



**Oral History interview with Genora Louis Birdsong [Equal Employment Specialist] conducted by David Pemberton on June 15, 2016 at the National Processing Center in Jeffersonville, IN.**

**David Pemberton:** Genora celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary here [National Processing Center] two years ago.

**Genora Birdsong:** Yes.

**DP:** It will be 53 years in December.

**GB:** December 23<sup>rd</sup>.

**DP:** You came to work in 1963. Before I get to the circumstances under which you came to work, I understand that you grew up in a large family. I'd like you to tell us a little about what it is like growing up with your nine brothers and sisters, in more or less the same household, and all jockeying around, probably for the same bathroom.

**GB:** (Laughing) Well, growing up with six brothers, three sisters, we had schedules. Pretty much we were in and out at different times. So, we all just shared and got along. You go knock on the door, they come out, and the next one goes in (laughing).

**DP:** Where were you born and where did you grow up?

**GB:** Clark Memorial Hospital, Jeffersonville, Indiana. Right down the street from where I live.

**DP:** And you grew up in Jeffersonville.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** Were there any subjects in school that you liked that may have directed you toward working at the Census Bureau.

**GB:** Geography.

**DP:** Was that one of the things that you were thinking about when you applied to work at the Census Bureau?

**GB:** No-no-no. I wanted to see where all those people that I saw everyday coming down my street, I wanted to see where they worked. That's where they worked. So that's where I went.

**DP:** They came down the street on their way to the Census Bureau?

**GB:** Yes...and home. I used to stand in the front yard and watch them go by, and 4:30, here they come.

**DP:** So you applied in 1963, and how long was the waiting period between the time you applied and the time you were actually offered a job?

**GB:** Probably two months.

**DP:** Pretty good. It's gotten longer, maybe it will get shorter, but that's pretty good. Which branch of the Census Bureau did you begin working when you first started?

**GB:** Data processing. Called it DPD [Data Preparation Division].

**DP:** In 1963, what were the jobs that the data processing branch was responsible for?

**GB:** Processing, data input, verification, keypunch.

**DP:** So the Data Processing Branch was involved in data input, not so much in the output, the output would be punch cards that went somewhere else.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** But the input was, essentially, you got the questionnaires and, the questionnaires would be on a table or desk in front of you and you would be keying off the questionnaires that you saw on the desk.

**GB:** Yes, we had a setup, basically paper, and you just key what you saw and it was mainly numerical.

**DP:** These were 80 column cards. Basically you key, and then you verify, and then if the verification and the key matched, the card goes through and you go to the next one.

**GB:** Well, we would key and then it would go to a verifier, and then they would verify.

**DP:** Ok, a separate operation.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** And you did this for approximately 4 years?

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** And then you got permanent status at the Census Bureau by taking a test.

**GB:** Yes, we had to take the test every year. Even if you were doing the job and doing it well, you still had to take a test to keep it. Then lots of things changed, then we didn't have to take the test any more.

**DP:** When was that?

**GB:** I want to say probably 1964.... Before 1970. I'll put it that way.

**DP:** You were at the tail end of that process, where you had to take a test each year because you said you were doing it in 1968, and by '70 that process was over with.

**GB:** It was somewhere in there because I think I was in data processing four years.

**DP:** I understand that your sister was there, and she had preceded you in data processing.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** As the junior person, you were the one who had to leave because you couldn't have two people from the same family in the same branch.

**GB:** Yes. They told me, "You are the one who created the problem by being the sister, so you got to go to another branch." So they sent me to Geography. Yay!

**DP:** Which, by the way, I don't think that would have discouraged you.

**GB:** Nope, nope.

**DP:** When you first went to Geography, what were your duties there?

**GB:** [Laughing] That is very interesting, because when I first started I was in the filing department. My job at that point was setting the clocks, setting the time on the clocks and showing another young man how to set the clocks.

**DP:** And this was for coming into work, working 8 hours, or 9 hours, then...

**GB:** They never told me what it was for. [Laughing]

**DP:** They never told you what it was for?

**GB:** No, but as a part of what we were doing, we were in the filing department, and we took care of all the city directories, and other large books and maps.

