact, Shiloh Baptist, they have a program that comes on every Saturday, 10 o'clock and the Shiloh Baptist church in Port Norris and Reverend Dunkins is still there. He is the pastor there now. Uh, but all of us, we attended a church Sunday school. They all looked forward to the big Sunday school picnic every year, which we would go to the Parvins State Park and have a great time out there. That was a big outing for us that we always looked forward to. But

May ([17:39](#)):

Did you visit other Churches?

Ballard ([17:39](#)):

Somewhat? Not a great deal. Yes, we did. We did some of that with our, particularly our men's chorus. We went to a lot of churches singing and so forth. Yeah.

May ([17:52](#)):

And what was the,... excuse me, what music did you, what type of music did you do in church?

Ballard ([17:57](#)):

Gospel and hymns. We sang from the hymn book quite a bit. We all did some gospel musical. Also. We used to go to Philadelphia, get our sheet music from the old music store in Philadelphia, which I'm not sure it still exists anymore. And we came and

May ([18:11](#)):

Theodore Presser.?

Ballard ([18:14](#)):

Yep and we taught those and that was fantastic....men's chorus surely was. Yeah.

May ([18:23](#)):

What else did you do? Do you have summers and go out before college during the what did you do during the summer?

Ballard ([18:28](#)):

Basically when I was, when I, uh, during the summertime, when I was going to college,

May ([18:33](#)):

Uh, well, let's say from grade school up to the time you went to college. How did you spend your summers?!

Ballard ([18:39](#)):

Well we spent, well, , we did, uh, baseball, basketball, pickup basketball, and pickup softball and baseball games. Uh, some of the guys did a lot of fishing. I wasn't a fisherman. I didn't care for fishing. I thought that was boring for me. I thought it was the most boring thing just sitting around fishing. That wasn't for me..

May ([19:01](#)):

You worked in the summer as a kid growing up.

Ballard ([19:04](#)):

No I didn't, well, we did some of that. We, we worked in Beanfields, we picked beans, uh, some pick tomatoes, uh, those kinds of things. We did some of those things. I didn't do it constantly, but it was always available.

May ([19:20](#)):

Now, what else you grew up in Port Norris.

Ballard ([19:26](#)):

Right.

May ([19:27](#)):

You talked about going to Philadelphia. Did you travel around the County, Cumberland County at all?

Ballard (19:33):

We didn't do a lot of that.

May (19:34):

You just kind of.....

Ballard (19:35):

We were, we were content being around Port Norris and being with friends and doing things. It was just a fun experience growing up in Port Norris at that time.

May (19:46):

Um, when you came back as a teacher, um, and I guess at some point you said early, you had some, perhaps the children of your peers. Um, what was the reaction of some of those individuals?

Ballard (20:03):

Well, I'll never forget. I had a sixth grade teacher who was still a part of the staff along with a couple of the other teachers when I came back to teach school who are so proud of the fact that they had me in class and I came back with part of the same fabric they were part of. And that was, that was so, uh, that was, that was so wonderful. The experience for them just to have me come back here.

May (20:25):

What kind of a student were you? A pretty good student?

Ballard (20:28):

I was a pretty good student? I was a very good student in elementary school. I was an A and B student. I did well as a matter of fact, from fourth grade all the way through eighth I was left elected as President of my class. And, uh, cause at that time it was like 60%, 65% African American student body, . During the years that has turned around now, my Commercial Township School District now has got 75% Caucasian and like 24%, African American made it turn over because what happened to towns like South Port Norris and Bivalve what they use another part of section called town called, considered called Berrytown, which were heavily populated with African Americans. They, uh, got housing for those people here in Millville. They became part of Millville. And that cut down on the African American population, student, body, in Commercial Township, which caused internal.....(no ending to sentence)

May (21:25):

Any of your peers, what are they doing now? Are they any in education or ?

