CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

FLORINE WISE

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Chemical Heritage Foundation Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

on

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(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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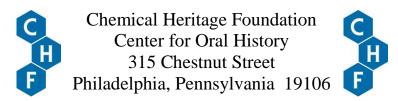
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ABSTRACT

Florine Wise was born in her grandmother's house and grew up in West Ambler, Pennsylvania, near her grandmother and many aunts and uncles. Her parents worked for Sperry Univac; two uncles worked at the asbestos plants. Although Wise was aware of special precautions needed to avoid asbestos exposure, she occasionally went sledding down the piles of asbestos-containing waste, as did most of the children she knew. Wise attended local parochial schools and graduated from Wissahickon High School; she worked as a legal typist/assistant for the Montgomery County Courthouse for a number of years. She has lived in several other places, but she considers Ambler her home town. Two of her children live near Ambler, one in Maryland.

Detailing changes she has observed in her community, she notes that West Ambler has not been included in Whitpain Township's comprehensive development plan; the area only recently got stop signs and sidewalks. She says older communities, many of them generations old, are being uprooted to make way for gentrification. Because of the remediation of the asbestos piles West Ambler's park was closed; the new Wentz Run Park, built as a substitute, is too far away for West Ambler residents to use, so Wise has been trying—unsuccessfully so far—to get a community center approved Boys and Girls Club, a space for other groups like dance classes, and a place for both young people and senior citizens to hang out.

Wise helped establish Citizens for a Better Ambler (CBA) to fight a proposed high-rise on Ambler's asbestos area. With the advent of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the CBA developed into a community advisory group (CAG), and the ensuing debate over remediation caused a split between Sharon McCormick's faction, who advocated total removal of asbestos, and Wise's, who wanted capping. Wise points out that removal of asbestos would mean many years of continuous truck traffic, with uncontrolled asbestos exposure, and increased flooding, all in the African-American neighborhoods of West Ambler. Despite these disagreements, Wise says things are going well with the CAG, and she is now the head of the environmental justice committee of the CAG.

Although she laments the demise of community cohesion, the indomitable Wise continues the dedication to service practiced by her mother, an informal community leader. She is now involved with Chuck Colson's Angel Tree, through the Presbyterian Church; this group helps keep prisoners bonded with their children. She emphasizes the importance of communication among citizens and believes that a community center would expedite such communication in Ambler. Her objectives include improving the safety and appeal of Ambler for its residents, especially by improving infrastructure and preventing flooding.

INTERVIEWER

Lee Sullivan Berry earned a master's degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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