**DP:** Which were used for the purpose of [creating] address lists.

**GB:** Yes. And making maps, scribing maps.

**DP:** Were you involved in filing of both books and the map sheets themselves?

**GB:** Yes. The maps would be maybe small or they could be 5 to 6 feet big. There were all different sizes.

**DP:** And you had these special filing cabinets for maps?

**GB:** Oh, yes.

**DP:** Everywhere.

**GB:** Yes. We still have them.

**DP:** I guess. Well we still use the maps.

**GB:** Yes, we still have them. The drawers are about that high, and we still got them.

**DP:** So you were filing at first. You worked in the geography branch for about 22 years?

**GB:** Yes I did.

**DP:** Were there other things that you did while you in the branch, in addition to filing?

**GB:** Yes I did. We had an operation called "Stick Up." We would have the names of the streets, the lakes. You have a little knife; you cut them, and you stick them on the map and burnish them down. I did that for years. I also was a check agent. I paid people.

**DP:** And thus, you became a very popular woman.

**GB:** Yes, [laughing] yes. At that time, I was also a union steward.

**DP:** What were your duties as a union steward?

**GB:** Assisting employees with issues, helping them understand issues, just being of assistance to them.

**DP:** Were you engaged in bargaining on their behalf?

**GB:** Yes, I did.

**DP:** And these would have been over all kinds of things, except wages and hours?

**GB:** You know, I think we did a little bit of everything. It was back in the days of President Jimmy [James E.] Carter. It was long, it was tedious, but it was worth it. Very interesting when you have to sit down and negotiate a contract. You gave up your annual leave; you gave up your salary; you gave up your nightlife; you gave up everything.

**DP:** So these were long, drawn out negotiations.

**GB:** Yes they were. We were only allowed 40 hours to negotiate, and if we did not get a contract within the 40 hours, then you went on annual leave.

**DP:** A rather harsh approach to bargaining.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** But I suppose it did help to have a kind of end point established, so that you knew this work had to be done by that time.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** And so everybody is focused on trying to come to an agreement, by that time.

**GB:** Yes and they tell you if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. So we got to bargaining, we got the job done.

**DP:** How long have you been a member of the American Federation of Government Employees?

**GB:** Up until about 4 years ago.

**DP:** Ok, why did that change?

**GB:** Good question [laughing]. I would answer if I knew, but I'm not sure.

**DP:** In addition to doing the work for the union and working in the Geography branch, you were also involved in the first EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] advisory committee. What did you do for them, and what was the organization called?

**GB:** It was the EEO advisory committee because we did not have an EEO office as such. So, whenever there was a problem, employees would share their problems. We would take it to the committee. The committee would look at it and make recommendations to management.

**DP:** And were there representatives of both management and union on the EEO committee.

**GB:** Yes. Two from management, two from union.

**DP:** And was there an appeal process.

**GB:** No.

**DP:** Ok, so the management decision was final at that point.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** I may ask you this more than once, but were there any remarkable people that you met at the Census Bureau up until the point you left Geography Division?

**GB:** Remarkable as referring to management? Customers?

**DP:** People who were outstanding in some way? I'll give you an example. I asked about remarkable people, would you now be able to think of any remarkable people?

**GB:** Remarkable people that have visited the Census Bureau... the greatest of all was Muhammad Ali, when he showed up here.

**DP:** When did he come?

**GB:** He came, I'm thinking, it was right before he and his last wife Lonny [Yolanda Williams, married 1986-2016] got married because Lonny's mother worked here. That was the reason Muhammad was here. His mother-in-law worked here. Other than Muhammad Ali, I remember we had one agency head. You really don't get to know them, unless they come out in the working area. Because the employees thought he [the agency head] was the Xerox man. They say, "Well who is this?" That is our director. We thought he was the Xerox man. So, if a person came to our agency, we may or may not see them. All depends on what department they went to. So anybody remarkable, I really cannot recall many.

**DP:** Ok. I understand that you have a recollection of a former director, Barbara Bryant [Director of the Census Bureau, 1989-1993].

