NEW JERSEY MULTI-ETHNIC
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH
Hazel Fields
March 25, 1980
Interviewer: Robbie Coker
Transcriber: Evelyn Leslie
Cassette #1, Side #1

Fields: ...get talking, you know, I don't get things in chronological order.

Coker: Well it's okay if it's not all in chronological order but I would like to know about your father and his death; of whatever happened about that time.

Fields: He had pneumonia. That seemed to be the thing that everybody had in that day.

Coker: Do you remember what year that was?

Fields: No.

Coker: And you say that...

Fields: I think I have it somewhere in the Bible. Everybody recorded things in the Bible at that time.

Coker: So you say this is why you left New York City?

Fields: That was why we left New York City. So it must have been around 1906, 1907, or something of that sort because we went to Troy to stay because that was my mother's nearest relative, her sister, aunt Rebecca...Rebecca? No, Rachel.
Aunt Rachel was in Troy and my mother went up to live near her. We lived in a street called Harrison Place. I don't know whether it's still there or not. And it was row houses, you know, but I guess it was tenements because they were adjoining. And we lived in one house and she lived in the other. But my mother didn't like it at all and came...

Coker: so when she had the opportunity to buy a place in Plainfield, she came to Plainfield...

Fields: I often...

Coker: And she was a widow at the time?

Fields: Oh yes. My father died in New York before we left New York. That's why she left because she wanted to be near somebody of her own, and she went to Troy. He had pneumonia and he died. She was pregnant at the time with my youngest brother, the eight child. And I think it was such a shock and everything, she lost the baby.

Coker: Hazel, do you remember going to school in Troy?

Fields: Oh yes. I went to school in Troy for the year—for one year. I think that's the only time I went to a kindergarten. I remember it because when we had to pack up to come to Plainfield, I had been making some sort of sewing business. I don't know what it was. I don't know whether it was an apron or not but it was in a bag and the school was closed. And I wanted that bag very desperately. I remember that I wept. I went to the school and wept. And the principal went down to the locker where all these bags are kept and got my bag with my sewing in it and gave it to me. I walked to my home with it very proudly—my mother was with me—because that was my own hand-work. That was the first time I had done any hand-work. I must have been young because it was in kindergarten or first grade. Then when I came to Plainfield, I went into first grade and that was
in the old Irvin School, which has since been torn down. That was on the corner of Monroe Avenue and Fourth Street. I used to walk from where we lived at 628 West Fourth Street, right up the street, block after block to school—to the old Irvin School. Since then it's been torn down and it—that part, is now a playground. After I left Irvin School, I think I went to the Washington School for a year. And then I was transferred to Whittier School, which is now the board of Education head quarters on Madison Avenue and Fifth Street. I think I went to the fifth grade. Then I went back to New York to live with my sisters who were living in New York by themselves. And I went to seventh and eight grade at PS 119 in New York City. I don't know whether PS 119 is still in existence or not but I remember going there and having a very, very nice time. I enjoyed it very much; everybody was rather nice to me. In both schools, here in Plainfield and in New York, blacks were the minority. Even Harlem was not all black at that particular time and of course, the population of Plainfield was at least 90% white at the time. I remember in the high-school class that I eventually came back to in Plainfield, that there were sixteen blacks in the whole class. Out of a hundred and twenty, sixteen, something of that sort. They were very few if you could say so. I did not know segregation as such in school at all.

Coker: Were you treated any differently by either teachers or classmates than white children were?

Fields: No. In those days the teachers were very dedicated people. They were in there to teach. I remember there was one particular teacher here in the fifth grade in Plainfield. Her name was Martha Kline and she hasn't been dead so very long. And she used to wear shirtwaists and long skirts that almost touched the ground and a belt. And on the front of this shirtwaist was always a watch. I don't know whether they had clocks in the schools or not, but I remember seeing Miss
Martha Kline looking at that watch. She was a stern teacher but kindly, and she had a dedication to the students. It didn't make any difference. I remember hearing another person years later, tell me that Martha Kline—a black person who became a very prominent school teacher in New York City—telling me that Martha Kline had saved her from being a little bum. Because Martha Kline realized that this girl had brains and she was frittering her time away. and Miss Kline said, "I'm going to make you do right or else" and she did. And she became a very good teacher. But any-how, Miss Martha Kline was one of my teachers here and she was good to me too. She sort of made me toe the line.

Coker: Were there any black teachers at all?

Fields: No black teachers in Plainfield...

Coker: In...

Fields: Not in any schools in Plainfield. I didn't stay in the New York schools long enough, except for the seventh and eight grade, and there were none there.

Coker: Have you always gone to public school?

Fields: Yes, except when I went to Partt Institute which was a trade school. And I did go to Columbia later.

Coker: Tell me about your graduation from high school. Was that Plainfield High School as we know it today?

Fields: No, it was in the old building which is a middle school now. They tore down . While I was in grammar school they built the new high school. I graduated from the new high school in 1919, so the school was not too old. I think they built it in 1915 or something of that sort. And there was no segregation or anything. We marched in line according to size or height, rather. The tall ones marched in the back and the short ones marched in the front. It didn't make any difference what color you—well there were so few blacks they couldn't have.
Coker: How many were in that class?

Fields: A hundred and eighteen or twenty, something of that sort I would have to look that up. I don't know.

Coker: And where did you rank in that class?

Fields: About sixteen.

Coker: Do you remember commencement speakers, and that sort of thing, about your graduation? Was there anything outstanding about it?

Fields: The Vice Principal had charge of it. The Principal was a man named Lindsay Best. I think he was a New Engander, I'm not quite sure. And then there was a Canadian—Henry Hobart, who was born in Canada but I think he lived in the States most of his life. He was the Vice Principal and he was a very fine person. I remember him particularly because he sort of took a paternalistic interest in me and he was kind to me.

Coker: Going back a little bit, I'm wondering whether religion played any particular part in your life during those first nineteen years of your life?

Fields: Oh yes. My mother, as I said, had been a Methodist in the south and she was quite devoted. But she didn't care for the Methodist Church in Plainfield for some reason or other. I never got it out of her why she didn't like it. I don't know. I still to this day can't figure it out. So she joined the Presbyterian church here. Maybe she was a snob, I don't know (laughs) because...

Coker: Were these integrated churches or were they white?

Fields: No, they were black churches; both of them were. I don't know why she didn't. But she joined the Presbyterian church and stayed there for years until her grandsons were grown—almost grown. I don't know what happened between her and the people there but she left. And her grandsons became acolytes in the Episcopal church. And then she joined; and then I joined.
Coker: And how old were you when you joined the Episcopal church?

Fields: I don't know. I think I must have been about thirty.

Coker: Oh you were definitely an adult when you became an Episcopalian then.

Fields: Oh yes, yes.

Coker: So in your growing up...

Fields: In my youth I was a Presbyterian.

Coker: In your growing up days then, you were in the habit of going to Sunday school on Sundays?

Fields: Oh mercy° My mother dressed me early in the morning on Sundays; I can see the shoes I wore. For some reason those shoes stuck in my mind. They came up over my ankles and they were black. They had a black patent leather band around the toe and attached to this patent leather band was a black tassel, which bobbed around as I walked. And she made my clothes because in those days very few people bought clothes. Poor people had no money to go to the store and buy clothes. Those were the days when a loaf of bread was a nickle. And she made dresses that had berthas. Last year when I talked about berthas most people in the class did not know what I was talking about. But it was a ruffle that went around the bosom of the dress. If the dress was plaid, then it was a biasd piece of material that was gathered and put around the bosom of the dress. If the dress was white, which they usually were for Sunday go-to-meeting dresses, it had white what we would call embroidery, I think, around...

Coker: Eyelet?

Fields: Eyelet—that was it. Eyelet embroidery around. And that went around the bosom of the dress. And the dress usually had long sleves.

Coker: Did the berthas come up to the neck...

Fields: No.
Coker: ...or just over the breast?

Fields: It came this way around the shoulde and the dress had a collar made of the same material as the bertha.

Coker: In other words, the bertha was a sort of dropped collar.

Fields: Decoration—sort of a decoration. My mother would take me by the hand after she dressed me in this Sunday go-to-meeting dress and take me to church—to Sunday school at 9:30. And I would stay at church because Sunday school was over at 10:30 and church began at 11. So she would come to church at 11, and I would stay there and wait for her. And then church was over about 1 or 1:30. And we would go home and eat and come back in the afternoon to BYPU. They didn't call it BYPU in the Presbyterian church; they called it Christian Endeavor. And then after Christian Endeavor, my mother would come to church again and we would go to 8 o'clock service. In those days you had two full services and these small services. So we would go to 8 o'clock service—we'd stay there and go to 8 o'clock service. I was verging on teenage then, and I was very much interested in the boys in the back row (laughter). The boys who were teenagers would come to church by themselves and sit in the back rows of the church. Sometimes they were kind of unruly and I can remember the minister speaking about them. And of course, we girls sat in the front and very solemnly but, you know, our eyes were looking towards the back.

Coker: That's when you wished you had eyes in the back of your head.

Fields: Oh yes. We would turned the heads slyly, you know, but mother was sitting beside you and she controlled that.

Coker: Did you sing in the choir or do anything of that sort?

Fields: Heavens, no. They had a dramatic club and I was in that.

Coker: And in Christian Endeavor, the children took part in leadership there. Did they?
Fields: Oh yes, oh yes. And...

Coker: And were you in any special...

Fields: I was the head of the committee or so but I don't remember exactly what it was. But I was terribly interested in dramatics. They had a minister at the church named Hines—at the Bethel Presbyterian—and he had a wife who was interested in drama. She organized a drama club and of course, I was in that. I've always been interested in drama and am to this day, even though I don't act now as I used to. I have a silver cup there on the shelf that I won for drama. I belonged to another drama club and in Plainfield they had a drama league. It was composed of private clubs, and the high school club, and drama club, and one or two from the churches. The North Plainfield High school belonged to that league. And that was right after I came out of high school I believe, and I was saving money to go to Pratt. Then after I came back home, I joined another drama club. So I've always been interested in the theater.

Coker: Did you ever get any good parts in any kind of the dramatic production?

Fields: No, no. I worked in New York after I came back from working in the south—after I went to Pratt. That was the time of the WPA, I believe. There was a drama club at the Harlem Library and I belonged to that, but it was amateur.

