

Ethel Alexander Murray (1917-1990)

Much of what we know today about Murray comes from oral history which can sometimes contradict existing historical documents. In situations where there is confusion, we have included the information from both sources, as well as explanatory text.

Ethel Alexander Murray was born on August 14, 1917 in Lincoln, Illinois.¹ Her maternal grandmother, Susan (McCurdy) Camper Lynn—born into slavery in Kentucky—had moved to Illinois after the death of her first husband.² Murray spent most of her childhood in Lincoln with her parents, Samuel and Birdie (Camper) Alexander, and her older sister, Marian.³ Murray's mother was a native of Lincoln, while Murray's father had migrated from Mississippi.⁴ During their daughter's early years, Samuel earned his living as a fireman⁵ at an ice plant and Birdie worked as an attendant at a physician's office.⁶ Marian and Ethel, who were only 18 months apart in age, maintained a close bond throughout their lives.⁷

Their parents' relationship, in contrast, collapsed when Ethel was around ten years old.⁸ By 1930 the couple maintained separate residences in Lincoln, though they both identified as married on the U.S. Federal Census.⁹ Samuel worked odd jobs while renting a place at 1526 Broadway Street.¹⁰ Birdie labored as a laundress and owned a modest home at 824 North Sherman Street.¹¹ By 1935, the couple was divorced, and Birdie had married George Cornelius.¹² Samuel followed suit five years later when he married Ora Fant. He passed away in 1955.¹³

Ethel Murray's 1985 oral history interview is filled with vivid stories of her life in Central Illinois. One such story she recalled was of socializing with carnival workers at her grandmother's property in Lincoln. Her grandmother owned a one-room shack at the end of her lot that she would rent to African American carnival workers. Included in the rent was breakfast and dinner. Murray recounted visiting the shack, listening to their music, and watching the women dance. However, her parents disapproved of her newfound interests. Nevertheless, one

¹ "Ethel Murray," *Pantagraph*, September 11, 1990, 21.

² Ethel Murray, interview by Dr. Mildred Pratt, Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Historical Society, November 4, 1985, 1; "Susan Camper," *Pantagraph*, May 8, 1940, 2.

³ "Ethel Murray"; "United States Census, 1920, Ethel Alexander" *FamilySearch*, accessed August 19, 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MJHM-SZD>.

⁴ "United States Federal Census, 1920, Ethel Alexander"

⁵ A fireman at an ice plant or factory would manage the fuel supply used to manufacture ice, which for many factories in the early 20th century was still coal.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ethel's parents produced two sets of twins who died at a young age before Marian and Ethel were born; Ethel Murray oral history, 1.

⁸ Samuel was probably mentally ill. Ethel claimed that the divorce occurred because he "had a nervous breakdown" and "wanted to kill everything that had 'the devil' in it" She noted that he was a patient at the psychiatric hospital in Peoria (Peoria State Hospital). Ethel also claimed that her father had a gambling problem; *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁹ "United States Federal Census, 1930, Birdie Alexander," *FamilySearch*, accessed August 19, 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XSB2-6DB>; "United States Census, 1930, Samuel Alexander," *FamilySearch*, accessed August 19, 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XSB2-59C>.

¹⁰ "United States Federal Census, 1930, Samuel Alexander"

¹¹ "United States Federal Census, 1930, Birdie Alexander"

¹² "Mrs. Birdie Cornelius," *Pantagraph*, February 27, 1969, 31.

¹³ "Samuel Alexander," *Pantagraph*, September 23, 1955, 5.

night when she and her parents attended the carnival, she slipped away and joined a dance competition. All the while, her mother glared at her from the crowd. Thankfully, she won the contest, along with a five dollar prize. Murray later recalled in her oral history interview that when she came back “my mother told me ... I was in for it. So I gave my mother the five dollars. She scolded me good, but she didn’t spank me. ... [Y]ou know them scoldings—sometimes you’d rather take a whipping because they didn’t know when to let up. ... And I thought that five dollars would shut her mouth.”¹⁴ It worked.