**GB:** Yes, Barbara Bryant was here and while she was here, it was very interesting, because she was here during derby [Kentucky Derby] time. That's when we found out she loved horses. She maybe even owned horses. But, it was just remarkable, she left with an impression. Very nice lady, very nice lady. Other than those, Muhammad and Barbara Bryant, the rest of our visitors may have gone to the director's office, and we would have heard they were here, because you saw them spruce up and get ready, give a good presentation. I can't remember many of them.

**DP:** During your career at the Census Bureau, have you had any mentors, any people who have helped you along in your career either by suggesting training, by suggesting moving to another branch, any kind of suggestion, verbal or otherwise, as to how to improve your position and I guess your grade at the census bureau?

**GB:** People who have mentored me over my 53 years are few and far between. I have had some that have been influences. There was a man that came from headquarters named Robert [L.] Kirkland [Chief, Administrative Services Division], and when he came here he made a tremendous difference in the atmosphere. The way people responded to each other. He encouraged people. He encouraged me to become a member of the Census Federal Credit Union and I did, and I was on the board for 20 years. I served as president and secretary. Bob Kirkland. To this day, I'm not sure he's even still in [the] Suitland area, but he was one. Roland [H.] Moore [Associate Director for Field Operations] was another. When he came here, it was just the way he treated people. The way they made you feel comfortable, and through talking to them you wanted to do more, you wanted to do better. You strive to do better things and help people, so those two I remember distinctly.

**DP:** You mentioned that you were involved with Census Credit Union. Is this something that had been here before you got involved with it or were you involved in establishing the credit union?

**GB:** No, the credit union was maybe 10 years old when I started working with [the] board of directors. It was probably 2009 that we dissolved the relationship between [the credit union at] headquarters and Jeffersonville. Now we're the Jefferson County Police Department Credit Union. But for the 20 years I was there, I never missed a meeting. It was interesting, challenging and rewarding. You learn a lot about people, finances, and how to treat people who have *bad* finances. You learn a lot about your employees.

**DP:** That's the sort of thing that credit union officials and bankers have been asking for hundreds of years.

**GB:** The Census Federal Credit Union, if you ever have an opportunity, it's owned by the members, whereas a bank is owned by a corporation, or a few people. The members own the credit union. Once they learn that, they can provide services beyond their beliefs. Just say I am a member...I am an owner. And go for it.

**DP:** And the officers of the credit union were open to suggestions from the members?

**GB:** They are elected by the people. The people can put them in, they can take them out.

**DP:** Now you were in Geography Branch for 22 years. Early on, you did some of the filing. What were some of the other duties that you had in Geography Division?

**GB:** I was lead clerk, which meant helping others with the work. I had a unit that shipped maps to different parts of the world. I had maybe 22 people under me at the time. It was interesting because, they were interesting beyond belief. It was a matter of understanding the different personalities, knowing what the job is, knowing the deadlines. Getting all those personalities together, working together as a team and getting the job out. We worked in a warehouse. It was different from working in an office because you are in a big building. You may not have the best lighting, you may have some little friends with you [laughing], people from outside, little visitors, little legs, moving around.

**GB:** Yes. It was a challenging thing. But we did maps, and we shipped maps. It was called the Map Shipment Unit, and we shipped maps, and we verified maps. We did everything to make sure that when a city developed a new area, we knew the streets, the lakes. We did all of that. So that when the maps were ready and you go get the GPS [global positioning system], well the Census Bureau put the map on there, you ready to go.

**DP:** And was this especially heavy during the decennial census?

**GB:** Yes it was, yes it was. Because you have your metropolitan areas, such as Chicago, Atlanta, New York, all your metros [metropolitan areas]. As they grow, so do the requirements here because you have to include all those new areas, all those new buildings, all those new streets, the little dead ends, the new businesses. Yes, the work increased during the census. We may, at one point, when the census was over, there may be ten people in the unit. When the census was up and going, you may have 50 people.