Coker: Backing up a little bit. Your mother was a widow when you came to Plainfield and lived on West Fourth Street. Prior to that time she had been a house wife—I mean home taking care of you children. Did she get...

Fields: How did she support us?

Coker: How did she support you?

Fields: Well my mother was an excellent cook. When she came to Plainfield, Plainfield being the kind of place it was, it was very easy for her to get a job. So she got a job in Netherwood. Now, people not living in Plainfield at that time don't realize
that Netherwood was the place to live if you were wealthy.

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Fields: ...people who had offices in New York and worked on Wall streets had their homes in Netherwood. Most of them had such large homes, they had a retinue of servants. My mother was the cook. They had a laundress; they had a coachman who later became the chauffeur. They had a waitress and they had an upstairs maid. For a time I lived with my mother at this house, not always because my younger sister was married and her husband had died. I think—she was living in the house on West Fourth Street. So part of the time I stayed with her. But I used to stay with my mother over at this place. Ordinarily my mother stayed home and went up there every day. She had one day home and I remember that that was her great baking day. And as I said, I was quite large before I'd eaten any store bread because my mother baked loaves and and we used that. She baked twice a week.

Coker: She baked yeast bread.

Fields: Yeast bread, that's right (laughs).

Coker: Which we call light bread

Fields: Light bread. You are southern (laughs). Yes, she baked light bread. So I was quite large before I...

Coker: Backing up again. You mentioned just now something about this employer having a coachman and you also mentioned your father had been a coachman. For the benefit of the younger people, would you tell us just what a coachman was?

Fields: Oh yes. These families who were wealthy or who needed transportation kept horses. Quite often they had two different carriages. One was what they called a run-about; it had one seat. Then they had a carriage where you had to step up
a step and open a door and go in. The coachman was a man who took care of the horses, took care of the barn. And if they were a very wealthy family and had more than two horses, they had a footman. He was the one who did the dirty work in the barn. The coachman was a upper echelon servant. He wore a uniform and a cap and he helped the people in and out of the carriage. He took them wherever they wanted to go. When they would go to visit a store or something or other, he would drive them there. And then he would sit in the carriage and take care of the horses until they came out of whatever, the house or the store or the business that they went. That was a coachman.

Coker: In other words, he was the forerunner of today's limousine chauffeur?

Fields: Right. And I must tell you something about...when my mother had this job up in Netherwood. I was going to school here in Plainfield. But I was going to school—we didn't have districts, you went to school where you pleased almost. And I was going to school, I think, on Madison Avenue—the school that is now the Whittier School. This family had a little boy and he went to the private school here in Plainfield, which was Wardlow even then. And the coachman had to take him to school. So the woman who was the head of the household said that, "well you have to pass Whittier School," because Whittier was on Madison Avenue and Wardlow School was over...way on the west side—Plainfield Avenue which was very much on the west side. And she said, "when you are taking him," I don't even remember his name, "you drop Hazel at her school." Well that was unprecedented and the coachman, who was black, resented it. He told her that he did not want to take me. And she told him that is the order and you take her or find another job. That was the first time that I had come across anybody who was adamant about being unprejudiced.

Coker: And he took you?
Fields: So he took me.

Coker: He didn't want to lose his job?

Fields: He didn't want to lose his job.

Coker: You mentioned that your mother married again. This was...

Fields: Oh, this was after I was in high school. She married in February and I finished high school in June. In the meantime my mother had sold the house that we had come to Plainfield to live in, because she had heard through one of the carpenters who was building the other houses, that this Metropolitan Company owned or was building, that the company was becoming bankrupt. And I often say had she had education and training, she would have been a marvelous business woman. She was by herself buying this house and she decided that if they were going bankrupt, she wasn't going to be caught in the middle. So she promptly sold this house—the house where we were living on West Fouth Street and banked the money. And we went into an apartment. I think it must be her African blood because she had to own land. And she bought another house way, way, way down at the west end; a little tiny house. It had five rooms. And she was living there when she met this man who she eventually married. I was in high school. I used to walk from Clinton Avenue and Plainfield—anybody lives in Plainfield knows that's way down the west end—to the high school, which is in the center of town—Ninth Street and Park Avenue. I walked every morning. I had had the flu; it was the period when everybody was dying with the flu.

Coker: Nineteen eighteen, maybe?

Fields: Yes. The doctor had decided that I must not get in a bus with a lot of people. So I had to walk form school home, and from home to school. In the meantime, in high school I had made a friend of a girl who lived in Bound Brook. Now Bound Brook pupils would have to come to Plainfield to go to high school. So she would
take the bus down to Clinton Avenue and get off the bus and join me, and we
would walk to Plainfield High School together. Her name was Ruth White. She
was the sister of a girl who eventually became Margaret Bourke White, who
became a very famous... well she was an early Barbara Walters. The First World
War came and she wrote after the war, a book, about the German survivors of
the war. But anyhow, Ruth would walk with me to school every day. She would
get off the bus—we had bus tickets—and walk with me.

Coker: Tell me about your mother and your step-father, how they met and how they
were married.

Fields: I don't remember how they were met but I think they met at Bethel at the
church. And they...

Coker: That's out on the mountain? Bethel is a...

Fields: No, Bethel Church. The Presbyterian church here in Plainfield...

Coker: Oh.

Fields: That's where my mother went. I think that's where they met. They were
married by the Presbyterian minister in my house on West Third Street, near ?
Avenue; the one that she bought after she sold the house that was built for her.
And she came down here to live. In the meantime, my two sisters were in New
York living. One was married to a man who was part ? Indian. The other was
married to a West Indian. And we—my mother and I came down here to live with
her new husband. His name was Isaac Alexander.

Coker: That was in this house where we are talking today?

Fields: In this house house where we are talking today.

Coker: And that was in 1919; sixty years ago.

Fields: Nineteen nineteen. And I have lived here off and on ever since. I lived in no
other place since then in Plainfield. I worked in the south and I lived in New
York and worked in New York for a little bit. But aside from that, I 've lived in this house ever since. That's a long time.

Coker: It belonged to you ever since?

Fields: Yes, yes.

Coker: Tell me a little bit now about—you mentioned going to Pratt Institute. Was this a dream you had through high school? How did you happen to go to Pratt?

Fields: Oh yes. I'd always wanted to go to Pratt because Pratt was established by a man named Pratt, who had struggled to get an education. He became wealthy and he established this school—Pratt Institute. It was to be used for people who had to struggle to get an education, who didn't have any money and that sort of thing. There were no racial barriers. He just felt sorry for poor folks and he wanted to start this school for poor folks regardless of who they were. Numbers of black girls went to Pratt Institute. He had sewing departments and cooking. And finally (laughs)...it developed into a...school where they trained dieticians and trained teachers of all kinds. It has become an accredited college and they are training numbers of engineers and office and business people. And they are still interested in dietetics and that's all. And it's still in Brooklyn. It's growing—grown, grown. It's a huge thing now.

Coker: And what course was it you took there?

Fields: Dietetics.

Coker: Dietetics. How long did it take you to finish at Pratt, Hazel?

Fields: Two years.

Coker: And did you work at all while you were going to school or you pulled...

Fields: I worked a little bit. On week ends I prepared dinner for a family in Plainfield. It was two sisters and a mother. They were elderly people and I did that. Then at Pratt they gave me a job to help out with my tuition too. It was a silly job in
the dietetic classes, the home economic classes, the management classes. They used numbers and numbers of dish towels and overall aprons and it was my job to wash them. They had electric washers and things of that sort. It was my job to wash them and dry them and fold them up. It took about two hours every other day but it was part of my credit. I needed the money, my mother being a widow, you know. So I did work at Pratt and otherwise.

Coker: Another thing about the training that you got there. Was it strictly technical and academic training or was there also something of training in the social graces?

Fields: No, not in that school. I don't think that there's much of that even now because, as I say, it was originally for people who were poor, who needed to train to take a job. So we had strictly professional work. We didn't have the three Rs'. Later when I was older and had been working sometime, I did take work at Columbia. At least I took two years. I never graduated, but I took two years there. Then my mother became ill and I had to come home and take care of her.

Coker: How old were you when you went to Clumbia? Do you recall?

Fields: When I went to Columbia? I think I must have been about...well I tell you I came home on my vacations from this job that Pratt got me in North Carolina and I would spend the summers going to school at Columbia. When I left there in 1929, I went to Columbia. I commuted from Plainfield to New York.

Coker: That was in 1929?

Fields: Yes.

Coker: You want to tell us anything about how Pratt came to get you the job and tell me something about the job.

Fields: Well Pratt made it a point of being connected with a lot of the southern schools, (laughs) and other schools. This school in North Carolina—Livingstone—needed a
dietician. No, no, I'm wrong there. I went to A and T College first and that's where I was the dietician. I was there a year and then I transferred to Livingstone, which was also in North Carolina, but in another town. One was in Greensboro and I can't think of the name that Livingstone was. That's when I taught as well as was dietician at Livingstone. I was there for 6. Then I came home because I thought I was going to concentrate on getting a degree at Columbia. And that's when I went to Columbia for two years. Then my mother became very ill and couldn't get anybody to take care of her. Because at those time if a person was trained as a nurse, they usually wanted to go into a hospital cause better pay and better hours, and all the rest of it. And so I came home to take care of her then and...

Coker: Is that the course you were taking to be a nurse?

Fields: Beg pardon

Coker: This course you were taking at Columbia...

Fields: No, no, no. I was going on with the dietetics.

Coker: Going back to your going to North Carolina. Here you were a northern black woman coming from New York City and Plainfield going to the south, tell us about your trip at North Carolina and what happened.