Murray attended an integrated school—Monroe School—while living in Lincoln. Her least favorite subject in school was her history class, though she could not express why until later in life: “[W]hen you read one thing, you know, it was bound to end up the same way. The white man always winning, you know, over the Indians and the Blacks and so on so forth. There was just nothing. So I just didn’t find it interesting.”¹⁵ There is some discrepancy about which level of education Murray received, but it is clear that she never attended high school.¹⁶

Murray was a self-assured and bold child, though sometimes unaware of the potential consequences of her actions. As a young girl, she discovered that the neighbor boy’s father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Because of that, she sat atop the wooden fence that separated the two properties and loudly taunted the boy. Murray’s father brought that behavior to an abrupt end by explaining the dangers of her actions. For the next few weeks, when the Klan passed by their home to meet in a nearby mineshaft, her father brought the children inside and guarded his home with a shotgun. Another time, she whipped a girl with a roofing shingle as payback for calling her a “n-----” because she thought the girl was cussing at her. Murray later admitted that she was ignorant of the ugly implications behind these experiences: “I really didn’t know anything about prejudice because Blacks lived all over Lincoln in white neighborhoods, and I didn’t know anything about it until I come to Bloomington where you were segregated. ... I didn’t know what prejudice was until we moved to Bloomington....” According to Murray, Bloomington’s prejudice was more pronounced.¹⁷

Murray moved to Bloomington in 1932 at the age of 15. At first, she lived with her older sister, Marian Alexander Ross, and her sister’s husband. Murray took care of household tasks while Ross recovered from appendectomy surgery¹⁸ and the birth of her daughter.¹⁹ Their mother moved to Bloomington by 1933 after her home in Lincoln burned down.²⁰ Soon, Murray and her mother rented a converted boxcar together on the far west side of town (1000 block of West Washington Street).²¹ By 1934, the two resided at 304 North Morris Avenue.²² That same year, at age 17, Murray gave birth to her only child—a son named Carroll Alexander.²³

In 1933 or 1934, her mother Birdie began work at the home of Paul and Kathryn Beich. Murray occasionally worked there with her mother if she was needed for parties. This was a

¹⁴ Ethel Murray oral history, 2-4.

¹⁵ Ethel Murray oral history, 4.

¹⁶ The 1940 U.S. Federal Census shows that Murray completed eighth grade. In her oral history interview, however, Murray states that she only completed fourth grade; *Ibid.*; “United States Federal Census, 1940, Ethel Murray,” *FamilySearch*, accessed August 19, 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KWTF-BKK>.

¹⁷ Ethel Murray oral history, 5-6.

¹⁸ Appendectomy surgery is performed to remove the appendix.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8; “Troy Lynn,” *Pantagraph*, January 16, 1933.

²¹ Ethel Murray oral history, 8-9.

²² *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* (1934), 55.

²³ “Carroll Alexander,” *Pantagraph*, October 4, 2013, 28.

fortuitous arrangement because the Beichs helped Murray find other employers. In fact, Murray provided “day work” for multiple families around town.²⁴

One such family was that of a local teacher. For six dollars a week, Murray labored every day with only Thursday afternoons off. One day she arrived for her regular Sunday shift to discover that the family had company. In her own words, “They never said anything about it, and I had to make the bread and all those kinds of things, you know. And so I was a little upset that I had to go there on Sunday morning and find out that I got about ten people to fix breakfast for...” Already upset, Murray fumed when the party made its way to the living room to listen to the Southernaires—an African American gospel vocal quartet—on the radio. Before leaving, her employer’s mother commented about it being time for the “Darkies” to sing. Murray commented during her oral history interview that “the ‘Darkie’ hit me wrong. And they went upstairs, and into the living room, and turned this radio on to listen to the Southernaires. And I’m standing out there in the kitchen swelling more than what, you know. ... I tried to clear the table off, and I was too upset. I was shaking. Dishes were rattling on my hands and what not. And I just threw the towel down, and I said, ‘The hell with it.’” Murray demanded her paycheck and walked from the family’s home in the White Place neighborhood to her home on West Washington Street.²⁵ Her employer called her later about what had happened. Murray’s response: “go get one of her ‘white Darkies’ to do it.” The call ended with the employer hanging up on her. Murray stated that her strong reactions to prejudice goes “back to because my mother and dad didn’t explain to me, you know. And these little things just—I just guess I didn’t know how to handle it.” Despite it all, this employer never provided Murray with a bad reference.²⁶