**DP:** What GS [government service] level were you at the time you were supervising 22 people?

**GB:** Five.

**DP:** A GS-5.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** That just goes to show you that headquarters and the Jeffersonville office have two different overall ranking systems. You'd never be able to supervise that many people at headquarters as a GS-5. Here, supervisory opportunities arrive sooner, I would think. Because they need people to supervise other people and you can do it at a lower grade.

**GB:** Yes, because you can have a grade, our journeyman level was a [GS-]3. Data keying was a [GS-]3. Your lead clerks were GS-4s. Supervisors were [GS-]5 and 6. Then, you may have a few



[GS-]7s, we even had [GS-]8s and 9s, 10s. I don't know how many [GS-]7s, 8s, 9s, and 10s they have now, but once a person gets into a position, they don't leave it. They are probably still there now. [Laughing] Really! As a [GS-]5 or 6. Because we were called a primary subdivision. We were not the biggest, we were just a portion of everything.

[Thunder and inaudible [radar, minutes away]]

**DP:** Is this going to affect the interview? [**Cameraman:** "No, no." "If we hear a big clap of thunder, we might as well just stop."]

**GB:** Because I don't want to say anything or reveal anything too much about what was going on back in them days [laughing] because... [more laughing]

**DP:** That was a different time.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** That's part of the point of these interviews. They are to show that 30 years ago, things were done a little differently than they are now.

**GB:** And if you wanted to talk about 30 year ago, 40 years ago it was very different.

**DP:** Different in what ways?

**GB:** We could not wear pants, and if a woman put on a pair of pants, they had to be dress pants. They could not be Levi's or jeans. We had a few supervisors who said, "Enough is enough. We're going to wear our pants." So, they came into Geography with their pants on, [laughing] or wearing pants, I'll put it that way. That started the trend of allowing women to wear pants to work. There was a time when you could smoke at your desk—everybody who smoked, smoked at their desk. Nowadays you cannot do that. They cleaned the air up. A lot of things have changed. Jeffersonville had a turnover. When there was a large census, the numbers go up. We even had what they called the inverted register, which meant that if you made the lowest score, we hired you.

**DP:** And why was that?

**GB:** Because they wanted to hire people who otherwise would not get a job. So they inverted the score so your lower score qualified, but for only a Grade [GS-]2.

**DP:** Ok.

**GB:** You didn't get promotion potential, but you had a job. We had Schedule A [hiring authority], which meant a person with a disability could come here and work under supervision

as a Grade [GS-]3 and would not have to compete with other applicants for a position. We had our largest influx of veterans back in 1970 and '75. We got veterans everywhere. And that was good. Then, once the census is over, it goes back to normal. So what happens? Those supervisors who now have been promoted to a GS-5 or 6 or 7, they revert to GS-3s and 4s.

**DP:** So there's a lot of adjustments that coincide with the cycle of the decennial census.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** Perhaps a little bit smaller with regard to, say, the economic census.

**GB:** Yes.

**DP:** But the big bulge would have come at the decennial census.

**GB:** Yes. That's when the grades were elevated, and people were happy. You were getting an opportunity to do something you wanted to do. But, as soon as the census was over, [you went] right back to where you were. What happens you get that experience, you get the years in so when the next census come, the same people may get the same jobs again...and again...and again.

**DP:** You were talking about the ebb and flow of employees at Jeffersonville. Were you personally frequently reassigned when the work dried up?

**GB:** No, because I did not desire to get into that. I could have, but it wasn't a part of what I wanted to do. At that time I was basically either a union steward or entering into EEO, and helping people. I just wasn't interested in the movement up and down. I was very satisfied where I was. That was helping people, basically.

**DP:** And that moves us into the EEO. You worked for Geography for 22 years and my understanding is that in 1989, you interviewed for a position with the EEO office in Jeffersonville, and you got it.

**GB:** Yes. In 1989, I was approached and asked to apply for the position in the EEO office. I'm thinking noooo, because you have to go take a typing test, and I am tired of taking tests. But I went to Ivy Tech [Ivy Tech Community College] and took the test and did 100%. To my surprise [laughing]. And that was the requirement to get into the office. Once in the office I started working with Special Emphasis, and that means we observed Dr. [Martin Luther] King, Black history, Women's history, Native American, Hispanic, Asian, and so on, and that occupied a lot of time. So, going from one set of helping people, which was the union steward, into helping the same people, but as an EEO officer, was my main focus. That's where I've been ever since.