Fields: I had never been below the Mason-Dixon line, which begins in Washington as you know. And here I was a Yankee-born, Yankee-trained gal. I heard about what happened in the south but I had never been south. So you take the train in Newark and you rode on the train, an ordinary coach, to Washington. When you reached Washington you change trains for the southern line I think it was called. Being black, I had to ride in what they called the Jim Crow car. It was the first coach after the engine and all the soot—cause they were using coal then—all the soot and the cinders from the engine blew into this. Even though the windows
and doors might be closed, the soot and the cinders got into it. And that started the dirt. Then the people who rode the car—as I say, if you make an animal of a person they become it. The people who rode the car were not clean. They came in any sort of clothes. After you passed through Washington and got into Maryland then it was a slow train. It stopped—made lot of stops and the people would get on in their work clothes. They would have picnic baskets. In those days black people could not go into the parlor car; they could not go into the dining car. And so if they were going a long distance, they had to carry their lunches—their food with them. So they carried bread, biscuits, hot fried chicken. They would throw the bones on the floor. And if there were papers, they would throw those down. In fact, the Jim Crow train was very unpleasant and very dirty. I had never been on anything of that sort before so it was quite a shock. And to compound that shock, when I finally reached Greensboro and got off the train with my suit-case—my trunk had gone ahead—there was nobody there from the school to meet me. I went over to the taxi stand and got a taxi. Well, I did not know then that being black, I should not have been in a white-driven taxi. And I think I startled the taxi man so badly that he did not tell me that I was wrong. He took me to the school. Maybe it was because I was going to the school that he felt he could take a chance on taking me in his cab. And so I did. I got in the cab with my suit-case and went to the school. When I reached the school and went to the president's office, he asked me how I reached the school, that they had sent somebody to meet me but they hadn't met me. I said, "I came in a taxi." When he said, "the taxi that I saw drive up" and I said, "yes," he said, "why did you take that one?" I said, "it was a taxi." And he said that you shouldn't have been in that taxi, you should have been in a black-driven taxi. And that was the first time that I realized that everything at that particular
time was separated according to black and white. It's quite an interesting thing.

Coker: This school you were going into, I take it that it was a totally black school?

Fields: Oh yes. That was long before affirmative action.

Coker: Were there many teachers from the north there or were they mostly southern teachers?

Fields: Well they had all black teachers at that time. It had started out with both black and white teachers. But at this time, they had all black teachers and most of them were southern teachers, northern trained.

Coker: Did you ever run into anyone from Peabody University or Howard University as you were working in the south?

Fields: Howard? Yes. But I think at that time we weren't particularly interested in...different schools. There were lot of people there. For instance, Rebecca is from Barber-Scotia and that was a Negro school that concentrated on the graces as much as anything else. The girls were taught the three graces—the cultural things. There were a lot of Yankee white teachers in those schools originally, and they taught the graces that they had learned in their schools to these girls who they were teaching in the south. And out of this—out of these schools came the social rules that most black people endorsed at that time, because they were training their children for the future. They were very honest about this business of the future.

Coker: Could you tell us sort of briefly kind of of what those rules or social graces that were instilled, what they were in a general sort of way?

Fields: You were taught...oh, let me see now. I didn't go to school there but I was associated with this group, for instance. They taught the girls how to sit; and how to be courteous to older people; and how to talk in a courteous manner—not to yell at people. And they made almost a fetish of good English. When I hear of
people saying—arguing that street language should be taught in the schools, I know that these folks are turning over in their graves (laughs). It was a very cultural atmosphere. They had people coming in lecturing about things that people knew any—nothing about. It was very—well, the only word I can use is cultural.

Coker: You got the three Rs' and the culture together?

Fields: Oh yes. And you got good 3 Rs'.

Coker: And was it a college you were teaching in or a...

Fields: Beg pardon.

Coker: Was it a high school or college or...

Fields: Well I taught in the high school department because in those days these so-called colleges had two departments. They had the colored college department and the high school. And I taught home economics in the high school. And when I think of men going to school to become dieticians, stewards, and things. Now I remember the difficulty I had in this school in establishing a boy's cooking class. I had to call it "Camp Cookery." What I was after was teaching them how to prepare balanced meals. But I had to call it "Camp Cookery" in order to get one single boy in it. I think I managed to get six. But if it had been called plain ordinary cooking, they wouldn't have gone cause that was woman's work. But a camp—now a man cook at a camp or he went camping; it was perfectly alright. And some of these boys came from very good homes. You must remember there were always Negro families or as we call them black families, who were more affluent than others. And they were the ones who usually sent their children, their sons and their daughters to these boarding schools because it was a mark of affluence to send your child off to school. These boys went camping so they didn't mind learning how to cook camp cookery, but they didn't want to learn the
ordinary cooking. Mother did that.

Coker: They were not preparing to be the chef of the Waldorf Astoria.

Fields: No. That came later. (Laughs)

Coker: Were either of these schools you taught in in North Carolina church sponsored schools?

Fields: Oh yes. The first one was not; it was a state school. It was an A and T college. After the Civil War they established these agricultural colleges. The black ones were called A and T, and I've forgotten...

Coker: Agriculture and Technical College?

Fields: Yes. Those were the black ones and the white ones had another name but they...

Coker: Agriculture and Mechanical College.

Fields: Agriculture and what?

Coker: Mechanical—A and M.

Fields: Yes.

Coker: A and M and A and T.

Fields: They were established to teach both people but they had separate schools, which was a waste of money. But segregation is always wasteful.

Coker: And the second one then was a church-sponsored school.

Fields: The other one—Livingstone was a Methodist school and very church-sponsored. I remember that every Sunday we took the girls to church. They wore white middy blouses, blue skirts, black shoes and stockings. And they marched two by two across town, because the Methodist church was on the other side of the town. And they walked—there were no buses and those things, you know. They walked every Sunday morning. We would have breakfast and then everybody would get ready for church at 10 o'clock and we would walk to the Methodist church.
Fields: These girls all had on blue skirts that reached their ankles. They were usually wide skirts because they were pleated. It wasn't supposed to be good form for a young girl to have a tight dress. So these skirts were pleated and buttoned at the waist and the mid blouse came over. The church was a very nice church; it was nicely built. The minister was a young man, if I remember correctly. And he was a very good speaker and he was well trained, which surprised me. Because I had been led to believe that most southern preachers were untrained, backwards people who just decided to be a preacher or minister. But he was very well trained. He'd been trained in some northern school—Howard or some place. And he was a very good speaker. There are times when a Yankee going into a southern school—going into a southern church is a little startled because even though this man was a good speaker, there were answerings from the audience: "tell it brother," and "that's so right," and "hallelujah." That sort of thing would startle me because I had come from a Presbyterian church, which is rather cold (laughs). And so it startled me. But anyhow, every Sunday we took these girls to church; they had to go to church. The only way they could keep out of going to church was to be sick. And some of them would manage to be sick every Sunday because they didn't want to go to church. Now we had children, girls whose parents were very religious people. One of the Methodist bishop's daughter was a student and she was a problem too because she was unruly. I think she had been pampered so much that she felt that she could do anything she pleased. We had young people from all over the United States, particularly in the north-east and the middle-west. I don't think we had any from the west coast but we did have
them otherwise. And they really were—on a whole, a very nice bunch of kids. They were there to study. Of course, they had the usual college pranks and things of that sort. And there were disciplinary problems which any group of young people will have. I remember when we marched these girls to church, the boys didn't have to march in two by two. And they would slyly stick into the line beside the girl who was the girlfriend of the person at that time. But the church was a very good church and the man was a very good speaker. That was one of the things that impressed me. These young people would go and they will be full of heck but the minute they got into the church they seem to assume a different attitude. They quieted down and sat there and took it all in; it was very good. I think it helped me as much as it did them because it was an entirely different type of worship for me, and it seemed it didn't have a formula. It seemed to be spontaneous. And although I might write something about it, and I have about other forms that interested me, it was from the heart. They believed what they were talking about. Maybe I glamorized it or maybe I reacted because it was so different, but I enjoyed those visits to that church. I think it helped me after I came home, to tolerate some of the staidness and coldness perhaps that is in my own church. I think it helped me to broaden my outlook about religion because the Presbyterian church at that time—I don't know now, I'm not in the Presbyterian church—was a very staid, orthodox thing. You did certain things and other things you didn't do. And you didn't think about...things; this was the law; this is what it was . Since then, I think it's become more personal with me and I think perhaps this Methodist church in the south helped me to develop. No matter what happens now, I do what they would say. I take it to the Lord. If it's bad I know it will be solved if I wait long enough. I think I got some of that out of this Methodist church in the south. Well any how, we took the kids to
church every Sunday—I didn't mean to start philosophizing. We took the kids to church every Sunday and then we'd come back and have a big dinner. Then the afternoon was free. If the girls wanted to go for a walk, a chaperone had to go with them of course. But we didn't have any trouble with them. They were alright and I enjoyed those years down there with them.

Coker: You mentioned a while ago the usual college pranks; things changed through the years and this was a few years back. What were some of the common college pranks at that time?

Fields: Well (laughs).

Coker: I don't suppose they ate fish out of the fish-bowl?

Fields: No, they didn't. But what they would do, they would sit up too late at night. They had a curfew and they would sit up late at night and eat. They had a little spending money and there was a place not far, practically on the campus, where they could buy things. So they would sneak off down there and buy food and then they would sit up late at night and eat, and giggle, and you could hear them. And the man or the woman who was on duty would have to go in and stop this. Of course, they'd quiet down and go to their rooms until this person has gone back to his or her room and then they would start all over again. Then they would try to get away with not wearing uniforms on Sundays. They would go to church and wear them but they were supposed to wear them all day Sunday because that was the day of rest and they were supposed to be ladies. They hated them; they hated those uniforms. They would try to get away with not wearing them to supper. Now we had supper at 5:30 and they were supposed to be in blue skirts and the white middies at supper time. They would do everything on earth to try to get out of wearing those. Little things, nothing very, very...

Coker: Did they sneak out at night sometimes? Climb out the window?
Fields: Yes. This bishop's grand-daughter was one of those we were always catching coming in the window. (laughter). That was one of the things; they did sneak out at night.

Coker: Did you have any other experiences during the time that you were teaching at Livingstone that people would be interesting in hearing about?

