

Interview with Velma Dean Stewart

Interviewer: Jacquie Stewart

n.d.

Q: What is your full name? Why did your parents select this name for you? Did you have a nickname?

A: Velma Dean Stewart. Her mother called her Velma Dean, but her father called her Velma Dawn.

Q: When and where were you born?

A: I was born at home in Posey County, IN on June 21, 1933.

Q: How did your family come to live there?

A: Her father was born in Mt. Vernon, Indiana down in Point Township.

Q: Were there other family members in the area? Who?

A: Her mother had two brothers that lived here with her, but they didn't stay here too long. They all went into service. They lived there for like a year or two.

Q: What was the house (apartment, farm, etc.) like? How many rooms? Bathrooms? Did it have electricity? Indoor plumbing? Telephones?

A: We all lived in a big house on 924 Fourth Street. They had three great big bedrooms. All the boys shared a big room, the girls shared a room and my mom and dad had the 3rd big room. They had one bathroom and were lucky to have one. They used oil lamps for electricity. It was 1939 when we were first got electricity. Right before I started school. They didn't have indoor plumbing then. It came later on. They just went outside for everything. They didn't have phones until 1946 or 1947.

Q: Were there any special items in the house that you remember?

A: My player piano. It had a piano roll that would turn on and plays the music by itself. They had a big Troller that plays big records.

Q: What is your earliest childhood memory?

A: It was leaving the west side of town. They left either during or after 37 flood. There used to be creeks down on the west side and would flood when it rains. They ended up getting a home on the Eastside. We got a ride from one of my father's friends because there were so many of us.

Q: Describe the personalities of your family members?

A: My dad was a nice person, but strict. Not overly strict, but he was strict. When he said something, it was the end of it. My mom was a mom. She would take care of us and the house. Her father would get up every morning to start a fire to get the house warm and my mom would start breakfast for us before we went to school. We would look just like "The Walton" sitting at the table. There were so many kids around the table. All my siblings as kids were good, but they all had their own personalities. I think I was in the mix of all of them. My brother Frank was the most smiley one, and a gentleman. You tell Frank anything and he would turn around and smile. Herby was... well I don't want say strict but was more on the point about things. He was the only one that could hold two jobs and the others could only hold one. But he wasn't the oldest. He was the fifth oldest out of the brothers. He did all in the yard work, flouring, working in the bakery, and the cleaners. So, he was an all-around person. He was busy going. Everyone else had a good personality too. We weren't allowed to have everything else.

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Q: What kind of games did you play growing up?

A: There wasn't a whole lot to do. So, we made up games. We would play Caddy. You get a broom handle and cut off a piece. You take the little piece and stick it on a brick. Then you would tap on it and take the broom handle and hit it. That's how we learned how to count. If you hit it once, you get five points. If you hit it twice, you get 10 points. It depended on how far you hit it, and how that's how far you count. Sometimes you count 10. 20. 30. 40. 50, 60, and other times you count 15, 20, 25, 30. All in all you learned how to count while playing. That's how everyone learned how to count. We would play washers. We found an old bowling ball and drew some lines in the alley and pretended that we were bowling. The thing (bowling ball) was wrapped, crooked, someone took a hatchet and chopped a piece off of it.

Q: Did you play any board games? Such as checkers?

A: Oh yeah, Chinese checkers, and straight checkers. You know, I never learned how to play dominos. I was never interested in it, So I never learn how to play them. So, the only thing I really played was Chinese checkers, straight checkers, and shoot marbles. But I wasn't interested in dominos or nothing like that. Didn't play cards really besides rummy.

Q: When you played checkers, for example... like how you and I play. You always beat me all the time and the others. Were you that competitive like that when you were younger?

A: Yeah and I played everyone in the house. I would go next door and play this lady and she was a Chinese checker lady. She could play the devil out of those Chinese checkers. We would take our checker boards or Chinese checkerboard to someone else house and play. Miss Bertha lived next to us and we would go over there.

Q: Was the neighborhood small enough where everyone could play together?

A: Yeah... yeah... Oh God in one block, The Acuff's had 10 in their house. We lived in the block where McDonald is. The next house Was Miss Katie Lee and there was four, then our house had 11. The Stewart's had seven, the martins had eight and this is all still in one block. All of them had big families. Then Miss Augustus moved here later on and she had about 11 in her family. In a block you could have 30 kids. When we played baseball, everyone was out in the street. There's where we played ball. Then later on we went into the athletic park, because we were breaking too many windows in town. I broke the first church window. It went shh BANG! You could not find anyone in the street. Everyone went into every hole around the house and everything. We didn't have angry kids. Nothing like the kids are now. Most kids were too busy playing and didn't have anger that they do now. Everyone would just play together. You couldn't just pick an egg, because everyone was a different egg. We had a ball team from the littlest one to all the way up. We didn't try to separate everyone, but we could have. We all had to get our own lessons. Everyone in the household and we didn't have time. So, I would start crawling around on the floor and They'll make a number one and I'll ask them what's that. Then they'll make a letter E and I'll make an E. After a while I quit asking them and learned myself. That's how I learned. I remember on the first day of school the teacher put her pointer on my head. She had me go to the board and write something and I could write nothing, because I didn't know how to write. So, she said to make one's. So, I made the number 1 all over the boards. Be time recess was over I had the whole board

