

ORAL HISTORY T-0022
INTERVIEW WITH NANNIE MITCHELL TURNER
INTERVIEWED BY DR. RICHARD RESH AND FRANKLIN ROTHER
BLACK COMMUNITY LEADERS PROJECT
JULY 24, 1970

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RESH: This is the ninth in a series of oral history interviews sponsored by the University of Missouri at St. Louis. The interviewer is Professor Richard Resh assisted by Mr. Franklin Rother. Our guest today, July 24, 1970, is Mrs. Nannie Mitchell Turner, president of the St. Louis Argus, a leading Negro newspaper and a columnist for the Post Dispatch. Mrs. Turner, could you begin by telling us a little something about your background, where you were born?

TURNER: Yes, I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1888 and I married at seventeen years old, to Mr. William Mitchell, came to St. Louis 1904 to the World's Fair on my honeymoon. My brother-in-law, Joseph Mitchell, who was already here, he and his wife, we came and got together with them and decided that we wanted to start something like a newspaper, we called it. So we admired white newspapers and all about white people, being down South all of our lives and all. So we decided we wanted to do something we thought that it was great if we had a newspaper and published news about our people to build them and educate them. But the funny thing about it, neither the three of us had any college education ourselves. But we just had faith and confidence in ourselves, we could go on and learn as we go. Although my husband, Billy Mitchell, he was the educator in the bunch, with us, so we depended on him to guide and direct, my brother-in-law and I. I'm just down to earth telling the truth, because I do love the truth and I have lived to find out the truth really pays, if you tell the truth nothing can hold you down.

RESH: When you founded this newspaper did you have any models in mind, because there were national and prominent newspapers such as the New York Age and the Boston Guardian, edited by Monroe Trotter, did you have those in mind?

TURNER: Yes, my husband did and my brother-in-law, they did, of course I knew nothing about them, I was a wife and sister-in-law, I was just following the men. I'm pretty sure they did, because they would bring those things, and we would sit down and talk over them, and then they began to get with different doctors, lawyers and business, professional men here in St. Louis. Such as Dr. Staffer, Dr. Curtis, Dr. Powell, attorney-lawyer Bonds, men like that and they began to start like that.

RESH: Did St. Louis have a Negro newspaper at that time?

TURNER: They had something, some kind of little something, they called ... the O.K. Robinson, he had a little small paper, that was about all.

RESH: When you came here in 190U to the World's Fair , what impressed you about St. Louis?

TURNER: Oh, just so many things, it was great, it was just one thing that impressed me I hadn't been used to seeing Negroes driving the wagon, of course there wasn't many cars then, just mostly wagons, buggies and horses, and I hadn't seen many Negroes driving those such as ice wagons and things like that . Those were all white jobs down South, and I saw so many Negroes on those delivery wagons and things like that and it was great for me, I thought that it was wonderful.

RESH: So, the first issue of the Argus appeared in March of 1912?

TURNER: Yes, in March of 1912, and it was a little four page tablet and they got it set up some how, I don't remember how they got it set up, but they got the Christian Board, here on Beaumont and Pine, they printed it for them, they got it set up some kind of way, I don't know how and put it in some little old iron cases and my son, Frank, who I just lost about little over a month ago, he and his father would put the little things in a little wooden frame and had a wooden cart and push them up the alley and push them up to Beaumont and Pine, to the Christian Board and the little house we had, we had a little business there. Market Street.

RESH: Before the first issue of the Argus appeared, that is in the period from 190U, when you first came to St. Louis and 1912, what did you and your husband do to support yourselves?