Fields: One Sunday when I first arrived, we had been to church and we'd had vespers and we'd had supper. There were six teachers there from the north but we were not all from the same part of north. We were from Ohio—I was from Jersey. There was one from Indiana. We were from all over. There were two from Ohio and one of the ones from Ohio had been there the year before. He had lived there the whole school term. So this evening—beautiful, balmy, North Carolina evening, we were bored. We didn't know what to do so we started out, the six of us, to take a walk. This man from Ohio suggested that we go to church. But we didn't want to go to church because we'd been to two church services already. He said, "well, if you go to this one, you will never forget it," so we did. Now this town was divided. One half of the town—one part of the town was the black section of the town and the other part of it was white. This town was a beautiful town and most of the homes, black and white, were very nice. But they were separated. So we had to go down to the black section of the town in order to go to this church that he told us that we would neve forget. As we approached the church we could hear singing and you could hear the thumping of a drum. We went in and were greeted at the door by two very nicely dressed men who shook hands with us, who were very glad to have us come in. And he—one of the men nodded to a woman usher dressed in white, who was standing a little a part and she came over and conducted us to seats in the middle of the church. Now the church was just a clap board building and very simple. And it had sturdy benches
up and down and a center isle. So we sat down and the singing continued and the thumping. Up at the front was one of these old fashioned standing desk—the desks the clerks used to use that they stood at rather than sat. That was the minister's place for his Bible. And on this desk was a huge, beautiful Bible. It must have been because you could see the gold edges on the side. He was standing behind it leading the singing. And finally the singing ended and he began to preach. As he preached the people began to be ever so much more energetic than the ones in the ordinary Methodist church I had been. They jumped and they yelled and they fairly danced. Well one woman took our eye particularly because she danced out from her seat. She danced out from her seat into the isle and danced and pranced up the pulpit, up to where the preacher was. And then she began to jump. She jumped and jumped. And each jump was a little bit higher than the last until her heels were hitting her back—her buttocks. And this little boy who was beating the drum began to hit the drum harder and harder and harder and she was jumping higher. Finally he broke the side of the drum and he hastily turned it around and began beating on the other side. In the meantime, the minister was continuing with his service. And finally he took his Bible and closed it; put it on his shoulder and began what he called the "glory walk." He came down out of the pulpit in rhythm. Came down to the isle of the first seat and began walking the tops of the benches all the way down, preaching as he went with this Bible on his shoulders (laughs). I still have to laugh. He marched all the way down to the door and came back the same way that he went. And this woman was jumping all the time that he is doing this, and everybody else is screaming. Well we had never seen anything like that because as I said before, we had come from families that had tried to be conformers and belonged to the very staid churches in the north. And it amused us. So we laughed and
laughed. And they yelled louder and louder. And pretty soon the woman who had shown us the seat—the usher who had shown us the seat, came over to us and asked us to be quiet. But with all this screaming going on, we couldn't see how they could hear us and it made us more amused and we laughed. So finally, another lady came over and said to us if we couldn't appreciate what was going on, for us to leave. We couldn't stop laughing so we left. As we went out we could hear the thumping and the singing and we were amazed. It seemed more of a circus to us than a religious service because we were not used to that kind of thing. Later now that the times's passed, I feel that perhaps those people had as much religion as any of us. They had a right to worship as they please and if that was the way that they got their religious satisfaction and relief, well then that was alright for them. But as a youngster, a woman twenty-one years old, that was amusing. All of us were young. All six of us were young and it had no appeal for us. It was just funny. (Laughter)...

Coker: At least they weren't hurting anybody.

Fields: No.

Coker: How long did you teach at Livingstone?

Fields: Five years.

Coker: Five years. And you mentioned something about your mother being sick...

Fields: My mother...

Coker: ...that's why you came back

Fields: I came home during the summer to go to summer school as usual because I did that every summer. My mother became ill and I tried to get someone to take care of her. I didn't have much money to pay so I couldn't. So I stayed home and took care of her. In the meantime, she got better and I took a job in New York at Seaview Hospital on Staten Island as a dietician. It was a tubercular hospital
and they had thousands of patients. I think they had 2,800 or something of that sort. And they were in eight buildings, sort of a quadrangle—almost like a campus. They had a huge kitchen where all the food was prepared. I went there as what they call a contact dietician. I had a building that I had to go in three times a day and check the patients; check their diets. And tubercular patients are sad people? We did everything we could to make them a little happy. So if there was special things that they wanted it was a contact dietician's job to try to get that particular thing for them. Because with tuberculosis you could eat most anything you pleased. If they have other diseases, then you would have to stick to the diet that the doctor had prescribed. There was an army of doctors and an army of dieticians. I think there were two dieticians in each building. The buildings were six stories high I believe—either six or four stories high, and wards on each floor.

Coker: It's that over there by the light near where the apartment houses are? Or do you know—there is a beautiful light in Staten—you said Staten Island...

Fields: Yes, it's Staten Island. My contact with that island was get off the ferry, get on the bus to the hospital, get out of the hospital, get on the bus, get on the ferry. At that particular time Staten Island had a reputation of being a very prejudiced place and there were very few black people living on the island. There was...a semen's home or something there. I think it's still there but the coloration of the island—everything has changed entirely. But my contact with the island—with Staten Island was off the ferry onto the bus, in the hospital, back on the bus and on the ferry and home.

Coker: Were you living in New York while you were working there or in Plainfield?

Fields: Both. I lived in New York originally, but my mother became ill again so I was commuting, I would say five years. The latter part of my time--I would say five
years I commuted from Plainfield.

Coker: And did you have to go into New York and then go...

Coker: And did you have to go into New York and then go...

Fields: Oh, that was the time when we had the beautiful trains from Plainfield—lovely, lovely trains. Of course, they were nice because Plainfield at that was still a millionaire's home and they commuted. When you went down to the station here in Plainfield at 8 o'clock in the morning, you could hardly move because there were so many commuters. They had commuter train, after commuter train, after commuter train. I took the first one when I was going to Staten Island. It was at 6:20 in the morning and then they continued until 9:30. These are the commuters trains. And they came in I think every twenty minutes from Bound Brook or New Brunswick. I think it was Bound Brook that they started. And they were full. Some of the men had a club car that they rode in every day. They paid a certain amount to the railroad to use this particular club car. And they played cards, drank, and what have you in this particular club car. The ordinary passengers did not get in those cars; they had their own quarter. The conductor went through and collected the fares or they punched their tickets. But they had a private porter who took care of them on this train. But I took the early one. That wasn't as I say, (laughter) as the rest of them because those were the people who were really oing into New York to work. I had to be at Staten Island 9 o'clock—at the hospital at 9 o'clock, which meant that I had to leave on the 6:20 train in the morning, take the ferry over to New York. The train stopped at Jersey City. Then you took the ferry into New York. And then I would take the elevated down to South Ferry and get another ferry to go over to Staten Island.

Coker: That was quite a trip.

Fields: It was quite a trip. I never got home before 7 o'clock.
Coker: And how long did you work over there? How many years do you...
Fields: About five years
Coker: About five years
Fields: Yes.
Coker: Well I think we will wind up for today, our talk about your life and we will come back to it another time and pick up...
Fields: Okay
Coker: ...things that might have been especially interesting at the hospital or what happened after the hospital. Okay. And I thank you very much.
Fields: Well I hope I have helped.

Cassette #2, Side #1 continued
April 22

Coker: Hazel, we have pretty well covered the first thirty years of your life and brought you up to around 1929 or 1930. Your mother is sick, you are working in the Seabrook Hospital in Staten Island, and this must have been the time also of the famous Wall Street crash in 1929. Did that have any particular bearing on your life, with your mother, with your job, with your commuting?
Fields: It didn't have any effect on my commuting or my job except that at that particular time everybody had what we would call food stamps now. I can't remember what we called them. But any-how, it was food stamps. I don't know whether the war was on or what it was but you had to have stamps to get the food. There was certain things—certain kinds of food that you particularly had to have stamps for. Flour and sugar. You could get one pound of white sugar but you had to take—if you wanted five pounds—if you had stamps for five pounds of
sugar, in order to get that one pound of white sugar, you had to have four pounds of...brown sugar. And then there was something that they called rainbow sugar. It was white sugar with a lot of little grains of color in the sugar. I don't know why they did that, but any how, there was that brown sugar. Sometimes even the molasses were substituted for the sugar. Then you had to have coupons for meat. We had lived in this house for quite sometime and my mother was known in the neighborhood. Everybody knew that she was ill and that I was struggling to feed her. There was a butcher down at the corner name Callahan. It's where an ? bakery is now. There was this grocery and butcher Callahan, and he knew my mother. And he knew me, of course. Neighborhoods were closer then. Even though he was Irish and we were black, there was a sort of neighborhood loyalty. He saved special cuts for me to have because of my mother. He'd say, "now Hazel, I know you want this for your mother." And he would save it for me and I would give him my coupons for that. I remember that distinctly and so consequently, I think we weathered the Depression pretty well because we were in this house and my step-father had been...let me see—had been killed one summer when I was teaching in the south. An automobile ran over him up at the corner of Second Street and Berkman. He was a gardener—I don't know whether I mentioned this before. He had a hand-cart that he carried his gardening tools in. And he was lame. I don't know whether he been hurt in the war or the First World War or what. I don't remember because I didn't know him that long or that well to get all of his details because when my mother married him I was a high-school graduate. As I said before, she married in January or February and I graduated from high school in June. And he would carry his gardening tools in this hand-cart. He was on the corner crossing the street at Berkman and Second, when this young man from Westfield—a young
white man that had just inherited lot of money and he was showing off with it I guess, drinking and driving, and he ran into my step-father. Now my step-father was on his way to Front Street. There was a family on Front Street—Front Street then was quite nice. Wealthy people lived on Front Street. And he was the gardener for this big estate—Miss Meade Estate. Now Miss Mead, who lived in this house where he was going to garden, was quite prominent in Plainfield. She was the president of the YWCA. She had donated a lot of money to the YWCA, and she was quite important. She and her mother lived in this big mansion on Front Street and he was the gardener for it. He was on his way to her house when the automobile ran over him, knocked him, killed him. The doctor at the hospital said that practically every bone in his body was broken, he had been thrown so far. Since my mother was not too well, I had to assume responsibility for her and the house, everything. That's when I got the job in Staten Island. I did not go back to the Lobby. Let me see...

Coker: Hazel, you mentioned the food stamps. Now the Depression would have started there at the end of 1929, early 1930 and the Second World War began long about 1940-41. I know we...

End Cassette #2, Side #1

Begin Cassette #2, Side #2

Coker: We were just talking about the food stamps and that they did not begin until the Second World War...

Fields: They began at Second World War.

coker: When did your mother pass away Hazel?

Fields: In 1944.

