

**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY
COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: Ima Edwards

INTERVIEWER: Jim Schlosser

DATE: N.D.

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

JIM SCHLOSSER: --tell everybody that we're talking to Erma Edwards.

IMA EDWARDS: That's Ima.

JS: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Ima. I should have known. I got Erma here but I meant, I knew it was Ima. Ima Edwards, who--you live out in Glenwood, right?

IE: Yes.

JS: And you worked for Woolworth's how long?

IE: I worked, I retired when I had forty years' service. I worked some at Northeast part-time after that, so all together about forty-two years.

JS: Forty-two years. And when did you start with Woolworth?

IE: I started February 11, 1953.

JS: Nineteen fifty-three. And had you grown up in Greensboro?

IE: No.

JS: Where did you come from?

IE: I was from a little town up above Elkin. It was called the Benham community. It really wasn't a town, it was just a community.

JS: Right. And I take it in that town was mostly a white community, right?

IE: Yes.

JS: Being in the mountains--

IE: It was mostly farmers and, you know, you lived about two or three miles apart. Not real close--people wasn't real close around.

JS: Right. Did you know any black people growing up?

IE: No, I didn't.

JS: Right. I think one thing you told me that you were maybe even a teenager before you ever met a black person, is that right?

IE: Yes.

JS: Because I know up in that part of the country there, there's just not a large black population, and you didn't travel very much.

IE: I didn't travel at all [JS laughs] until I left home.

JS: Right. What made you come to Greensboro?

IE: Well, I came down with a friend. She and her husband had got a job here and I came here. And at the time, I went to work for Sears in the wrapping department out at the catalog place.

JS: Yes, on Lawndale Drive.

IE: Right. And I worked there for, you know, just the Christmas season. And then it was a couple months in between that that I was really hunting for a job and didn't have one. But I settled, I decided to go to Woolworth's and, of course, they put me right to work.

JS: Right. Did you get a tip that there were jobs available there?

IE: There was an ad in the paper.

JS: Okay. And of course, you started out doing what?

IE: My first job was really waitress.

JS: And then over then next forty years you--

IE: You mean at Woolworth?

JS: Yeah, Woolworth's.

IE: Well, it was--that answered both questions. Yes, it was. I started out as waitress.

JS: And eventually were promoted to, you were promoted to manager of the counter.

IE: Right.

JS: Right. And that came when?

IE: That came--I'm not sure about the year, because I didn't write it down. I was manager probably nineteen or twenty years on the counter.

JS: Right. And now on the day of the sit-ins, you were working the bakery counter, is that right?

IE: Yes.

JS: What was your job, just as a clerk, or I mean as a sales person?

IE: Well, I was actually the bakery, head of the bakery department, which, you know, I had people working under me to help with the sales. I did sales, but I also, you know, kind of coordinated it.

JS: Right. And where was the bakery counter in relationship to the lunch counter?

IE: It was right next to the lunch counter.

JS: Right next to it. And did you have any inkling at the time that something was about to happen at Woolworth?

IE: No.

JS: There hadn't been anything in the community that black people were beginning to want more rights and so forth?

IE: No, there hadn't been anything.

JS: And what--were you there that day when they came in?

IE: Yes.

JS: And what do you remember about it?

IE: Well, I just remember, you know, that they said they were--they came in and sat down in the back, which was, you know, a counter away from me, but I could see them there. And they asked to be served, and of course the waitress told them she was sorry, that she couldn't serve them. And then they demanded to be served and they got the manager, and it was hand[led], the rest was handled through him.

JS: Could you hear Mr. [Clarence "Curly"] Harris talking to them?

IE: No, I did not.

JS: How did you feel? Were you nervous?

IE: No.

JS: What did you think was going on?

IE: Well, I just thought they were, they were trying to get served. You know, I mean I didn't really think that much about it.

JS: Did you think they didn't know they couldn't be served or that they were testing, you know, just to see?

IE: Well, to begin with, I didn't think they knew that they couldn't be served. But then when they told them that they would be back the next day, then that told us that they were, were demanding to be served, in other words.

JS: And you could hear them say that when they left?

IE: No, I could not, because, like I said, I was at--the counter where I worked was real busy most of the time.

JS: People were--the presence of the black students was not causing a disruption in the store? People continued to come in and buy and so forth?

IE: Sure.

JS: Nobody was just standing around, you know, staring or anything?

IE: No. In fact, the biggest part of the customers that day did not even know it was going on.

JS: Right, they just, just four black people back there in the back, right? Okay. And then you saw them, I guess you saw them leave, is that right?

IE: Yes.

JS: And then the store closed. What happened the next day?

IE: Well, of course, you know, we were told that they said they would be back the next day. The next day they did come back about, I think it was about eleven o'clock, in that area. And they did sit down at the counter.

