

Edythe Pridgen
Former Dunleith Resident
Route 9 Oral History Project

Interviewed by Michael Emmons, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware

Interview Date: June 9, 2022

Abstract

Edythe Pridgen is a former Wilmington City Councilor whose family moved from Millside to Dunleith in 1952, when she was four years old. Pridgen lived in Dunleith until 1972 and currently resides in Bear, Delaware, with her granddaughter. In this interview, Pridgen recalls growing up in Dunleith, describes the close-knit community there, discusses the racial dynamics in the area in the 1960s and '70s, and remarks on ways in which the community and characteristics of the architecture have changed through the years.

Transplants from North Carolina, Edythe's parents had lived in Millside since 1944. She describes Millside's cramped accommodations and layout of space and also the strong sense of community residents of Millside shared. Although Dunleith was open to Black military veterans when built and her father had been unable to serve, her Army veteran uncle signed the paperwork for the house for her family. She describes how excited she was about her family's new home in Dunleith, how large the house seemed, and how impressed she was by the bathtub. What impressed her most, she remembers, is how many kids there were to play with in the neighborhood. Pridgen says her parents and neighbors were proud of owning their Dunleith homes and remembers her father and her neighbors taking meticulous care of their lawns.

She describes the Dunleith community as close-knit and very safe, recalling playing with neighborhood children in the streets and fields as a child and picking fruit in a part of the neighborhood before it was developed. Pridgen describes how the schools had many activities for kids to participate in, and that the two local churches—Community Presbyterian and Coleman United Methodist—held regular dances and other events and activities. The adults, she says, were very involved with the children in Dunleith, and many teachers from the local Dunleith School and Millside School lived in the neighborhood. She remembers that the adults in her neighborhood were employed in a wide range of jobs because there were few other options for homeownership for African Americans in the area. In addition to teachers, people were employed as dentists, business executives, plumbers, carpenters, hairdressers, laundresses, and in the auto industry at the nearby Chrysler and General Motors plants, among others. There were also many small business owners. Many families had connections to the South, Pridgen recalls, while some had relocated from Detroit, and many had lived in Southbridge, Millside, or elsewhere in Wilmington before purchasing in Dunleith.

Pridgen notes that her family had very few complaints about their home in Dunleith, although she remembers that the subdivision's placement on marshland caused dampness, mold, and foundation

problems in many of the houses. She recalled that only four houses in Dunleith were built with basements and that these were all on Bunche Boulevard. In her own home, she recalls seeing water running through the heating ducts below the floor vents. She remembers some families enlarging kitchens, adding an extra bedroom or second story, or adding a porch. Alterations to the subdivision included the extension of Morehouse Road to connect it to Route 9.

She relates several experiences with racial animosity in some of the white neighborhoods along Route 9, recalling receiving taunts from children while walking through Holloway Terrace to the small store that was located there during her childhood and her brother and his friends receiving harassment from white teenagers from Garfield Park for swimming in a pond between the two neighborhoods. She attended the segregated Millside School and Dunleith School for elementary through ninth grade and relates how the transition to the integrated De La Warr High School was marked by a great deal of racism from the school's staff. The students, she says, generally got along fine. Pridgen also relates her memories of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of racial unrest in Wilmington in the late 1960s, and of protests at the Delaware State House during her years as a college student at Delaware State University. She recalls being chased out of Minquadale in the 1980s while canvassing for a local candidate.

Pridgen notes that the neighborhood has seen changes through the years, beginning most notably in the 1990s, when she began to see more drugs in the neighborhood. While she believes it remains predominantly African American, she says that within the past decade or so she has seen more Latino and Asian residents move into the neighborhood. She says many younger people and couples have moved in recently and spent time beautifying the neighborhood. The biggest change she remarks on is the greatly increased property values in the neighborhood, where houses that sold for \$7,000 initially now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Pridgen concludes the interview restating what a positive experience she had growing up in Dunleith.