Coker: So actually you had a period of about twelve, fourteen years in which you were working and supporting your mother...
Fields: Oh yes.
Coker: ...and taking care of her.
Fields: Oh yes.
Coker: After you left Seabrook Hospital, where did you go from there?
Fields: Where did I go? Oh, I came home and took care of my mother.
Coker: You didn't work at all for a while?
Fields: I worked. I picked up anything I could do. That's when I went into catering.
Coker: Yes
Fields: There was a woman here in Plainfield that did quite a bit of catering and I worked with her. And I did that up until...oh, for a number of years. I don't remember how many years. In the meantime, while I was doing this catering, I became a corset salesman. There was a—there is still a corset company in New England that originated in England—the Spencer Corset. And I became a Spencer salesman for a number of years. I was quite successful with that. And I continued that after my mother died for a number of years. One of the reasons I could do that was because I had a car and I could drive quite, you know, distances. I had customers from Elizabeth to New Brunswick and in between—Island Park, all along. It was interesting and I didn't have to go out at night too much with this Spencer business because most people wanted to be fitted in the day. But I had to have Spencer parties occasionally. I didn't have them often, but I had to have them occasionally. That was part of the deal. And we had meetings; the Spencer Company had meetings. I had a supervisor and we had meetings. Most of them were in Newark at the...what's the name of that tree?
Coker: Tree Hotel?
Fields: Yes.
Coker: Robert Tree Hotel?
Fields: Robert Tree—at the Robert Tree Hotel. That's where most of the meetings were held. There'd be thirty of us perhaps, from all over the state, and we would meet there every two months. That was interesting and I had a nice time. And made quite a few friends because I still have friends that I had as customers. And then I—let me see...they became too expensive because most of my customers were poor people like me or perhaps there were one or two that could afford to pay. But when the girdles began to get to be sixty and seventy-five dollars a piece, I decided that that was not for me because I wasn't getting any orders. So I left that and concentrated on the catering. And then the catering petered out because most people that we catered for were Jewish and they became interested in cooking the fancy things themselves because it was the thing to do. It became quite fashionable. So that sort of petered out; it was just occasional. So I...let me see—in about 60—in about 1965—I think it was 65, somewhere along in there, I took a part-time job working three days a week for a family—not all day, just a half a day. And that was interesting too because I'd never done that before. I think I was as much a surprise to them as they were to me. More so, because I don't think they ever had come into contact with anybody else but...

Coker: What kind of work did you do there?

Fields: Oh, house work.

Coker: And you had never done that kind of work for anybody before?

Fields: I'd never done it for anybody before. And...

Coker: And they expect you to be just the ordinary house keeper?

Fields: I think they were surprised, but they quickly adapted to me. I think we became friends. Maybe it developed into the old relationship blacks and whites had except, I think, we became almost friends. It went on until I had a heart attack
and I had to stop everything.

Coker: How old were you when you had the heart attack? Do you remember?

Fields: Oh, seventy. I really didn't do any awful lot of work at that place because I could do it to suit myself when I did. Part of the time we were sitting down drinking tea.

Coker: That was hard work.

Fields: What?

Coker: That must have been hard work.

Fields: So it really wasn't so bad. I did have a heart attack. I don't know what brought it on. I had had pneumonia and I had been in the hospital a week with the pneumonia and I came home. I was sitting here and all of a sudden I got this terrible pain in my chest and it went down my left arm. I have a very good friend who is a nurse in the hospital. At the present time, she is the assistant superintendent of the hospital— I think that's what you call it. She is a black woman and her son is my godson. So when I got the terrible pain I called her and she sent the rescue squad. And her husband—and she and everybody—no, she went to the hospital to meet us there. And the rescue squad came and administered oxygen and took me to the hospital. Her husband was here then, and he went in the—he took his car and went in—no, he went in the ambulance with me I believe. I was in the hospital five months with this heart attack. So I havn't been able to do any strenuous work since... but I live. In the meantime, I decided that this house was too big to be just sitting here in. So for years I had—after my mother died, I had taken in people to live. One family was a young soldier who had been in England and had married an English girl. He was from Oklahoma. He came from a town called Boley. Boley, Oklahoma has been famous for rodeo, black rodeo. I think most of us don't realize that during the
period of the popularity of the youth of the cowboy, that there were numbers of black cowboys. Some of them settled in this Boley, Oklahoma and made it quite an important town for the rodeo.

Coker: Is that the all-black town in Oklahoma?

Fields: That's an all-black town in Oklahoma.

Coker: I remember it.

Fields: That's Boley—that's the old black town. It's still in existence. This young man who had been stationed in England, who had married an English girl, who he had been introduced to by her mother, had brought his wife back to the United States with him. He was having difficulty because he was still in the service and he wanted his wife near him; he was having quite a bit of difficulty because black families did not want to house white women. In fact, there was quite a bit of resentment among the American black women at the fact that these men, some of them had married Hawaiian women, and English women, and French women, and so forth. The slogan was, there was plenty black women who are of all colors and distinction, and there is no sense in marrying these women. Well, this turned out to be a very nice girl. When he came to rent—to ask if I had the room, he'd been recommended by a friend of mine, the ? family on Richmond Street, because one of the sons-in-law was working in the same unit that he was in the army. He didn't tell me who his wife was and in fact I didn't care. He asked if he could have a room and I rented the room to him. He went back to get his wife, who had been living at the guest house at Camp Kilmer, and when he came back he tried to slip up the stairs with her without my seeing her. But, something had told me the story. No one had told me but I just sort of figured it out because he seemed so grateful when I said yes he could have the room. I met her and I often say for years onward it must have been ordained from heaven
because she has been more than a daughter. I'm very much dependent upon her right this minute. She drives my car because I had bad eyes now and cannot drive. She takes me wherever I want to go. She supervises me to see that I go to the doctor and do anything that's good for me. So I often say it was ordained from heaven that she should be sent to me.

Coker: That's wonderful

Fields: Oh, no one knows how grateful I am that I know Freda George. I never married, I had no children but—between this woman who is the assistant in the hospital and her family whose son is my godson and this Freda George whose oldest child, who was born when she was here, is my godson—I feel no loneliness, no lack of family; I'm blessed. And I thank God that I met those close friends. When anybody tells me she's white? about anybody, I get so incensed. I get breathless because if I had had prejudice, which I'm afraid, I hope I did not have, she certainly would have erased any prejudice that I had. You don't know. Never a night passes that she doesn't call to see if I'm alright. She lives up on George Street—that's a coincidence, her name is George—and never a day passes I don't have some communication. Now she will call when she gets off work. she works at Sears. When she gets off work at 4:30, she will call around five to see if I'm alright. On her day off she comes and take me to do my shopping or any errands or anything I have to do. I am grateful to God that I said yes he could have that room.

Coker: Does she have any children?

Fields: She has one daughter and two boys. One boy—the youngest boy is married and he is in the service. He's in Korea. The other boy who is my godson—the oldest boy is in California. He does construction work. He went to college for two years and then he decided it was not for him. So he went into the service and he stayed the regulation two years. Then he came out and moved to California.
And he's doing dry-walling. It's some sort of putting up walls that are already made or something or other. As far as construction is concerned I do not know. But anyhow, he's happy in that. She has a daughter who is in between the two boys. She is not married and she is in California. She is doing social work with the Mexicans because Spanish was her major in college. She graduated from a college up in Pennsylvania. I forgot now which one it was. She has asthma so she can't stay here because the asthma gets very bad when she is in Plainfield. She doesn't have it in California but she has this job.

Coker: Now, are the brothers married dis you say?

Fields: One brother. The youngest brother is married...

Coker: Did he marry a black girl or what?

Fields: Yes, oh yes, oh yes. I have a suspicion—well I have no suspicion, I know that if the older brother gets married, he will not marry a black girl because he's been going with this white girl for years. He knew her in college and in high school. And after he came back from the service they got together again. So they are in California. Now if he ever gets married, that's the girl he will marry because Suzie adores him and he adores Suzie.

Coker: Is he dark or is he a very light colored person?

Fields: No, he's not. None of her children are very light. They are definitely Negro—black children. They are not dark. When they are born, every one of them looked white but as they grow older, they get olive. That is the tradition among Negro children that are not thorough bred—that are not pure black. When they are born, they are quite light but they usually darken out.

Coker: If it's not touching on sore spot, I would like to ask you about your love life

Fields: (laughs).

Coker: You say you've never been married.
Fields: No.

Coker: And you been away from your parents and sisters for many years...

Fields: Well I was engaged once and then that was in my twenties. And then my mother became ill and I had to take care of her. I had friends who were married and who had invalids to take care of—I have one in particular. I still have her and I still adore her, and I adore her husband because he is unusual. But I felt I couldn't devote myself to my own family and my mother who was rather demanding. So, this was a southern man and I broke off the engagement and that was that. I don't think I've ever wanted to marry anybody else. (Laughs).

Coker: Did you ever really get serious or start going with any other men? No?

Fields: Oh, once or twice I thought about it but it never became serious.

Coker: Have you ever heard anything more from this man after you broke up...

Fields: No.

Coker: ...or did he go totally out of your life?

Fields: I heard of Fleming—I heard about him. He has been quite successful. He is a teacher. But I don't know whether he's dead or anything.

Coker: No regrets?

Fields: Some (laughs). I wouldn't be honest if I didn't say some. Yes, some. I don't—what shall I say...I don't like being alone. I am a social animal. I like to talk to people and I think it would be very nice to have someone close all the time. I haven't experience it and maybe I would be unhappy. Maybe I'm too...well as some of my friends say, "too bossy," that I might not had made a success of it because of my...dominance. But I've had to take care of myself all of my life so I developed a certain amount of independence that perhaps is not the best thing for a wife. It might be alright now, I don't know. But I do know that the divorce rate is very, very high and I personally attribute that part of it to the fact of the
absolute independence of the average trained and educated woman today.

Coker: I think...

Fields: Maybe I'm wrong.

Coker: I think that a part of the idea behind these recordings, particularly with black people, is to develop a contrast in the so-called black culture and the white culture which may not even exist. So, I'm going to ask you some questions that follow along that line and be free to extend on it whatever way you wish. We may have covered this before but when did you first realize you were a Negro, or black, or different from other people?

Fields: I think it was in high school. Plainfield was not definitely as black as it is now and in every neighborhood I lived, there had been white kids and black kids. We were all friends and we all got along very nicely. I remember once after I got in high school, a Jewish girl sat in front of me—lessons did not phase me; it wasn't difficult for me to get along in school—and we were having an exam one day and she asked me the answer. I said, "I'm not going to give it to you; you ought to know it." And she said "nigger," and I popped her (laughter). I never stopped to think about it but "wham." And she began to scream of course, and the teacher came to find out what it was. She found out what had happened and she said, "you're in fault."