Ballard (21:30):

Yeah. Um, one of my best friends, Paul Millbourne, who will be retiring this year with me,. Uh, now he went to the Brown school, but now he has the brother Larry Millbourne, who was, uh, went to the major leagues and he stayed in major leagues for like 10, 15 years. Larry did, he played for the Yankees. He played for the Phillies. He played for Houston. He played for several ball clubs on, on the, uh, major league level. And his father who had just died a couple of years ago, uh, was instrumental. He, he was a little league coach, Babe Ruth League coach and he, uh, always professed that when his sons would be immediately ball players and, that happened in case of Larry Miller whose brother was my best friend

who teaches sixth grade for me, uh, for a number of years in Commercial Township School District, we're leaving together this year, after this year. Um,

May ([22:24](#)):

In your experience growing with growing up in Port Norris, did new people come into the town, um, just move in, um, as you grew up or was it pretty much the same people? That you always.....

Ballard ([22:39](#)):

Basically the same people. It was not, uh, a lot of movement into Port Norris during that time. As I said, the millions of bucks never made,..... Unfortunately a lot of that dollar never went back into the town. Uh, but there was not an influx of people that migrated to Port Norris at that time. Except for people in the industry.

May ([23:03](#)):

I was at a session for Bayshore back in May, and it was held right in Port Norris. And some of the people talked about, uh, DuPont, and they said that it really wasn't a virus. It was DuPont dumping chemicals into the Bay that, um, um, you know, cause the problem virus or whatever caused the disease. Have you heard anything about that?

Ballard ([23:29](#)):

I never heard that.

May ([23:31](#)):

Okay. I mean, these are people that were in their eighties, right. So I just wondered if there was, um, anything you want to add to anything you've said so far.

Ballard ([23:40](#)):

I'm trying to think. I'll probably think of something once you've gone. Right now I can't think of anything.

May ([23:46](#)):

Any exciting stories, anything happen, um, that really stands out. Um, or would you say that it was really a kind of a almost a storybook, but this very quiet subdued?

Ballard ([23:59](#)):

Uh, yes.

May ([24:00](#)):

Straight ahead.

Ballard ([24:00](#)):

And it still is that way right today. I mean, it's, it's, it's quiet country living.

May ([24:07](#)):

Okay.

Ballard ([24:08](#)):

Easy country living and we just, we just loved it.

May ([24:12](#)):

What was it? An adjustment and quite a change? And why did you choose change?

Ballard ([24:15](#)):

Okay. Well, the adjustment came because when I went to high school to Millville High School, I was one of the few African-Americans who took College Preparatory. Matter of fact, in my class, the class of 64, from the Millville High School, I(in audible) less than five of us left, that had college preparatory. So in my case, in Millville High School, I was the only black student in most of my classes, except for, phys ed and the general type courses. And I went to Cheyney. It was the best thing that happened to me in my life. I always said I was around other black guys who were having the same ideas I had. They want to be doctors and lawyers were going to be, teachers would want me to do this. And that was good for me. Cause I was like, I think I was the first black kid to go to a black male college, from Port Norris in years, because I was no longer a stand up when I was at Cheyney. There were a whole lot of us. And that made me, that was a good feeling.

May ([25:26](#)):

Any closing comments?

Ballard ([25:27](#)):

Well, I just like to say that my experiences as a, as a child in Port Norris, moving on from there and moving on to Millville and going onto college and the rest of my life, I was inspired by growing up there. Because during that time we were poor. We didn't know it. We didn't have anything. My parents worked hard. They didn't have a lot of money. We didn't have a lot of things, but we had everything we needed. They didn't have everything we wanted, but we had to have sure, my parents made sure we have everything that we needed and we just happened. You couldn't tell us we were anything, but we were just happy people. We didn't even realize we were poor, but we worked for it. We didn't realize it. And that's about it.

May

Can you make that statement one more time?

Ballard

I said, if I had my life to live over again, I wouldn't change very much at all. And I enjoyed every minute up to this point.

Footnote: Reference to the "Brown" school's location was referred to in text as South Port Norris, also, known as Shell Pile. Also, Brick School referenced was the Port Norris Elementary School.