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full. Now I made up my mind that she'll never use that pointer on me again. She didn't either. Two days later I could say my one's all the way up to my 10's, Then go down and say my ABC's. Then 2-3 weeks after that I could say all of them. I won 26 cents. I bet everyone in the class saying the ABC's the fastest.

Q: So, whenever you won a challenge at school you would get awards?

A: Yeah. She was my first teacher before she retired. It was the year of 1939. She said whoever can say the ABC's the fastest would get a penny for each letter. I whooped all of them. She was like so... your winning. I went home with 26 cents! I'll never forget that. Soon after she retired, she had a stroke. She taught almost everyone in Mt.Vernon. She was the only primary teacher for 1st through 4th grade. Her sister-in-law Jenny bishop was 5th through 8th and Mr. Bishop was a high school teacher. Miss Bisbasher was the economic teacher and all around a teacher. She taught how to cooking and everything else.

Q: Did you have family chores? What were they? Which was your least favorite?

A: We would spend so much time with chores in the house. We would sit around the house trying to figure out how we were going to make the work easy.

Q: Did you receive an allowance? How much? Did you save your money or spend it?

A: I would take my father's shovel and haul ice for people for money. When my dad found out that I was doing that, he would get so mad. So, I would sneak and get it and put it back in place before he would notice it.

Q: What was school like for you as a child? What were your best and worst subjects?

A: They were very good students. I didn't really have any worst subjects. I did pretty well overall

Q: Where did you attend grade school? High school? College?

A: I went to elementary school at Booker T then went into Mt.Vernon High school later on. We did pretty well in school (her and the sibilings). I have Herby's report card from Lincoln High school. He made all A's and B's. There were all black teachers. That's where we had to go after the closed Booker T. I didn't go there, but Herby, Betty, and Billy went there. Billy dropped out and went to Korea and Herby graduated. Betty dropped out for some reason. There was a lot student for the low amount of teachers. They had colleges, but not for black people. They had the Evansville College and Lockyear Business College. My daughter Jill went to that college when she first started at Bristol Meyers. Those were really the only two colleges. The college that around now, is Ivy Tech, USI, and Indiana Business college. Ivy tech classes were in the High School such as the mechanic classes. Now they moved that back into Evansville.

Q: What school activities and sports did you participate in?

A: There were a lot of school competitions. We had to get our lesson in order to do a play. I always go into the programs. We weren't big enough to have clubs. We would all go out and play ball together.

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Q: Do you remember any fads from your youth? Popular hairstyles? Clothes?

A: We were all too poor for that. You talking about the depression honey. You might think you're dressed by having your bigger sister dress on.

Q: Who were your childhood heroes?

A: Well most of our heroes were cowboys. We were western. Our brothers were never home enough to be our heroes. The one that died, I don't know if we had called him a hero. He was a purple heart.

Q: What was your religion growing up? What church, if any, did you attend?

A: We only had two churches downtown and one on the other side of town. We had them down the road together. The Missionary church on Second and Kimball and the Free Will church on 3rd and maple. The other one was on the other side of town was the Methodist church and it's still there. You would believe how many people lived in town. When we had a standout in church, we didn't have enough room sometimes. Especially on the Holidays.

Q: Were you ever mentioned in a newspaper?

A: No, we didn't have any newspapers or anything. You had to be on the scene to see it. You know when someone would be like, 'Girl you should have been down here yesterday. The elephants came down 3rd street.' They never advertise anything.

Q: Who were your friends when you were growing up?

A: I had lots of friends. They were black and white. We all went out in the street and play together.

Q: What world events had the most impact on you while you were growing up? Did any of them personally affect your family?

A: Just the depression really.

Q: How were holidays (birthdays, Christmas, etc.) celebrated in your family? Did your family have special traditions?

A: On Thanksgiving we would have big dinners and try to cook everything in the neighborhood. Then we would have wild meat. People who were big hunters would bring you a goose in, a turkey, possum's, raccoons. A lot of people still today eats possums and racoons. They would also get rabbits, ducks. People would all come in and white people that were hunters and had farms would bring all kind of meat in. You wouldn't have to worry about any meat. We celebrated Christmas the same way and had these big stockings being held by a nail on the wall. Had an orange in it, apples, nuts, and candy. Sometimes bananas would be in there. We would wait for Santa and look for the biggest stocking we had. Birthdays we would make a cake. My mother would make the cakes. We would have so many cakes because be time you get done with one, we would have to make another one. We used to have cake every Sunday anyway. Maybe someone would get you a gift. People were so poor then. Everyday dinner was a treat to us, but we still had good times. There's nothing bad about it. Maybe there were times we didn't have enough to eat, but it wasn't noticeable.