Coker: To you?

Fields: To the girl. That was the main thing. Then another time—you see, none of this happened to me until high school because I was the leader when I was in grammar school, in primary grades and things of that sort. Even when I was in Troy and went to school in Troy, a little, little bit of a thing—when we had to go, you know, boys on one side and girls on the other, it was always a white boy on the other side. It never made any difference, you know; it was just a boy.
Coker: Yes.

Fields: So when we got in high school, New Jersey passed a law that when you graduated from high school you had to swim, had to know how to swim. Well, by that time I began to realize that white people and black people didn't associate because when there were parties, they were all black. So New Jersey passed a law that you must learn to swim. And Plainfield High School said the boys could all swim together—black and white boys could all swim together. I think they wore trunks; that was all. They didn't wear bathing suits; they wore trunks. But the black girls and the white girls could not swim together. So the black girls—we weren't called black then, we were called colored—would have to wait until after school was over to go swimming. School was longer then than it is now, which meant that we couldn't go swimming until 4 o'clock. Now I was living way at the other end of town and Plainfield High School was in the middle of the town. It's on the perimeter. And it meant that I was getting home from school at dark in the winter time. So who was my mother, put on her long skirt and her belt—the way everybody was wearing it—and a nice clean shirtwaist and marched up to school. Lindsay Best was the principal then, and she told him, "she has good marks; she doesn't have to learn to swim in order to live and I'm not having her come at 5 o'clock at night, after dark. So if you can't find some other time for her to swim, she isn't going to swim and you are not going to keep her out of graduation." So I never learned to swim and I graduated from high school. I've often said my mother was quite a lady. She was very independent; everybody said she had a walk that was because her shoulders were back and she always walked very rapidly. She was very independent. My father had left her with these children; she raised them and bought a home. And she felt very independent. So I graduated from high school and I never learned to swim
properly. I can make three or four strokes and a breast stroke and that's it, that's when the blackness, you know...

Coker: Yes

Fields: Then after I went to Pratt in New York and I graduated from Pratt, they recommended me for a job in Philadelphia. The woman called me on the phone and said for me to meet her at—I think it's the Hotel Astor...Vanderbilt. It's Hotel Vanderbilt—Vanderbilt Avenue and Forty Second Street. I went to meet her and she came in—and she's white. And she looked all over me and went around looking for somebody else. And I said, "are you Miss"—I don't remember the name now because it was years ago—and she said, "yes." And I said, "well, I'm Hazel Fields." And she said, "you? I couldn't use you." I walked out.

Coker: What sort of place did she have where she was going to use you in?

Fields: She had a hospital, I believe. She didn't stay long enough to tell me that she was perfectly sure that her workers would not work under me because I would be the head. I would be the dietician and these people would take orders and I'd plan the meals and all that sort of thing. And she said, "I can't use you." I walked out. And...

Coker: And that probably is true. If the others were white, they probably would have refuse to work under you.

Fields: That's right. But it was an interesting thing when I went to Seaview Hospital later, the chef was Italian and he had all these dieticians there working. Some of them were Irish, only two of us were black, and no one made any difference.

Coker: Well this brings up something that I wondered about. Apparently your life has been far more free of racial prejudice than that of many people of your race.

Fields: Oh yes, oh yes.

Coker: But I'm wondering how this has developed through your life now. Apparently
when you were a very small child, you knew nothing of racial prejudice and you picked this up in high school. As you went to work, you say you did not have it at the hospital in Staten Island. As you grew older and you were taking care of your mother, and living here in Plainfield, and in the catering business, did you run into many instances of discrimination against you because you were black?

Fields: Not too many, I don't think. It is a funny thing about Plainfield and maybe the prejudice was there. But, as Mr. Hubbard said yesterday, there were certain things that you expected and you more or less ignored them or accepted them.

Coker: You weren't looking for it in other words.

Fields: You weren't looking for it. Later you recognized it more than perhaps you had when you were younger. I don't know. My mother was one of the charter members of the NAACP; it was started when she was living in New York. And I've always been a reader. I read everything that I could possibly get hands on. And we took the Amsterdam news; we knew that all these things were happening. The Amsterdam News is a black news paper that is still going on in New York City, I believe. Of course, being a charter member of the NAACP, she had the Crisis; it was always in the home. And maybe...I don't know. I don't think I suffered from it as some people have. Of course, as I said, there were several of this business of jos that I didn't get because I was black.

End Cassette #2, Side #2

Begin Cassette #3, Side #1

Coker: We were just speaking about the head dietician at Seaview Hospital in Staten Island. Would you like to continue with that story, Hazel?

Fields: Yes. The head dietician was a tiny little, pretty little, very charming to-look-at-woman; tiny little thing. When I was sent from New York to the hospital, I went to see the superintendent of the hospital. I remember his name was Shaw. He
was very, very big and very, very loud and very, very rough. So when I was sent to him, he sent for the head dietician to tell her that he had a dietician for her. When she came in, he told her that I was the person. I was sitting out in the outer office then, and she was in the inner office. And she told him she couldn't use me; she didn't want to use me; didn't want any black dieticians. And he told her, "you've been asking for dieticians and you have one. You either take her or you don't get anybody else." So in the meantime, I was a hot headed young person and I marched in and I said, "now, I'm not starving and you don't have to take me if you don't want me because I can get something else to do." And he said, "we are going to take you. She wanted a dietician and you are going to be it." (mimics superintendent's voice). I think it startled him to think that I was so independent and I think that's why he was in my corner. The whole five years that I was there at the hospital, no matter what happened, you see, if it was turned over to him he'd find some reason to find out that I was alright. I remember there was a nurse who didn't like me very much and she said that I was not supplying things to her patients that I should. And she reported me to Dr. Shaw. He put her in her place. He said he knew perfectly well that if that stuff had been there I would have gotten it for her patients. that was the end of that story. I think if it hadn't been for Dr. Shaw, the head dietician, whose name I cannot remember—Haas, yes I do. Her name was Haas—H-A-A-S. Perhaps she was of German extraction; maybe that was the explanation for some of her antagonism. I think that because he was in my corner, that's why I got the job and I stayed there five years.

Coker: One of the things that's interesting as different ethnic groups mix and cross, are the traditional foods. For instance, as I came from the south to the north or even when I went from the south to the southwest, the change in foods bothered
me a great deal, and I'm white. But when we came up with the soul-food idea in New Jersey, I was very happy because the foods were what I had enjoyed as a child. Have you had any particular experience with the different types of food? You mentioned catering, you mentioned working for Jewish people, what has been your experience with foods and different groups?

Fields: Well, let me see. Even though I was raised in the north I knew soul food, though we didn't call it that. It was just food. Greens, pig feet—I would not eat pit tails because they were too greasy. And I've always had a peculiar stomach; I have never been able to eat salt breads. My mother was a wonderful cook and made all sorts of cakes and pies, and breads. As I said before, I was quite grown before I had eaten store bread. Hush puppies I couldn't eat. For instance, the dough fried, I couldn't eat that, but on the other hand, my mother made a ? that was fried. But it was dry and I could eat that. As for Jewish food, I don't like bagels, but I came to like some of the other—for instance, they make this liver. They fry it in onion and then grind it up, and chop it up int a paste. Everybody eats it now, but some time ago it was strictly Jewish. We use it as hors d'oeuvre now.

Coker: Liver pate I think they call it.

Fields: Yes, yes, yes. It's chicken liver; it's not the ordinary liver—it's chicken liver. The other day I saw an episode on either "Eight is Enough"—I think it was "Eight is Enough"—in which this girl is interested in a boy she thinks is Jewish. She cooks what she thinks is this pate, and she used ordinary liver. And of course, nobody could eat it. And then there's...during the Jewish holidays they make a ...I guess it's meat. It's—they cook dumplings...

Coker: Gefilte fish?

Fields: Dumplings in the chicken. They boil chicken and they boil a lot of water in it, and they drop these dumplings in. I've experienced it but I can't eat the
dumplings, of course, but the chicken is good. Most Jewish food is very good but it's very much like black food.

Coker: Oh really? That's interesting.

Fields: I think.

Coker: As I recall such things as black eye peas...

Fields: Oh yes

Coker: Corn bread...

Fields: Oh yes

Coker: Turnip greens...

Fields: Oh yes

Coker: Tripe...

Fields: I can't eat tripe but it's part of it.

Coker: As you have lived these eighty years, if I may express it that way, is your own eating a more generalized type and has it been all your life or have you...

Fields: I think...

Coker: ...or have you stuck pretty much with southern type food?

Fields: No, I think it's generalized because as I said, my mother was a cook and she cooked for people here in the north. She had to learn a generalized cooking and so consequently she fed it to us.

Coker: Similarly on the matter of celebrations and festivals and things like that, are there any particular holidays that you have celebrated in your life time differently, either because you were black or because of any particular family situation from what the general populace celebrates? Or maybe you celebrate Christmas or Easter in a different way than what others do?

Fields: No. I celebrate Christmas just about like everybody. I remember when we were living in the west end in a house that my mother had built, there was a fire place
and we would hang up my stocking. My mother would tell me to—I wore black stockings in those days, you know. And she'd tell me to hang up an old one because she would put—I didn't know she was doing it cause there was Santa Clause, you know...

Coker: Yes.

Fields: But she would put in the stocking so that the red apples and the oranges would be where the holes were. I could remember that because I always wanted to see the fruit because fruit was expensive; fruit that you didn't grow—oranges and that sort of thing. That was Christmas. We always got that sort of thing at Christmas. And I remember that we popped corn and strung it on the Christmas tree because we couldn't afford too many ornaments. We always had pop corn and cranberries. But I think that must have been something that was adopted from New England. Don't you think?

Coker: I don't know where it came from but I don't think it's necessarily a black custom?

Fields: No.

Coker: I didn't even have a Christmas tree when I was a child and when I married, our first Christmas tree, we could not afford tinsel and different things. And we popped corn and strung cranberries. But we had read about this in books. Where it originated I don't know.


Coker: It maybe...

Fields: Cause the cranberries...

Coker: ...more the times than any particular culture.