TURNER: I was a chamber-maid and my brother-in-law and his wife, he was a house-man and she was a chamber-maid. Here at thirty-seventeen Morgan it is Delmar now, but that's where we got our first jobs and we stayed there, that was a big rooming house for the World's Fair guests. And I remember one coincidence, when the people were supposed to go back to the fair, we were supposed to take care of their rooms and things, one of the guest went away and left a purse with five-hundred dollars in it, under their pillow. And making up the bed my sister-in-law and I found it and we took it to Mrs. Randle, who was the owner of the rooming house and turn it over to her. And we also had quarters, we lived upstairs, in the back and we were the house-man and the chamber-maid. But my husband, Mr. Mitchell, who was the educator, he was the college fellow, he was our guide and leader he didn't like house work, he said he would not do house work. But brother Joe and myself and sister, Mattie, we stayed there and worked, but he had him a job over in East St. Louis, I think, at a packing house, rather than to do house work. He said, " That was women's work." And he would not do it. So we worked like that for about, well, until 1904 to 1912, see, we worked like that up until 1912, so we went back South to visit, came right back and started this paper.

RESH: When you)back to the South, to Birmingham on your occasional visits, did you speak to friends and relatives about the city, did you urge people to, migrate to the city?

TURNER: Yes, surely, yes quite a few listened to us and came and we got one young man now here with me. That's the head of my composing room back there, Carl Thomas, he's been with me about thirty-eight years, from down there, we brought him from down there out

of the mines. Out of the coal.

RESH: Was St. Louis when you returned occasionally to visit to Alabama, was St. Louis known as a good city for Negroes to go to?

TURNER: Yes, it was.

RESH: At least it was better.

TURNER : Better.

RESH: If not good then better.

TURNER: Yes, it was better, yes. And seemed like people, everybody was headed for St. Louis and most especially, we were quite proud of St. Louis Blues, we just thought that was the most wonderful thing there was, for someone to write St. Louis blues.

RESH: Did you know Mr. Handy ?

TURNER: Yes, in person, been with him, in his presence any number of times, because I think I danced with him once.

RESH: What kind of man was he?

TURNER: Nice fellow, fun fellow, very fun fellow, full of life. Yes, I did dance with him, in Chicago, he was there and I came there and I danced with him.

RESH: Did you know any other composers or musicians that were active in that period? Did you know Scott Joplin, for instance?

TURNER: I knew of him, yes, but Mr. Handy was about the only one that I was familiar with and associated with.

RESH: Well, getting back to the founding of the Argus, the first issue appeared, those must have been precarious days.

TURNER: They were.

RESH: Live

TURNER: Live from day to day. Had a hard way to go, I'll tell you that. That's the reason now I look at people and think, " Oh, my what do they want." They have everything and still they are very unhappy. I just wonder, "Why?" And when I think back over my life, how we came, how hard it was. Now see, that's the reason I admire this young man, (Frank Rother) he seems to be so ambitious and so pleasant. And I enjoy when I see them like him because, the reason I said that because, blacks are so unhappy and they don't even want to give you a nice answer. You ask them something, "No," " Yes", just like they are mad about it. I said, " Oh, if I had the opportunity , how hard I had it, nothing but hard work.

RESH: What was it like back then, when you started out?

TURNER: Like how?

RESH: What was your daily routine like, like working? Around 1912, what was an average day like, when you went to work for the Argus? What did you do?

TURNER: Just went to work from the desk, to in the back to the little composing room, we had, we did printing work too, got out the cards, made the fly sheet or little valets for somebody. I was back there setting the type by hand and making up those jobs and running them off on those presses. We've got two of those little presses back there right now. And I ran thousands and thousands and thousands of those little business cards and hand bills for people. Sometimes stand for hours and I was short and I had to have a little stool to stand on, hours and hours.

RESH: Well, in those early days, did you have any significant financial support from anyone in the Negro community?

TURNER: Very little, very little. I've always been very conservative, sometimes I think I'm a little toomuch, but I would save every penny my husband and I could get a hold to, every penny. Just happened we got in a very bad situation once and I had saved up five hundred dollars and my brother-in-law had saved us a couple of hundred, we just about closed out, but that kept us going. But these other professional , lawyers and. doctors, I just named, they would have a little money, they would put in a little in: now and then, they didn't get money like these people get it now . . . my, my, my. If they could have got money like these people get it now, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.

RESH: Some of these professional people, who did come to your aid occasionally, if they could, who were some of those people? Homer Phillips was he one?