**DP:** Could you tell us a little bit about what it takes to arrange for one of the Special Emphasis or special months.

**GB:** I like meeting people spontaneously. One time I was flying back from Palm Springs, CA, (where ever Bob Hope [the actor] lived), from a conference. There was a man on the plane, and I said he looks like somebody who would come to our agency and speak to our employees. So, I asked him would he come there for our Hispanic program. He happened to be a professor at Indiana University Southeast, and so he said, "Yes." So, he did. As a part of getting the program together, this is what I do, I engage people that I don't know. I invite them here to talk to our employees. But, besides that, we have a working group, which means the branches and managers will send us volunteers to help us with the program. Basically I want them to make the plans. I oversee the plans and keep everything in line with what the director will and will not accept. Once the plans are in place, they're sent to the director saying, "This is what we want to do." Then the graphics department helps us with everything--programs, flyers, awards, and we present it. The employees donate door prizes, food, artifacts, and they have a myriad of everything. These employees have everything. They're very artistic and sometimes we may just have a program that displays the employee's talent, say for Women's history. Show us what you do—it may be sewing, it may be embroidering, it may be whatever, just show us what you do. And so when it comes to Special Emphasis, we try to educate, share the cultures of the Native American, the Hispanic, the Asians or whatever group we're observing and make everybody feel at home and yet be educated at the same time and have a little time for fellowship or interaction. Now we have programs where for some of our observances we may have games and they would be cultural games that I've never heard of before. It may be a hula hoop, it may be dances from India, or where ever, but we do it all, singers, we just want to show that we here at NPC want to represent all of our employees.

**DP:** These kinds of programs do not come out of nowhere. They involve a good deal of preparation and research. How are you involved with the preparation for these programs?

**GB:** For example, in August I'm going to training, and I will be communicating with other specialists from around the United States, and the Department of Commerce, and other agencies and discuss what we do. We make contact with different organizations and make them explain to us what they will like to come here and do for us. It may be a matter of asking. We had a young man come here—he was a professional singer. When he sang, he would share his life, he would share coming from Mexico into the United States and what it was like. So, the research comes through talking to individuals. We may go on the computer, do some searching, see what's out there, look at it, bring it here. It may be a video that is acceptable and we play it, but everything is vetted and it's even more vetted now [laughing]. Once approved we look at it good, go over it and then present it, but I do get training for it.

**DP:** Are you the primary person who gets the training and then comes back and conveys that training to the rest of the EEO staff?

**GB:** There's just two of us in our office, and I'm a part of headquarters where there's more. Yes, I am the one who is the manager of the Special Emphasis program here at NPC.

**DP:** That involves a lot of thought and reflection about how do I represent something new this time. Is that a challenge that you enjoy meeting?

**GB:** Yes, I enjoy the different things that we can share with the employees. If it's a budgeted item, it's even more enjoyable, but just finding people in the community willing to come here and say, this is what I do and I want to share it. It's enjoyable and it's challenging and it will go on forever hopefully. Special Emphasis [laughing].

**DP:** That's the kind of motivational activity that one would hope that many employees would have an opportunity to feel as they're working here. Many may not have as many opportunities as you do at this point, but if we could find ways to encourage this to think about what can I bring to the [Census] Bureau that I may not be able to bring in my specific position that's something that would help perhaps with morale.

**GB:** When it comes to Special Emphasis, at orientation for new employees I tell them about our programs, and I ask them do you sing, write, or dance? If you want to be involved, call the office [and] give us your name. We'll get permission and get you involved. We invite anyone to get involved with our programs.

