

An Oral History Interview
with
Frances Vinson Curtis (Mrs. Roger)
Civic Leader

by
Helen Scharf

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with Frances Vinson Curtis

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
with
Frances Vinson Curtis (Mrs. Roger)

Interviewer: Helen Scharf

SCHARF: This is an interview with Mrs. Roger Curtis, a resident of Scotland, a very old community in Bethesda on Seven Locks Road.

I am Mrs. Helen Scharf, the interviewer, and we are having this interview at my home in Bethesda on the eighteenth of February, 1972.

Mrs. Curtis, where were you born?

CURTIS: Germantown, Maryland.

SCHARF: That's in Montgomery County, of course, and in the State of Maryland.

What was your name before you were married?

CURTIS: Frances Vinson.

SCHARF: And your father's name?

CURTIS: Louis Vinson.

SCHARF: And your mother's name?

CURTIS: Louise Vinson.

SCHARF: Did she come from Germantown, too?

CURTIS: No, she came from Travillah.

SCHARF: Is that in Montgomery County?

CURTIS: That's in Montgomery County.

SCHARF: Mrs. Curtis, you just corrected me about where Scotland is located. You reminded me that it is in the Rockville boundaries, not Bethesda, and we accept that correction and go on from there.

Did you grow up in Germantown?

CURTIS: Partly.

SCHARF: Tell me where you did spend your childhood.

CURTIS: Quince Orchard.

SCHARF: Where did you go to school?

CURTIS: I went to school in Quince Orchard.

SCHARF: I'd like to know something about the school in Quince Orchard. Is it still there today?

CURTIS: No, it's not there today. It was a one room school with one teacher, and she taught all grades.

SCHARF: About how many children did you have in your class?

CURTIS: About twenty.

SCHARF: And did you spend all of your time in Germantown or did you ever live any place else in the county?

CURTIS: Only Germantown and Quince Orchard, when I was younger. Then we moved to Scotland from Germantown, and then I went to school on River Road in a one room school.

SCHARF: Didn't they have the school in Scotland then?

CURTIS: They had a school in Scotland, but I never went. We went . . . My mother moved in Bethesda. I'm making a mistake. My mother moved in Bethesda, and then we moved back to Scotland.

SCHARF: Now you are not one of the oldest inhabitants of Scotland, but I know you've been there for about forty years.

CURTIS: Yes.

SCHARF: And you came, you say, with your mother to live. Your husband is a member of a very old family in Scotland. Will you tell me something about his family?

CURTIS: Well, his family was the Doves, and I have learned that they were about the oldest families in Scotland.

SCHARF: Do you have any idea how far back that family goes?

CURTIS: No, it's so far back I could not remember. I don't remember. I wasn't in Scotland at the time.

SCHARF: And probably even if you had been, you wouldn't have known all of his relatives.

CURTIS: No, I wouldn't have.

SCHARF: When did you and your husband get married?

CURTIS: Some time in about the '30s or something like that.

SCHARF: During 1930s. Sometime in that period?

CURTIS: Yes.

SCHARF: Before we go on about your life in Scotland, did you have any brothers and sisters living in Scotland with you at that time?

CURTIS: My oldest sister lived in Scotland and also my brother.

SCHARF: And do any of them still live there today?

CURTIS: I have a brother there and a sister.

SCHARF: The same ones?

CURTIS: Not the same ones.

SCHARF: I gather you'd had a large family.

CURTIS: We had eight in our family.

SCHARF: And most of them still living today?

CURTIS: Two have passed on.

SCHARF: I'd like to know how people in Scotland, forty years ago when you came there, forty years ago when you married, I guess, how they earned a living.

CURTIS: The women were housewives, and the men worked as gardeners.

SCHARF: Did all of the women stay home and take care of their children?

CURTIS: Some women stayed home and some worked out.

SCHARF: And what kind of job could you get forty years ago in this area?