Early on, it appears that she was having difficulty finding steady work in Bloomington, so she moved to Springfield, Illinois for a couple of years around 1935 or 1936.²⁷ While there, Murray was interviewed to work in a white woman’s home and was in competition with another candidate—a white woman—for the job. The employer liked the white candidate and would have hired her, but felt that “a white woman shouldn’t be doing housework.” According to her, that was the role of black women. Murray was not pleased, later stating “that white woman was just good as me” She never contacted the employer again.²⁸

On April 23, 1936, Ethel married William James Murray at Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church (804 N. Center Street) in Bloomington. Ethel was 18; William was 20.²⁹ The family lived on the west side of Bloomington for the next few years until moving to Peoria. Before leaving town, William worked as a laborer.³⁰ In Peoria, Ethel was unemployed, while William drove a truck for a junk company, earning \$420.00 for 30 weeks of work.³¹ That puts the Murray household annual income at a little over \$7,000.00 in 2016 dollars.³² By 1943 William had passed away, and Ethel and Carroll were living in Bloomington, where Ethel once

²⁴ Ethel Murray oral history, 10-11.

²⁵ Murray was living with her mother at 304 N. Morris Avenue by 1934; *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* (1934), 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6; E-mail message to Lincoln Library, Springfield, IL, July 18, 2016.

²⁸ Ethel Murray oral history, 6-7.

²⁹ McLean County, Illinois. Marriage certificate no. 39460 (1936), Murray-Alexander.

³⁰ “Wm Murray,” *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* (1937), 266; “Wm Murray,” *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* (1938), 270.

³¹ “United States Census, 1940, Ethel Murray”

³² “CPI Inflation Calculator,” *United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed July 1, 2016, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=420&year1=1940&year2=2016>.

again worked as a maid. They lived at 416 S. East Street.³³ It was not until ten years later that Murray entered another relationship. Around 1953 she and Reginald Whittaker began “going together,” a relationship that would last over thirty years.³⁴

Starting around 1952, Murray worked as a maid for Mary Lou DeMange Kennedy and her husband Herbert at their home located at 303 Grant Road in Bloomington.³⁵ Although Herbert initially disliked Murray, Mary Lou always supported her. In fact, Murray was able to use Mary Lou’s credit and car whenever she needed. After cleaning up from a party, Murray indeed borrowed Mary Lou’s new convertible to get home. It was early in the morning and she did not know when the family would return. She left a note stating “don’t call the law, I got it. I’ll be back ... on Sunday.” Herb did not like that and thought she had just taken the car. But his attitude changed when she brought the car back just like she promised. Murray recalled: “That put faith in him to like me cause I done what I said I was going to do.” Later, the Kennedys purchased a car for Murray. When that vehicle turned out to be a lemon, they arranged for the dealer to give her another one.³⁶ She worked for them for about a year before the couple moved to Fort Lauderdale, Florida.³⁷

Afterwards, Hazle Buck Ewing—local activist and philanthropist—employed Murray as a maid from 1953 to 1954 at her Sunset Hill manor.³⁸ Ethel earned 60 dollars a week, had sleeping privileges at the home, and was given one dollar extra per day for meals.³⁹ Murray recalled that at that time, she felt like “she was making more money than the law allowed” because it was so much more money than she was used to earning. Murray travelled regularly with Mrs. Ewing to such places as New York and her ranch in Crivitz, Wisconsin, and they seemed to get along well. Mrs. Ewing would even share her vast library with Murray, and the two would often sit by the fireplace and read together. However, according to Murray, Mrs. Ewing preferred to hire couples so when her chauffeur Herman Edwards remarried in 1954, Murray was let go with a severance payment.⁴⁰ The chauffeur’s new wife was Ruby Edwards. It does not appear that there was any animosity between the women. Edwards and Murray belonged to many of the same clubs and organizations. Murray was again hired by Ewing in 1961, and both Murray and Edwards worked for Ewing until her death in 1969.⁴¹

After her initial tenure at the Ewing home, Murray again worked day jobs for various families around town. Starting around 1957, however, Murray worked exclusively for Henry L. Loomis, president of Industrial Casualty Insurance Company.⁴² She cleaned his home on East

³³ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* (1943-44), 229.