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Q: How is the world today different from what it was like when you were a child?

A: When I was a child, the world was almost untouchable. Today you turn on a knob and flip on the switch and its right in front of you. That was the difference between now and then. To get news from anywhere, it used to take up to one to two weeks or a year before your communications catch up with you. But now you can instantly see it automatically happening. So, that is what make it different.

Q: As a child did you ever expect to be a black president ever? Are you surprised that there is one today? Did you know that there would be a chance for a black person to be a president?

A: No, not when I was a child. I'm surprised that there is one. Over the years, change has come about that you could expect it to be. The way of thought of wars changes people. The way they would think about things. It's not closed in or single minded.

Q: What would your parents/siblings think of President Obama?

A: My parents would probably will be hiding. I don't think they would comprehend it. Because, during the time they were coming up, you just didn't trust anything; trust was very thin among black folks. They didn't have too much trust within each other. That's almost true today. My siblings. They were so accustomed to being around white people and other races it wouldn't make a difference. So, we grew up within the same block. We just played with them. The only difference between us was our color, but that was all.

Q: Who was the oldest relative you remember as a child? What do you remember about them?

A: My oldest relative was my Aunt Minnie. She was 90 years old when she passed away. I was about four or five years old when she passed away. I remember her as a tall slender lady and very gentle. She liked children and was a really pleasant person to be around. Her age didn't make her old, and she was always upright as she got older. She was still a tall lady. She was sick for a long time, but old age caught up with her. She lived with us for some years, maybe two or three years. It was she and my Aunt Cardilia. Then people come and visit you. No matter how many relatives they had with them, they would stay with you. So, we enjoyed them when they were alive. Of course, Aunt Cardilia moved to Chicago with her grown children. My aunt Mimi was here till she passed away.

Q: What do you know about your family surname?

A: Not too much really. Because, my dad's families were scattered all over. Be time they were old enough to get married. When they went to war and came back, everyone would get up and leave town. So, there wasn't too much about them. He had brothers and sisters that we knew but were never around. See all the families left and some went to Kansas, New York and Chicago. That's because when they came in from the war, all of his children would leave to bigger, better places. My dad had five or six sisters and brothers. We never were around them, because they already left Mt.Vernon when we were coming up. So, I couldn't tell you a thing about them, but only their names. So, I wouldn't know too much about them. My mother came here as a young girl and most of her folks were gone and left Mt. Vernon be time we were growing up. Her brothers were from Kentucky and left for war and came back and went on to other town such as Indianapolis and Chicago. We didn't have a whole lot of togetherness, because they were never around together enough. We didn't know a whole about my

mom's brothers and sisters because her parents died as she was a young child. So, she didn't have a long knowledge of family history. So, she had four sisters and two brothers that she raised with the help of her grandmother. Her Father name was Jim Woods. Then we didn't have too much to get along with. We didn't have to worry about a lot of housing and plumbing. Everything that you have to have now we didn't have that. We all had a house with four walls and a roof above our heads and a little garden. That was our lively hood.

Q: Is there a naming tradition in your family, such as always giving the firstborn son the name of his paternal grandfather?

A: No, a lot of them though did come up with nicks names like for a boy. If his name was Junnie, it would be Junnie boy. Which mean junior. My dad was a junior, but when he named his son. He just named him junior. We didn't go 3rd or 4th or something like that. He just called him junior. So, when my dad went to service, he was a junior.

Q: What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? More distant ancestors?

A: None really. They all had pretty left town. When you asked, questions liked that, you would be asking kids that had grandparents like my Daughter Sheila and her age group. You couldn't go back any further for your relatives. We never really get to talk too much about out relatives. Even though we had a lot of them.

Q: Are there any stories about famous or infamous relatives in your family?

A: Ugh no.

Q: Have any recipes been passed down to you from family members? Did you have signature receipt of your own?