JS: And were there just four at this point, or were they joined by other black students?

IE: It was just, still just four at this point, I believe.

JS: Right, and I think, if I'm not mistaken there, two of the original four that were there the previous day were in the four that came the second day, and the other two were new students.

IE: I really didn't know because, you know, I didn't see them that close.

JS: Where you nervous that time?

IE: No.

JS: And what was the--

IE: Because they gave you no reason to be nervous. They wasn't threatening or anything.

JS: Were you worried that others could make trouble, though? Other people, white persons in the store might get mad or anything like that concern you?

IE: I never was really afraid, as far as being scared of, you know, what was going on.

JS: And the four, what did they do? They just sat?

IE: They just sat until later on that afternoon. Then I'm not sure whether they were joined with a few more that day or it was the next day, but, you know, as it built up there was more and more that joined in. And it finally got to the point with all the hassling from the [Ku Klux] Klan and so forth that the decision was made to close the counter.

JS: Right. Now tell me about, as each day passed, things got a little bit more tense I take it, right?

IE: Well, I would think so. It really wasn't, you know--it didn't disrupt business on the floor.

JS: Right. Did you ever see any klansmen in the store?

IE: Yes.

JS: What were they doing?

IE: Well, they were just heckling.

JS: Did anybody try to stop them or tell them to leave?

IE: I think police came and escorted them out.

JS: Now how did this affect relationships between yourself and other white workers and the black women that worked at the counter?

IE: It didn't affect our relationship at all.

JS: Right. What kind of relationship did you all have? Did you all have--

IE: We had a good relationship--

JS: Everybody got along?

IE: --and still do.

JS: And did you have any feelings one way about what the students were doing? Did you sympathize or were you against it? How'd you feel about it?

IE: Well, I'm not really sure. I mean, I can't really remember that much about how I felt then.

JS: You know, it was a tough time, and, like I say, you had grown up, this was your first experience working alongside black people, is that right?

IE: Yeah.

JS: And you all got along fine. But I guess, I guess it was, it had to be some, you know, toughness, especially tough for the black women working back there behind the counter.

IE: I think it was, because I think that, you know, they, the students themselves heckled them about working back there.

JS: Is that right?

IE: I think so.

JS: You didn't hear it, but you heard--

IE: I didn't hear it, but I have heard rumors that they did. [laughs]

JS: Right, right. And did you know--that first day, you didn't know any of the four? You hadn't seen them before?

IE: Right.

JS: Now as the years passed, you got to know some of them. You got to know David Richmond, didn't you?

IE: Yes.

JS: How did you feel about David as you got to know him?

IE: Well, he seemed like a nice fellow.

JS: I remember coming with him a couple of times, and he was a real nice guy. Did you think at the time that this was going to be an historic event?

IE: No, not really. I didn't think that much about it.

JS: Right. And when they finally closed the counter, what'd you do then? Did you get laid off?

IE: No, no one was laid off. We all worked. We had different jobs.

JS: What did you do--

IE: I was still right where I was.

JS: Oh, that's right, the bakery counter stayed open.

IE: The bakery counter went on.

JS: Right. And the bakery counter was integrated. People could--because you didn't sit down at the bakery counter, right?

IE: No.

JS: And you served all races there, right?

IE: Sure.

JS: And then there was--

IE: Some of our best customers were from A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] and Bennett [College] and the college out--

JS: Emmanuel Lutheran College?

IE: No.

JS: Oh, the prep school?

IE: Yeah.

JS: Sedalia?

IE: Yes.

JS: Alice Freeman Palmer Institute. Emmanuel Lutheran College was also opened then, which was a small black college.

IE: I don't remember that one.

JS: Yeah, it was right on the edge of the A&T campus. And there was also just a general snack bar, too, in the store?

IE: But that was connected to the bakery.

JS: Bakery. That stayed opened.

IE: Sure. We had sandwiches of all types.

JS: Right. And the people--now I talked with Geneva Tisdale. She said that during that time that she didn't get laid off. She took her maternity leave.

IE: Well, she was--yeah.

JS: Yeah, but the other people that had worked at the counter, they just went out in the store and did other chores?

IE: Yes. Well, you know, the ones in the kitchen, most of them were connected in the baking department, because they baked the cakes, baked the pies, did the donuts, and all this. So it really did not affect our operation that much.

JS: Right. Mr. Harris said it did affect business, though, that his--

IE: It did affect business, because you take away standing business all day long, and it does. [laughs]

JS: Right. Do you think some people in the community--white and black--became fearful of going downtown and going to Woolworth's?

IE: I think they did, yes.

JS: Now once it was, it was finally ended, do you remember the reopening of the counter?

IE: Yes.

