

## BLACK BOTTOM

Helen Nuttall Brown:

It was an area very near to the downtown section but very far removed from the downtown section in terms of being isolated economically and geographically. It was home to me. It was a safe place.

It was a neighborhood mainly of single homes with a number of businesses on corners, but they were family businesses. The people who had the businesses were ethnics like Italians or Germans.

I was on the corner of St. Aubin and Chestnut. It was a magnificent home and had a slate roof, and double brick construction. It had a cork floor in the kitchen and bathroom which was very easy on the feet. It had the central vacuuming. You just plug into the wall and you vacuumed. It had hot water heat which was very expensive. It had stained glass windows. The neighborhood was not consistent. Most of the homes were frame, many of them were two family, a few four-family, very few.

People trusted each other; people knew each other. It was safe.

We went to neighborhood schools. When the students finished Miller, which was called a junior high school at that time, it was converted all the way through the 12th grade so that Blacks wouldn't transfer to Eastern. We knew the pattern. We didn't have the facilities that a high school had. We didn't have a swimming pool.

My father owned a drugstore and the funeral home on the corner next to ours. My father was Dr. Harry M. Nuttall. He didn't operate the funeral home but he rented it out to people. He rented it out to Charles Diggs. He didn't really rent it to him; he just let him be the undertaker. Charlie was a little boy at that time. He would hire pharmacists at the drugstore. My father never allowed us to work.

The drugstore was very well stocked, and it was just two aisles. The drugstore was on the corner. The funeral home was next to it. There was a flat upstairs, and there was an up and down flat behind it. It was a very beautiful building. It was just across the street from Coleman Young's family. They had the cleaners and lived behind it. On the corner was a grocery store, Mike's grocery store. The grocery store on the other corner was Louie's. We could walk and get almost anything we wanted--bakeries, hardware, cleaners, grocery stores.

James Jenkins:

Communities were tight. The streets were safe. Everybody lived in the neighborhood. The people owned the stores. The doctors, the policemen on the beat, they would live in the neighborhood. Some lived on Macdougall, some on Clinton. They would hand out on the corner with you. If something would go wrong, they'd send for the

neighborhood police. He would come town if a man and women got into an argument in their house and he slapped her around. He would go around and talk to them and settle everything.

I remember the original Young's Barbecue. I remember how he had the little kilns built back there with that fire going and that meat on little platters. He used a ladle to reach in there just like the old-fashioned Germans to used bake bread years ago.

Helen Brown:

It was Coleman's uncle who owned the barbecue at that time, and he wouldn't give away one rib. I went around there many a time with Coleman's sisters, and we would just stand there, and he would not give them a rib.

James Jenkins:

Do you remember the Bagnasco's that had a funeral home down there? Do you remember that Sunday that they killed his father? That was the Purple Gang. We were all on St. Aubin around....We don't even know what happened. All we know is that they killed the fellow squabbling and left him on the sidewalk. All we heard was the machine guns go off. We looked around, and when we looked around this big black Lincoln was squirting smoke going towards St. Aubin from Vernor Highway. they got up to Vernor Highway and turned right and that was all. The kids ran out of the funeral home with the bags. They put their father in the bags and carried him in the funeral home. The police came. They came out with a broom and a bucket of water and washed up all the blood and said, "Nothing happened. Nothing happened."

SEE LABOR ALSO

GWENDOLYN EDWARDS

I was a maid at Hudson's for many years, and I used to be in the millinery department. The people who owned Hudson's used to come in, and I was real friendly with them, and they'd say, "How do I look Gwendolyn?" I'd say you look fine or you don't look fine. I was a maid. Normally the J. L. Hudson Company put very fair girls on the elevator so when I went down there I got a maid job. I didn't particularly care what job I got so they gave me a maid job. Finally they gave all the dark black people maid jobs. All the pretty ones went on the elevator.

Hudson's was a nice place to work. It didn't pay nothing. We may have got paid less than the elevator operators, but we had better times. I did at least. Mrs. Webber, the people that owned Hudson's, would come in. I'd lean on my broom and advise her not to buy that hat or whatever. We got to know them all really well. It was fun. The millinery department needed a full-time maid to keep things tidy. I kept the floor swept up and dusted off. The millinery department was the whole floor. That was my job. I'd go in and clean the offices in the morning and straighten up. Then all during the day I'd mop and pick things up. We had about 60 to 70 maids on the staff.

I worked there 25 or 30 years and then I went to Fords. When they decided that they were going to have a union I was one of the first representatives. There were five of us that worked in the women's department that were responsible for that Ford group.

We'd have conferences where we would teach the women what to do and what not to do in the plant. Then we would go all over, to every Ford plant and have a conference once a year. We'd take maybe 50-60 women out of the plant and pay them the wages they would be losing and teach them how to be good union members.