³⁴ Ethel Murray oral history, 16 & 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11; “Mrs. Carl Vrooman greets Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Kennedy,” *Pantagraph*, October 19, 1952, 17.

³⁶ Ethel Murray oral history, 12-13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13; “Table-Hopping at the Tilden-Hall Hotel Friday noon gleaned the following,” *Pantagraph*, May 24, 1953, 24.

³⁸ Ethel Murray oral history, 11-12; This home is now Ewing Cultural Center.

³⁹ *Ibid.*; Her weekly pay of \$60.00 in 1953 equals \$541.66 in 2016; “CPI Inflation Calculator,” accessed July 19, 2016, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=60&year1=1953&year2=2016>.

⁴⁰ Ethel Murray oral history, 12, 14-15, 33.

⁴¹ “Ewing Museum Gets Gift,” *Pantagraph*, August 30, 1970; Bill Kemp, “More to Hazle Buck Ewing’s legacy than Ewing Manor,” *Pantagraph*, August 24, 2014, accessed July 5, http://www.pantagraph.com/news/local/more-to-hazle-buck-ewing-s-legacy-than-ewing-manor/article_cbf1b4a7-79cb-5ded-8d4d-2e491a2dad62.html; Aingeal Stone, “Ruby Edwards,” McLean County Museum of History, accessed August 19, 2016, <http://mchistory.org/research/resources/ruby-edwards.php>, 2-4.

⁴² Ethel Murray oral history, 15.

Washington Street during the day and his downtown Bloomington business office in the evenings.⁴³ In the past, she had repeatedly discovered messes that the insurance agents had made in the office following their meetings. This time, however, Murray had had enough and left the office without cleaning. The next morning, she let herself into the Loomis home and began calling for “H.L.,” a name reserved only for his friends and family. She recalled the experience in her oral history interview:

I told him how I felt, and what I felt I was worth. And I talked about how their homes might look.... All he could see is that dollar coming in, but he didn't see the dollars in his furnishings. And we sat and we talked, and he cussed and I cussed. I smoked. He smoked. We had coffee. We drank that whole pot of coffee. And so then I left, and he didn't say he would or he wouldn't. But I left. I went back down to the office, finished cleaning. I felt good about myself because I told him exactly how I felt, and so come the next Saturday they were meeting [and] everything was straight.

Loomis had received her message. His agents cleaned up after themselves after all future meetings.⁴⁴

Although raised Methodist, Murray began practicing the Baha'i faith in 1953 or 1954. After the death of Reginald Whittaker's brother, who was Baha'i, Whittaker and Murray visited the Baha'i temple in Wilmette, Illinois, and thought it was “breathtaking and overwhelming.” Afterwards, they began attending meetings in Peoria and later Champaign.⁴⁵ A decade later, Murray also hosted weekly Baha'i meetings at her home at 404 E. Market Street. The first of the series took place on October 18, 1964 and sought to highlight the beliefs of Baha'i World Faith, primarily the “need for the coming together of all peoples, races, classes, nations and religions in a spirit of understanding and unity under the guidance of one deity.”⁴⁶ In 1975, she was honored at a Baha'i conference in Springfield and “cited as the first member of the faith to live in this area.”⁴⁷ She was a practicing Baha'i until at least the mid-1980s, when her oral history interview was conducted.⁴⁸ At the time of her death in 1990, she attended the Loving Missionary Baptist Church.⁴⁹

Murray was very active in the African American community and involved in a number of civic organizations. She served as president of the Civic Women's Club from 1964 through 1966 and again starting in 1986.⁵⁰ The Civic Women's Club (formerly known as the Colored Woman's Club) was organized in 1901 and joined the Illinois Association of Club Women and Girls (IACWG) that same year. The purpose of the Civic Women's Club was to bring “negro Women of the community together to stimulate a greater interest in Civic and Social Contact.”⁵¹ Murray served on the IACWG board of directors for four years and was a lifetime member at the

⁴³ Ibid.; “Loomis, Harry L.,” *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* (1957), 431; “Industrial Casualty Insurance Co.,” *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* (1957), 370.