A: Recipes, we didn't mark them down. We just made them up and kept them in our heads. You had to invent a lot of recipes in a lot of ways to make food and a lot away to make your meals different by adding something. Like things from the garden that we would be picked up was wild. Like greens picking came around in the springtime and you could pick five different types of greens before the other greens came up in the garden. So, you could have had greens early. You can always have meat. I didn't have my own signature recipe because I don't bake like I used too. I would make banana bread and chocolate plates. Now you can buy them in a box. The connivance of today has just kind of knocked out all the recipes. It's not a must anymore. It's not something that you can have. You can but a whole dinner now and not have to cook it. Sometimes I think that takes away the closeness of the family had, because they had to stay together and cook together. So, it takes a long time to prepare meals and everyone would be talking while they were cooking and you would have 10-15 people in the kitchen cooking So, that's what made people closer back then than now. Today you can order out of the store and tell them you want a turkey dinner for Thanksgiving or ham for Christmas. We used to have so many relatives that would come and travel so far, that you would come and stay for two weeks. Because, transportation wasn't like you can come and stay more than one night. So, they would come and help out with cooking as well. They weren't lazy people either. They would just come right in and pitch in on help. Such as cleaning,

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ironing, and cooking just like part of the family. Which they all were. The years have made it difficult because people begin to become more individualize.

Q: Are there any physical characteristics that run in your family?

A: Schools didn't have any type of sports. We were too busy trying to make a living. We didn't have time for sports really. Any times that we would have little recreations that we put together to pass the time to another chore came up.

Q: What about the military type things? Like did Mom (Jill), Glenna, and Junnie wanted to be in the service or did they want to carry on the traditions like your brothers did? Did Grandpa Floyd go to the military for the same reason?

A: No, the girls decided that they wanted to go and see something different. Junnie was in there and Randy went, and Morse did till boot camp and was sent home with a pinched nerve in his back. Junnie went to air force and Randy went to the Army. Before that Matthew was in the army and Morse. Then before that, my brothers were in services. Really, they could go and make some money or at least when you got out and you didn't have to stay in Mt. Vernon. As I say there wasn't a window opportunity to go to the force, but a door. It opens an old new door for money, to jobs, different people, and not like you're in a single little town where everyone wasn't doing anything. You can blame anything on nothing, because there was nothing to do around then. There maybe be jobs, but there weren't exactly for black people. They could make a garden or clean up for a white person yard. Like Yard work was plenty of that. But plenty of the money was in the factories. Floyd went to the military force as well. When you have a whole a lot of people and young men in a town with nothing to do. The service was the place to go. My first one that went in was my Brother Ira. He was the 3rd oldest and went in before anyone else did. There were also two more friends that lived a block from us name Edward and Charles, another young man that lived categories from the house went. They all went to the Navy. So, when they came back on leave, the other's boys wanted to leave school and go to service. So, my other brother, the 2nd oldest Vernon joined when the rest of them went back on leave. They all joined in. Some went to the army; some went to the navy and one went to the air force. They were here in the CC camps and that's why they decided to leave to suaveolens a conservation course that gave young people money and help clean up the cities and towns. They all were based ay Wadesville Indiana. All white community and had a camp from all over. They had lots and damns for the water waves. School buildings they built roadways, and railroads. Uncle Frank and Uncle Walter helped built the roadways during the depression. Then they build roads going out to Wadesville, which were paved. They had build Kramer's Lake too.

Q: What was the full name of your spouse? Siblings? Parents?

A: Floyd Damon Stewart. He had seven siblings. His parent's names were George and Cleo Stewart. My husband had a really big family also. They also were born in Mount Vernon. Floyd died December 13, 1994.

Q: When and how did you meet your spouse? What did you do on dates?

A: Floyd was one of the kids I grew up with as a child he was just always around.

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Q: What was it like when you proposed (or were proposed to)? Where and when did it happen? How did you feel? Where and when did you get married?

A: We got married here in Mount Vernon by the priest.

Q: What memory stands out the most from your wedding day?

A: She said really wasn't that big a deal then really it was just another day.

Q: How would you describe your spouse? What do (did) you admire most about them? My husband and

A: I all grew up around each other. So, we were kind of just were friends that grew to love each other. I didn't.

Q: How did you find out you were going to be a parent for the first time?

A: We had our kids at home earlier in my life. You didn't have a pregnancy test or anything like that. You just figured it out after a couple months went by.

Q: Why did you choose your children's names?

A: I chose the names kind after family members that we had.

Q: What was your proudest moment as a parent?

A: A proudest moment was just having little ones. I appreciated them because they were no problems to me.

Q: What did your family enjoy doing together?

A: I had them play sports. I put them in stuff they enjoyed. Some of my kids worked.

Q: What was your profession and how did you choose it?

A: I wanted to be a teacher.

Q: Of all the things you learned from your parents, which do you feel was the most valuable?

A: Their guidance was the most valuable things. I lead my children in the same way. I was taught to stay out of trouble. Also have respect for other.

Q: What accomplishments were you the most proud of?

A: Successfully graduating from school through all the segregation and controversy. I just tried to say above and not get involved it.

Q: What is the one thing you most want people to remember about you?

A: Well, when I was here, I was here. Maybe I didn't do as much as according to now, but to me I left my mark.