JS: What was that like, that first day?

IE: Well, I mean, it was just a normal day. We opened, everything went smooth. Nobody bothered anybody.

JS: Right. And I understand it was Ms. Tisdale and two other black women that were served first.

IE: It was four of them.

JS: There was four? Do you remember who the fourth was?

IE: Let's see, there was Geneva, Clark, Mattie, and I'm not sure who the fourth one was, but-

JS: She mentioned--

IE: Maybe Jamie Ruth.

JS: Well, Geneva mentioned to me that it was--

IE: Eppie.

JS: --Susan Morrison. You remember her?

IE: Yeah. She was working.

JS: And Anita Jones.

IE: Maybe it was her.

JS: Well, she said that--

IE: Anita Jones, yes.

JS: Yes. And that they were told to wear--

IE: It was Florence and Geneva and Anita and probably Susie, because I couldn't remember the four but I know there was four of them.

JS: And how soon after that did you see a non-Woolworth's black person sitting at the counter?

IE: I'm not sure. Because, you know, I couldn't, with the business that we had on the bakery, I couldn't keep my eye over there [laughs] all the time.

JS: So, but after awhile it became pretty routine for blacks and whites to--

IE: If they come in and asked to be served. I think it, it seems like that it was two or three weeks or maybe more before that they came to be served. I don't remember.

JS: But eventually you had an integrated counter and it became routine and nobody--you know, it just looked sort of natural. Did you ever wonder, stop and say, "Boy, what was the big fuss about?"

IE: Yeah.

JS: Because--

IE: I mean--

JS: Go ahead.

IE: I was always, I mean, I've always wondered if we had went ahead and served them, what would have happened there that day, looking back and then looking forward.

JS: You think that would have been the wisest thing to do, to go ahead and serve them?

IE: Well, no, knowing the time that it was, I really don't. I think it would have been a bad situation for the company, because, you know, they would be breaking tradition with what was going--the rest of the South. They didn't want to do that without the whole thing open, you know, the whole city opened up.

JS: Right. Did you ever talk to Mr. Harris about this whole situation?

IE: I'm sure I have over the years, but I don't remember a specific conversation.

JS: Right. He's often viewed as the villain of this situation, but what--

IE: He was not.

JS: Tell me about Mr. Harris. Did you--was he a good boss?

IE: Yes, he was.

JS: Did he treat the black employees with respect?

IE: Yes, he did. And I think that they'll all tell you that.

JS: Right, and--well, the only black employee I talked to was Geneva, and she said that he always was nice to her. And he saw her--when the downtown store closed, she went out to Friendly for a while, and she saw him out there once when he came to have some coffee or something. Well, I'm not sure if they had a soda fountain there, but--

IE: Yes, they did.

JS: They did?

IE: Yes. In fact I helped open up both of those stores. [laughs]

JS: Is that right. So you spent a long career with Woolworth's, and I take it you enjoyed your time there.

IE: Yes, I did.

JS: You miss the chain? It's all gone now.

IE: Well, I miss it, yes.

JS: I guess all of us thought that one thing about America, there'll always be a Woolworth's store somewhere. But it's gone. How about the sit-ins, though, as you look back? Did you--are you proud you were a part of history?

IE: Yes.

JS: And do you tell your grand--do you have grandchildren?

IE: Oh, yes.

JS: How old were your own children then? Did you have children at this time, at the sit-ins?

IE: I probably had a daughter a year old and the others was probably seven, eight, twelve, or something like that. They were stepchildren.

JS: Did they grow up asking you questions about this?

IE: No. I mean they know about it from all that was put in the paper.

JS: How about your grandchildren? They ever ask you about it?

IE: They don't ask me about it. They have got the paper clippings that have come out. Their dad saved them clippings over the years.

JS: Oh great. And have you been mentioned in books?

IE: Not that I know of. There was a lady in California that was writing a book, and I haven't heard from her whether she finished it or not.

JS: Right. After the sit-ins, did--were black employees at Woolworth's, were some of them ever promoted to managerial positions?

IE: We had assistant managers. I'm not sure whether they went on to be managers or not.

JS: Were they promoted from within--

IE: Because you know they come in as assistants and then go on up.

JS: All right, Okay. Well, it was an exciting time. I can remember, I was in I think the ninth grade. No, no I was in high school in 1960, so it's--it doesn't seem that long ago but--

IE: It's longer than you think. [laughs]

JS: I know it, I know it. But a lot's changed. Do you think Greensboro is a better place now?

IE: Well, I think so.

JS: You have no complaints about the way things turned out?

IE: No. I sure don't.

JS: All right. Well, listen, I appreciate this a lot. Like I say we're going to use some of this in different ways. The great thing about it, that we'll have it on--

[End of Interview]