⁴⁴ Ethel Murray oral history, 16.

⁴⁵ Ethel Murray oral history interview, 28-29.

⁴⁶ “Baha'i Group To Begin Series,” *Pantagraph*, October 17, 1964, 3.

⁴⁷ “Baha'i honors Bloomingtonian,” *Pantagraph*, April 5, 1975, 7.

⁴⁸ Ethel Murray oral history, 28.

⁴⁹ “Ethel Murray”

⁵⁰ “State Club Women Here Saturday for Conference,” *Pantagraph*, October 22, 1964, 11; “State Clubwomen Set 5-Day Convention,” *Pantagraph*, June 10, 1965, 18; “To Present Scholarship,” *Pantagraph*, March 19, 1966, 9; “Constitution and By-Laws, Civic Women's Club,” McLean County Historical Society, February 10, 1986.

⁵¹ Stone, “Ruby Edwards,” 4.

District level.⁵² In 1966, Murray received recognition for her service to IACWG, as well as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC), its parent organization.⁵³ She traveled to Washington, D.C., to receive the NACWC recognition and had the good fortune to visit the not-yet-opened Frederick Douglass Memorial, which the NACWC was helping to restore.⁵⁴ In 1968, she served on the courtesy committee for and attended the NACWC biennial convention in Chicago.⁵⁵ Two years later she assisted with the reception at the IACWG annual meeting at Bloomington's Illinois House.⁵⁶ In 1985, the same group, now named the Illinois Association of Club Women Girls and Boys, honored Murray for "25 years of distinguished service."⁵⁷ Around this time, Murray also joined the Three C Club, a pleasure club that brought local women together to discuss issues that regularly affected African Americans. Shortly after joining the Three C Club, she was elected its president.⁵⁸

Murray's career trajectory took a turn in the early 1970s. Between 1970 and 1978, she served as a Nutrition Program Assistant through the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana.⁵⁹ In this new role, she visited people's homes to help them organize balanced diets and menus. During these visits, she often discovered other issues that impacted her clients, such as discrimination and employment insecurity.⁶⁰ The quality of her work earned her a "homemaker of the year" award from the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in 1977.⁶¹ Two years later, she worked as a Home Coordinator for DCFS and then as a Home Interventionist, starting in 1989.⁶² She was last employed by The Children's Foundation, a local social service organization focused on supporting children and families.⁶³

Ethel Murray passed away at the age of 73 on September 8, 1990 at Methodist Medical Center in Peoria. Murray left behind her son, seven grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. Her funeral was held at Loving Missionary Baptist Church and officiated by Reverend James Hines. She was laid to rest in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.⁶⁴

By: Anthony Bowman, 2016

⁵² Ethel Murray oral history, 24.

⁵³ "Citation of Service Award," McLean County Historical Society, June 19, 1966; National Association of Colored Women's Clubs certificate, McLean County Historical Society, November 1, 1966.

⁵⁴ Ethel Murray oral history, 24-26; Today, the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site is part of the National Park Service. See <https://www.nps.gov/frdo/index.htm>.

⁵⁵ "Mrs. Edwards in Charge of National Convention," *Pantagraph*, August 1, 1968, 24.

⁵⁶ "Illinois Club Women, Girls Convening Next Weekend," *Pantagraph*, June 7, 1970, 30.

⁵⁷ "25 Years of Distinguished Service," McLean County Historical Society, June 20, 1985.

⁵⁸ Ethel Murray oral history, 30.

⁵⁹ "Ewing Museum Gets Gift"; *Bloomington-Normal City Directories*, 1972-1978.

⁶⁰ Ethel Murray oral history, 31-32.

⁶¹ "Volunteers," *Pantagraph*, May 9, 1977, 10.

⁶² *Bloomington-Normal City Directories*, 1979-1990.

⁶³ "Ethel Murray"; Martha Sullivan, "Scott Center emphasizes role with new name," *Pantagraph*, April 19, 1988, 5; Paul Swiech, "Focus on children," *Pantagraph*, October 12, 2008, 1.

⁶⁴ "Ethel Murray"