Fields: And they may have brought it here from Holland, or England or some where of that sort. When I was working in North Carolina, the 30th of May is celebrated
in the north. It isn't particularly celebrated in the south because it was the celebration concerning the poor Union soldiers that were killed during the Civil War. And in this particular town where I worked at Livingstone, Salisbury, on the 30th of May the white people went into their homes, locked the doors and stayed there all day long. The black people took over the town because it was the 30th of May. That was their holiday. I don't know whether it happened throughout the south but I know it happened in Salisbury. I was there five years and I saw it. They took over the town; they put big kettles on an intervals in the main street. And these kettles were full of oil, or grease, or lard, or something. Anyhow, it was hot. And they dipped fish in corn meal and batter and dropped it in this hot oil. It would go down to the bottom and when it came to the top it was done. It was simple delicious. I know it must have been dirty, (laughter) but it was delicious. And that was the way that they celebrated the 30th of May. You see, that was Memorial Day in the north. I don't know what they called it in the south. It slipped my mind—maybe it was still Memorial Day. But you see, it's started in the north and it did not honor the southern soldiers, so the southerners—the southern whites had nothing to do with it in this particular town. I don't know whether it was throughout the south or not but I do remember that. You could smell the fish oil cooking all over town.

Coker: I recall that in Mississippi we did not celebrate July 4th because it was the anniversary of the fall of Vicksburg, and the children in the community shot off their fire crackers and their Roman candles at Christmas time and not July 4th. It wasn't that they had anything against the birthday of our country, it was that they still... 

Fields: It was also the fall of Vicksburg and it was still a sore point.

Coker: Yes, it was still a sore point. You mentioned your mother being a charter
member of NAACP, was your mother or you involved in other organizations over
the years particularly?

Fields: Later, when my mother joined a lodge—whatever the female business of the
Mason's is—but she wasn't very active.

Coker: The Eastern Star?

Fields: Is that what is is?

Coker: Yes.

Fields: Yes, but she wasn't very active. But she was quite a good church-goer. She went
every Sunday as long as she was able to. And I don't think I told you that finally
she left the Presbyterian church and joined the Episcopal church with my—oh, I
did tell you. My nephews joined first, and then she joined, and finally I joined.
By that time—soon after she joined the church, she became quite an invalid. The
church was down the street and across the street from us. And each retor would
come over every Sunday morning and give her communion, which I thought was
rather nice.

Coker: So she found a great deal of comfort in her faith.

Fields: Oh yes, oh yes.

Coker: And you have stayed with the Episcopal Church all through the years yourself?

Fields: Oh yes.

Coker: I noticed earlier you mentioning that you had picked up from your associations in
North Carolina, the idea of "take it to the Lord." Has this really been a center
piece of your life in the years since your mother...

Fields: I don't know whether its a center piece or not, but I have learned not to stew
over things because I know that it will be taken care of. I get broke, I get bills, I
get debts, things happen to the house—had to be repaired, and most people will
say "oh, my God" How am I going to do this, that or the other." And I'll say,
"well, I don't know how I'm going to do it but it will be one," and it gets done. If that's faith, that's faith. Some how or other, some way most of my problems get solved.

Coker: Did any of your work qualify you—are you qualified for social security?

Fields: Yes. I am not qualifed for Medicaid.

Coker: Medicare is the one under Social Security and Medicaid is the one under State Assistance.

Fields: Yes. I'm not qualiiied for that.

Coker: We discovered a while ago that the first part of our first tape is missing here. Evidently it got erased accidently, so I would like to kind of go back and review the first part of your life. Let's repeat your full name again.

Fields: Hazel Cortez Fields. I was named for my godmother.

Coker: And your age?

Fields: Eighty-one

Coker: And where were you born?

Fields: I was born in New York City but my parents came from Virginia.

Coker: And you are black?

Fields: Oh yes. Apparently three or four, five, six generations, I do not know...

Coker: Do you have...

Fields: ...I know my grandmother was a slave.

Coker: I was going to say, do you have any knowledge of your family history back beyond your mother and grandmother.

Fields: My grandmother was the house keeper for a family. It must have been the ? I imagine, because slaves took the names of the people they worked for. And that was in Brunswick County, Virginia. She was a very independent type of person because after the Civil War, the woman who had owned them said to her—her
name was Lucretia—"Lucretia, if you stay here we will take care of you." And at that time the slaves were leaving the plantations fast and she said, "no, I think I can make it," and she left. She raised her boys and then finally owned their own little pieces of land. Any my father was one of them, he didn't own any piece of land because he trailed my mother to New York because she said she was not going back south. Her father and mother were dead and her brothers said that they could only take care of themselves. So she struck out on her own and came to New York. He wanted her to come back and she said no, she was not going back. So, he wanted to marry her and he followed her to New York. Apparently he had been familiar with horses in the south because he got a job with a very prominent doctor named...Pascall? I think my mother said Pascall—Dr. Pascall, and he became his coachman. My mother in the meantime, had gotten a job as a cook in a family and the woman was very fond of her. She taught her to read and write.

Coker: Oh your mother had not learn to read and write before she went to New York then.

Fields: She had no education whatsoever.

Coker: How about your father? Do you know if he did?

Fields: Yes, he could read and write too. But I think he learned after he was grown. I don't think they went to school. I'm not sure but I don't think they did...because my mother got a second job after this woman died and after my father died. She got a job in New York and the woman would write the menu—my mother was a good cook as you know—and the woman would write the menu and my mother would read it. The first time it happened she said, "oh, I'm so glad to have somebody in this kitchen who can read," cause she hadn't had anybody.

Coker: Part of that that was erased on the tape, had to do with your borthers and sisters
and where you lived in New York. Do you recall where it was your parents lived at the time you were born?

Fields: Well at that particular time, before my father died, they lived in the forties. I understand it was in the section of the forties. That's back of the library in New York now, I'm sure about that. Later, she lived uptown, but uptown was not Harlem; it was in the fifties. We didn't live in Harlem until I went to live with my sister for a couple of years when she lived in Harlem—my mother never did.

Coker: Who were your brothers and sisters and what were the relatives ages in the family?

Fields: My mother had eight children and they were—first a girl and then a boy, all the way down the line. I'm the seventh child. The last boy was—she was pregnant with that boy when my father died and she lost the baby. My older sister was Lucretia, named from my grandmother—my father's mother. She became quite a musician. She went to school in New York and I remember she had the most beautiful handwriting. It was picturesque; it was simply beautiful. Then my next brother, the borther after her—I think my mother must have had these children very rapidly because she had eight and the boys all died. I think maybe there was an epidemic in New York. New York has had waves of epidemics so maybe that was it. I do not know but I never knew any of my brothers. But my two sisters—the first sister and the second sister and I survived. My two sisters were grown and my older sister lived until 1932. The other sister died, I think, in the twenties. They both had two children. The older sister's children did not live to be very old. I think one lived to be about four but the other one didn't. And my younger sister's children lived to be grown.

Coker: What was your younger sister's name?

Fields: Anna
Coker: Who was Lulu?

Fields: Lulu was Lucretia, my sister. My older sister's...

Coker: That was the other name for Lucretia?

Fields: Yes. Lulu was the name everybody knew her by because she didn't particularly care for Lucretia. She was a musician (laughs) and she had her own orchestra in New York. There were two theaters, one on 135th Street and one on Seventh Avenue at 131st Street—that opened while she had her orchestra and her orchestra opened those two theaters.

Coker: Those are both in Harlem?

Fields: Yes, both in Harlem. They are still there I believe.

Coker: I don't suppose there's such a thing as recordings of some of her music?

Fields: No.

Coker: that's a shame.

Fields: That is too bad, yes.

Coker: And you say that Anna had children?

Fields: Oh yes. Anna had two boys. One of them had children. Albert had three boys. Two of those boys are still living. Albert, I don't—that's the tragedy of my life. I don't know where these nephews are.

Coker: And actually these two nephews are your only surviving relatives?

Fields: Yes. One of them was married.

Coker: What would his name be?

Fields: Their names were Tobias. And one of them was married to Rebecca Talor's sister-in-law.

Coker: And you still don't know where he is and she doesn't either? That's interesting.

Fields: His wife was an odd person and she made him very unhappy and he became a drunkard. So I don't know where he is. The other boy married—I call him my
marrying nephew—he married three times (laughter). The third time he married a girl I think is very unstable; they have disappeared. They came to visit me one night. Living by myself, I don't keep an awful lot of food in my house because I don't eat that much. I went out to buy food and when I came back they were gone. I've never seen them since.

Coker: It's strange. I'm going to ask a peculiar question: Is that a characteristic among black people of just simply disappearing from the scene?

Fields: I don't know...

Coker: I've had this happen to me twice with black friends.

Fields: Most of the people that I know, it doesn't happen to. They cling to their families; they spend hundreds of dollars going backward and forward to the south. Maybe it was a germ planted by my mother when she said she would not go back, I don't know.

Coker: I recall that when I lived in Texas there was a fine looking, young, black woman who worked for my neighbor and occasionally she would come over and help me out. There was absolutely no problems in their relationship that I could see whatever. We were very fond of her and she seemed to be very fond of us. All of a sudden she didn't come anymore. They never heard from her. She had come from another town in south Texas but they never heard another word from her. And I thought, well, that's just peculiar to the one person. Then here in New Jersey, back in the sixties, I was working and I really was not able to do my house work and I had a woman from Newark who was working for me. I was very happy with her. She came to me once in two weeks to do my house work and I felt that I could trust her with, you know—although I was away from the house during the day-time. And we even talked about what had happened with this other friend and she said, "oh, I would never do that to you."
Fields: But she did.

Coker: And then it wasn't two months after that until she failed to show up. I tried calling her; I was afraid something had happened to her. I tried calling her home and her husband really gave me, "what for?" And I've never heard from her since. So when you mentioned your nephew and his wife disappearing this way, it all came together like pieces of a puzzle or something.

Fields: I don't know, because it was an unusual experience with me. Most of the people that I know are very closely related to their family. They might fight and all that sort of thing but still it was family. I used to say, "oh, you spend so much money travelling" to some of them, you know. "Oh well, we have to go see the family, have to go see about the land," or something of that sort.

Coker: One thing that we've not talked about has been your participation in the senior citizen's groups and your interest in writing. When did you become involved in the senior citizen's groups?