**DP:** And how is the response to that request been?

**GB:** It's good. It's good.

**DP:** Obviously you feel that this is a helpful program both for the agency and the employees.

**GB:** Special Emphasis is good. We have diversity council, we have Special Emphasis, we have a lot of affinity groups. Anytime you can get the employees to sit and talk to each other and share, it's good. It helps put the morale back on the job. It helps with morale once they leave the job, on the way home, on the way into work. Not everybody arrive[s] happy or leave[s] happy, so somewhere in between there has to be a balance. Getting involved does that, and I enjoy it. I like it, I love it [laughing].

**DP:** Well your resume shows it, your involvement at the Census Bureau has been extensive but it has also been extensive outside the Census Bureau.

**GB:** [laughing] I love people. I can't help it.

**DP:** Sounds like you found yourself a very good niche.

**GB:** Purpose in life [laughing]

**DP:** You found yourself a good place to be able to exercise...

**GB:** Yes and I have found that they have given me the opportunity here to use my talents and abilities to project a more pleasant atmosphere other than just keying or doing maps to having a person just live and to be able to have people - 'what else is there to do'. [laughing] It's fun.

**DP:** And rewarding.

**GB:** Yes, yes. I have several awards. A speaker we had one time invited me to be the Grand Marshal for the Dr. King parade.

**DP:** Was that in Louisville [KY]?

**GB:** In Louisville. So, in 1996 I think it was, the mayor gave me a proclamation, named the day after me, two days in fact, because there was a snow storm. So they had to do it twice [laughter], but the opportunity came because I had invited this man to come and speak to our employees.

**DP:** And he came.

**GB:** He came. He did a wonderful job and in return he asked me to be the Grand Marshal and I go, "oh, okay." [laughing] I worked with the Red Cross.

**DP:** What did you do with the Red Cross?

**GB:** I was on the board of directors for the Red Cross for nine years, representing this agency, as vice president. We trained on disaster, blood drives, galas, anything to help the community.

**DP:** Are the Red Cross blood drives at the NPC generally a successful activity?

**GB:** Yes, yes.

**DP:** The employees do give blood?

**GB:** Yes, yes. The employees do give blood here, and very generously, yes. The blood drives [have] been going on here for years and the Clark County Red Cross is very involved.

**DP:** And in addition, I understand that you're very involved with your church and your church choir.

**GB:** Yes, I am highly involved with my church [laughing]. I've been the church clerk for 45 years.

**DP:** And not only did you preside over the choir at the Census Bureau, but you presided over the choir of the church as well.

**GB:** I directed the choir at church, at the Census Bureau, with my family. Our family sings, we love to sing, so we recorded an album.

**DP:** I understand you did, and it was released professionally.

**GB:** Yes, it was released professionally and it was interesting, because it showed all the dynamics of even using like “du dudu du duuuuu,” you know Auld Lang Syne. We had to get permission just to use those few little bars and we had to dig and research and pay ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers] for all of these privileges. It was interesting. That translates into once you get back to work and they say, “Well let’s sing.” “Okay, let’s sing then.” Well, you have to come and audition. Excuse me, I’ve got to audition to be a director? I’m sorry. I sing too much to be auditioning for this. That’s where my career ended [laughing], with the choir [laughing]. But it’s still a good choir. They still sing at Christmastime.

**DP:** And I understand that they also go to some of the nursing homes and retirement homes.

**GB:** Yes, we did. Yes, we did.

**DP:** As well as serenades in the Bureau.

**GB:** Yes, we used to go to nursing homes and sing. Oh, it was quite enjoyable, uplifting. Yes, we did.

**DP:** And I understand that even after all these years here in NPC, you weren’t ready to hang up the shingle just yet, you’re kind of considering a future here.

**GB:** The question has been asked of me, “When are you going to retire?” I laughably say within the next 10 years. Meaning I don’t know.

**DP:** Well of course each year you can say it, within the ten years.

**GB:** Within the next ten years and the reason is I enjoy what I do. I enjoy the people. I enjoy the challenge. When I quit liking it, I’m gone. But right now [laughing] I’m here.

**DP:** On that note, I think I’ll end the interview and I want to thank you for taking the time to talk with us and I hope you will enjoy the resulting product.

**GB:** Thank you for the opportunity, and I hope I will enjoy it, and I hope everyone else will too because I certainly enjoyed doing it! [laughing].