TURKER: Yes, Homer Phil-Lips, he was one of them , that's true, that was another one of our old buddies, Mr. Phillips. Oh, so many, I could. . . my mind just don't carry like it use to, probably breaking down, it's about time. I do the best I can. Yes, Homer Phillips and I wish I could call some more of them, right on the end of tongue.

EESH: Maybe they will come up later in the tape. 'Why don't you tell us something about your husband, Mr. William Mitchell.

TURNER: Mr. William Mitchell was a great man, if I do have to say it. The old saying is " Poor dog that wouldn't wag his own tail." That's the old saying I used to hear the old people saying, but Mr. Mitchell was very religious, he was very tender-hearted and kind and loving to people and he wanted to help everybody. He never fumed you away, if he didn't have but a penny in his pocket and you came to him, he'd say, " I'll give you all I have. He was just like that, good man.

PESH: Who were some of the prominent Negroes that Mr. William Mitchell admired? Did he have any models that he tried to emulate ?

TURNER: Oh, I wish I could, call the names.

RESH.: Booker T. Washington?

TURNER: Booker T. Washington, right, by the way, now makes it come to my memory I was all packed up and my little tin trunk to go to Booker T, Washington College when I married Mr. Mitchell in 190k. Just about packed ready to go. changed my mind decided that I wouldn't go, I would marry him instead. Booker Washington was one of our great admirers, wonderful. I've been to Tuskegee Mr. Mitchell and I visited, there, a couple of times after we married went back to visit, yes, we did.

RESH: Who were some of the other prominent Negroes in that time? Mr. Monroe Trodder, editor of the Boston Guardian.

TURNER: Yes, I remember him.

RESH: He was known as quite a radical.

TURNER: Yes, he was, yes.

RESH: The word sort of loses it's meaning with time, doesn't it?

TURNER: Yes, it does, it does.

RESH: And W. E. Du Bois

TURNER: Great man, those were some of the great men, those were some of Mr. Mitchell's thoughts and talk,-about men like that.

RESH: Let's talk about the World War I period. Around 1917-1918 ,St. Louis was one of the many cities where there was such an influx. St. Louis, like many northern towns under went a number of changes, probably the most significant of which was the large numbers of Negro migrants to the city. Do you remember that?

TURNER: Quite a bit about that. I remember a many a night, morning when they'd be taking the soldiers, they would be marching up Pine Street, going, getting ready to leave, how we'd all be out on our fronts, out in the streets, waving and crying, I remember quite a bit about that. Some said I was

RESH: In July of 1917 there was a terrible upheaval in East St. Louis, East St. Louis race riot.

TURNER: Yes, that's right, we suffered for that, I remember that so well. I remember Mr. Mitchell and I went down to the river, down to see some of them come over, watch them come over the bridge. It was sad, all up and down Market Street it was sad.

RESH: What happened?

TURMER: Well, there were just people fighting and running and crying, had their things in theirs arms and running away from there and throwing them in the river and drowning them. Oh, it was terrible, it was awful. It was a bad day.

RESH: During the 1920's period, you had your first real serious competition in the St. Louis American and one of the issues that the two papers apparently scalped about was the issue the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

TURNER: Yeah, that was quite a something we had to go through too.

RESH: What did you think of A. Phillip Randolph?

TURNER: We thought he was a great man, he did a great job.

RESH: Did the Argus support him in his drive to unionize the Brotherhood?

TURNER: Yes.

RESH: The porters?

TURNER: Yes. We thought that it was a great thing to do. Yes, we supported him in it.

RESH: During the depression, what was it like?

TURNER: Ah, that was another time, we suffered like everything. Yes, it was sad days, I hope I never live through another one.

RESH: What was particularly bad about the depression here?

TURNER: Well, you just couldn't get any money, you couldn't do nothing and you just felt like you really just looking toward to starving to death. You just couldn't get anything to move, it was just terrible.

RESH: How did the paper fare during that time?

TURNER: Sad, just sad, every which a way you would go. That's the reason I say, I just look at people now and wonder, " What is the matter?" You got everything now, just money, money, don't ever say a hundred dollars or five hundred, billions, millions and zillions now. We wasn't even able in those days to pay . . . » . we got no salary, had nothing to pay a salary. We just worked and all the money we got we had to use to carry on. We had no money. Now I got money and I don't know what to do with it.