Fields: Well I've always been interested in groups. That was one of the ways—I guess it was as Brother Hall used to say—it was my compensation. Because he was one of those who said, "I was crazy enough to get married." But anyhow I've always been interested in groups. I belong to a drama group and I belong to a group that was called The Women's Achievement Club. They concentrate on bringing blacks to Plainfield, who had accomplished something. We'd bring them, you know, present them. One of them was Matthew Henson. I don't know whether you ever heard of Matthew Henson or not, but he was a man that accompanied the man who went to the north pole. In fact, he was at the north pole before because he dragged this man on the sled over the north pole. Well, we brought him and we brought Adam Clayton Powell here, and various...

End Cassette #3, Side #1
Begin Cassette #3, Side #2

Fields: ...this group of young women, they originally call themselves The Young Women's Achievement Club. But as we got older and the club became thirty years old, we decided we'd better drop the "Young." So it became the Women's Achievement Club. But we continued to bring people here and we brought Agustus Savage. She was a black sculptress who was well renown. She lived in New York and I went over to New York to make the arrangements for her to come to Plainfield to lecture. She lived in a converted barn in Harlem and has she made it into a very lovely place to live. But she had a pet. The pet was a white rat and the pet ran around the place free in her lap and out of her lap. And the pet jumped into my lap when I was trying to talk to her and I was petrified. I couldn't open my mouth; I couldn't say anything (laughs). She realized that I was scared to death so she reached over and took the rat and I could draw a breath. I'll never forget it (laughs). I don't know whether she is still living; I think she died recently. But she was a marvelous sculptress. She came and talked about that. And as I said, we had Adam Clayton Powell, Matt Henson. I can't think of anybody else but we had quite a few people. Then we would raise money and we gave little, small scholarships. We didn't call them scholarships because they were too small. They were fifty or a hundred dollars. I remember that we gave one to a girl who lived in Westfield who has become—I don't know what she does now, but she lives in New England. That was one of the groups I belonged to and I now belong to the NAACP. I was quite active in that for a time. I edited a newspaper here in Plainfield for the NAACP. I wrote it, I typed it upstairs in my bedroom, and then we would have it mimeographed and sent out throughout Plainfield. Working with that—with me on that paper was Catherine Barnes, who is now living in Virginia, and Dr. Clement DeFrietas, who is now living in Peurto Rico,
and several other people. But I remember those people. Oh, and Ethera and Catherine Fields. They were not relatives; they were just acquaintances. And we edited this paper. And let me see what else I did...

Coker: Was that the beginning of your interest in writing? Was that the first time you...

Fields: Oh no. When I was in high school, I was one of the editors of the high-school paper. So I've always been interested in writing. But throughout the years, instead of writing stories or anything of that sort, I used to take it out in writing long letters to people—to my friends. I would write a friend ten and twelve pages, which was a little stupid. I should have been trying to cash in on it. But I've always like to write things. But—oh yes, and I've always like to talk. I went to night school at Plainfield High School and I took—what did I take there...some sort of speaking. I forgot now what they call it. And of course, I got interested in hand-work. I can upholster. I can upholster a chair like any upholsterer.

Coker: Oh that's great. You can come over and do mine.

Fields: And I can refinish furniture. I've always like to do that—done that for years.

Coker: You mean stripping it, sanding, and revarnishing it? Oh, that's hard work.

Fields: If you go to the bathroom before you go, there is a chair up in the hall that I've done and you could see that. And there's a table, but it's covered now with plants. I had several things that I refinshed. I have a desk down in the basement that I'm getting ready to do it for my godson. I have two of them—I have three of them and two of them I'm going to restrip. I'm going to strip and refinish and give one to each one of my godsons.

Coker: You have three godsons or two?

Fields: Two. The other one I'm keeping.

Coker: I think that I would like for you to express any particular points of view that you
might have. To me, you're even more interesting from a standpoint of the years that you have lived, through eight-two years of the history of this country of ours, as much as for the fact that you have been in the black community during all of your life of course. If you have any particular feelings or ideas about what this has done to you or how you feel about the way the country is going—I don't know what question to ask you but whatever you might like to say.

Fields: May I say this first. I remember the black soldiers coming back from the war—I think it was the First World War. There was a group from New York called the 69th. They had gone over to France, Europe, and fought. When they came back they marched up Fifth Avenue. And they marched in the arrangement of the ranks that they were when they left here. And there were all these open spaces in the ranks. There would be a soldier here and nobody across here, and then there would be one or two here and nobody. They walked in the ranks that they were when they left and they left the open spaces in the line for the men that they had left in Flanders Field. I was a young woman but I remember it so, because to think of all those young men dead. And they thought that they were doing right, because they were fighting as they thought for democracy. They were making the world free. Then they came back here and they couldn't get jobs. And some of them went back south and they were lynched because they wearing the uniform of the United States army. I've never gotten over that. I get upset every time I think about it because these men had offered their lives, their everything, and when they came back home they were nothing.

Coker: You know that they were actually lynched...

Fields: Yes.

Coker: ...for wearing the uniform of their country?

Fields: If they went home—if some of them went home, they would have to take the
uniform off...absolutely. And that's one of the things that has rankled because personally, I don't think I suffered as much from segregation or prejudice or what have you, because I was always—I think one of the reasons, I always able to take the other person. And I have a theory on a whole that you get what you give about some things. But there were these men, had given everything, and they were not accepted; they couldn't even get jobs. And then we felt that that was gone and passed. And then recently I read of a group of men in the south who had been used as guinea pigs. They were infected—deliberately infected with syphilis—you read about that?—and left to just die. Nothing was done for them.

Coker: And they weren't even told that was what they were infected with?

Fields: No. Why? Well

Coker: There have been instances, of course, in medical history of controlled groups being infected with different things, given different types of treatment, but these are supposed to have been volunteers.

Fields: Yes, but these people weren't.

Coker: But it's this publication has come out in the last few years. These people had no knowledge whatever.

Fields: No

Coker: As Americans, we can wish or hope that there's some mistake, that maybe they did know; maybe they just don't want to admit it now; maybe this is their way of getting reimbursed now. But at the same time, I'm afraid that the stories are right.

Fields: I'm afraid so, I'm afraid so, I'm afraid so. And then of course, as I said, at that particular time there were very few black magazines. There was the NAACP magazine, the Crisis, and that was about all. There was a newspaper or two. There was a black newspaper in Philadelphia, and one in New York, and one in
Chicago—the Chicago Defender, and the Amsterdam News, and...what was the name of the Phili—I don't remember the name of the Philadelphia one. But most of the black news, you got through those papers. And perhaps they too were prejudiced on the other side, we didn't get these stories. If I were a bitter person and I'm not—I don't think I am—I think that that particular type of thing would ruin me. And I think it did for a number of people—that kind of treatment.

Coker: In otherwords, the resentments that you have in your own life are not particularly because of things that have happened to you but because of things that you have learned...

Fields: Yes

Coker: ...of happening to others of your race because of the race.

Fields: Yes. Now I think that maybe I was particularly fortunate or dull. Maybe I was so dull I didn't realize what was happening. I don't know.

Coker; I have the feeling that people of your age, regardless of what their race might be, who were born in this country learned to adapt to life around them and accept life as it came. Now these younger generations—and here you are almost a generation older than I, but I too learned to accept, to make do, to live with what we had to live with, whereas the younger generations have come on and said we are not having it; we are not going to live with it.

Fields: They are not, they are not.

Coker; It's making a new world for us to live in, sometimes very unsettling for the older ones and then even though we may sympathize with whatever their goals are. One thing I didn't think to ask you about. As a child, you mentioned that you had at least one or two rather close friends who were white children. Did you have a occasion very often to actually visit in the homes of your white friends as a child? Did you exchange back and forth? Did they come and visit you or you
them?

Fields: No, no, they din't. No, I'm sure they didn't.

Coker: And from what you said, I have the feeling that if you had gotten interested, for instance, in a white fellow, that your family would have rejected this out of hand.

Fields: Oh yes. I think so, I think so...

Coker: How do you feel...

Fields: ...because when I was coming along, there were black entertainers and any time there was any whisper of their being associated with a person that wasn't black, there was resentment.

Coker: Today—in the society we have today, with there being somewhat more crossing over of racial barrier, how do you feel about racially mixed marriages now? Do you think they're still a bad thing or do you think it's okay?

Fields: Well personally, I've never thought they were a bad thing because I never thought about it much or less. Contrary to most feeling, I feel that if these people are going to cross over, what they need to do is to realize that they are going to suffer—both of them. Because the world hasn't reach the place where they accept people as people. And they are both going to suffer. I remember when this Freda, who lives in my house, so to speak, moved here, I had another couple—a black couple living here too. This black girl and Freda worked at the same place. Freda didn't have a car and this girl did. She would not take Freda to work in her car. And Freda had all sorts of difficulty because she was white, married to black. I don't think she has it as much now; I still think that there are people who haven't changed one solitary bit. But it was very difficult. And later after this girl and Freda became friends, it was alright. They visit each other now but originally she could not take her in her car to work and they were
working—there was Calco—was it Calco?—not Calco, there was something down in south Plainfield that everybody works. They worked during the war and afterwards. But anyhow, they both worked at this place but she wouldn't take her.

Coker: I have met you through the creative writing class of which Professor Fishtein is the teacher, and you have written some rather interesting articles based upon some of your experiences. Have you had very much experience in writing? Have you ever published anything, although you mentioned editing the NAACP news here locally, and being on the high school paper? Have there been any other instances of your publishing your work?

Fields: I don't think so.

Coker: Hazel, it's been a real pleasure interviewing you and talking with you about your life and some extent about mine too. As we end this interview, I believe that in our conversations, that we have agreed together that the important thing between all races, particularly the black and white race, is to accept all other people as individuals and not to throw people in a class of being black or white, or rich or poor, or whatever, but rather to accept each human being for what they are and to know them in that regard rather than throwing them into a class. Does that express your views?

Fields: Oh, it certainly does. Because throwing people all into the same barrel because they happen to be certain color or certain religion—we have that too, you know.

Coker: Yes

Fields: It's wrong because you are throwing away quality. So many people who would be so good for everybody are forced not to do what they can do because of classification. For instance, there was once upon a time when the slogan was all black women drank gin and that all black men carried razors. That's nonsense.
That's classification that's absolutely unwanted. And it's a great loss. It's a loss to them, it's a loss to the individual, it's a loss to the country, it's a loss to everything concerned.

Coker: Okay, we are going to call this quits then.

Fields: Okay.

Coker: Thank you.

Fields: And it was so good doing it with you.

Coker: Thank you, Hazel.

End Cassette #3, Side #2

End of interview