RESH: During the second World War, Negroes again flocked to the North, to St. Louis, did you notice many changes during the second World War period? Did St. Louis seem to change visibly to you, did it seem that different kinds of people were flocking to the city?

TURNER: Yes, it did seem that they were quite a few different changes, seemed like they had gotten used to them from the first war and they knew a little better how to manipulize it, how to handle the situation, it wasn't quite as hard, they had gotten use to it.

RESH: What were some of these mechanisms by which the migration was handled a little bit easier in the second World War?

TURNER: I don't know seem like they had a better way to feed them, how to handle them in housing, was a little better the way I looked at it.

RESH: Were there perhaps more governmental agencies?

TURNER: Yes, governmental agencies. Seemed like the government lined up a way to handle them from the first war, they had been taught a little better how to handle the situation when they got to the second one.

RESH: St. Louis was one of the cities in the second World War unlike Detroit and Harlem which avoided civil disorders and riots. Why do you think it was able to avoid the disorders?

TURNER: You mean St. Louis?

RESH: Yes.

TURNER: Well, I'll tell you, St. Louis I feel is made up of better people than in some of these other cities. I don't want to say anything out of term but St. Louis we have a good clean police guidance in St. Louis than in these other cities. I found that out by traveling around and going to these other cities, we have a better police system here in St. Louis. We got one of the best police forces of any city I know of, that I've ever been in. Policemen here in St. Louis they are interested of what they are doing to keep the city right, guide it. Of course now I don't say every one of them are good, there is always something bad in everything, but we got a mighty good police organization in St. Louis and that's what has kept these riots down. We've got some true blues. I have had them to come right in this office and sit right in that chair and talk to me.

RESH: Then perhaps St. Louis had a more stable community, black community?

TURNER: Yes, that's right, that's right. St. Louis is just a well made up city.

RESH: Some people that we've talked to said that St. Louis is a big southern town.

TURNER: It is, that's what it is. Made up of nothing mostly but southern people, every Negro here in St. Louis with anything is from the South. That's the truth, from the South.

RESH: Many, some of the leaders, whom we have interviewed were born in Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas.

TURNER: Yes, surely, that's right. Just a big southern town.

RESH: Mrs. Turner, looking back on your life and the life of the St. Louis Argus, what do you think were your most important moments, your happiest moments. Do you have any regrets?

TURNER: No , I don't, only I wished that I could have done more. I . . . I'll say we, hate that word I, we the Argus has helped thousands and thousands of people and whether I mean to say people, not only Negroes but white people, and that's the way it should be. God didn't tell you to help Negroes or white people, he told you to help people and that's what you should

do help people. I hate this old word, I'm going to help my people, my people, who are your people? They're all God's people, so help people, so that's what we've done helped thousands and thousands. I never turn anybody out of this place, come here and asked for anything, if I ain't got but a dime or a quarter, I never let them go away without something. And those girls there, if somebody ask them, they say, " No, we don't have it." I say don't say that, I say, "Give them something out of that box there", make them open up that box. Never. We've got people in Africa, got a family over there, I'm so proud of that boy, his name is Dennis, he came here to St. Louis and finished at Lincoln and came to us as a journalist and went to work for us, he worked for us for about two or three years and he married a little girl that was one of my little stenographers and they're over there now in Africa. Just lovely, just doing wonderful, we got them all over the United States, people we've helped and trained. Even Mr. Howard Woods, who's here in St. Louis with the paper set now, we helped him, we made him, he's right back here with us with his paper and doing nicely, very proud of him.

RESH: Well, Mrs. Turner, sociologists and historians have recognized for some time now that the Negro newspaper is one of the most important vehicles to bring cohesion to the Negro community and we want to thank you for sharing some of your memories with us.

TURNER: Only thing I wished, since I'm so tired today, I'm not up to par, I could do better because I know much more than I've said, but I'm tired and I've been under a strain. After I promised I didn't want to turn you away.

RESH: One correction on this tape, this tape was made on July 24, 1970 not July 25.