CURTIS: Well, they did general housework. Most of them did laundry and cleaning.

SCHARF: And the men were gardeners?

CURTIS: And the men were gardeners.

SCHARF: That community was built up enough for you to find work around it, or did you have to go some distance from home?

CURTIS: Well, they used to go to Edgemoor and Bethesda, and some went to Rockville.

SCHARF: Edgemoor is where we are sitting right this minute. And how did you get there?

CURTIS: They went by car. Some people had cars, and they would pool cars. Then once upon a time, they tried to have a bus go in Scotland, but some people didn't travel on the bus. They couldn't make enough money, so they took the bus off.

SCHARF: Does the same thing exist today, or are you getting a little more bus service?

CURTIS: Well, we get more bus service now.

SCHARF: Mrs. Curtis, I think the story of Scotland is very interesting. Of course, in recent years there has been a new development there that has replaced some of the old

houses and used some of the old land, which was probably once farm land, for a new development, but when I first knew you, you had recently bought a house. Now, did your husband's family have some land there that you could have lived on?

CURTIS: Yes. My husband's mother had a quarter of an acre. She had a three room house on that. So they moved to Washington. She used to keep her husband's nieces. They moved to Washington so that this little girl could go to high school. Then we lived in her house for a while, my husband's mother's house. Then we purchased our own home. We bought our own house and land, a quarter of an acre, five rooms, from old people of Scotland, from Mrs. English, and we lived there.

SCHARF: Would you like to describe where your house is rather precisely so we get a picture where Scotland is?

CURTIS: It's off Seven Locks Road in Scotland, and I'd say Scotland is between Rockville and Bethesda.

SCHARF: And tell something about the purchase of that house, how much it cost and what it was like.

CURTIS: Well, when we bought our first house and the land, the house was five rooms, two bedrooms, dining room and a living room and kitchen. We didn't have any running water in the house because the sewers didn't come through there then. So then we lived there for quite a while. I couldn't say how many years.

So then when the new development came in, then we didn't sell our land to the. . . . We didn't go in with those people. So then we built another house in 1971. We built a five room house.

SCHARF: And a very handsome house it is, too, and you are not going to the spring to get your water these days.

CURTIS: No. We have a bath and a half, and running water, electric heat.

SCHARF: How did you finance your house?

CURTIS: The new house?

SCHARF: Yes.

CURTIS: We had some money which we paid from and then we financed it with. . . . Mr. Fisher was our builder. My husband worked for Mr. B. J. Fisher, and he was our builder. So he made it so that we could borrow this money from one of the banks that he worked with and some of his friends were very nice in helping us.

SCHARF: Would you put a value on your house now. How much do you think it would sell for if you went out in the market and sold it?

CURTIS: I imagine it would sell for about \$30,000.

SCHARF: And how much did you pay for your first house?

CURTIS: \$1,400.

SCHARF: You've come a long way, haven't you? And also, I guess the price of housing has come a long way since you first bought that house.

Mrs. Curtis, you married a Dove whose mother was a Your husband, Roger Curtis, was the son of a Dove, and the Doves were a very old family in Scotland, been there for many

years and probably for many generations. What's happening to that line of Dove descendents?

You have a daughter. Tell me how popular Scotland is with your family.

CURTIS: Well, Scotland is very popular, I think, with my family.

SCHARF: How many children, grand children do you have?

CURTIS: I have one daughter and eight grandchildren, two great-grandchildren.

SCHARF: And they are all living in Scotland?

CURTIS: They're all living in Scotland.

SCHARF: And they are very happy there?

CURTIS: They are very happy.

SCHARF: I suppose one of the features of that happiness is the fact that you have belonged to the church in your community for many years. I suppose your daughter went there as a little girl to Sunday School.

CURTIS: Yes, my daughter went there as a little girl to Sunday School, and also I went to Sunday School there.

SCHARF: Oh, did you?

CURTIS: And I have my grandchildren going to Sunday School there, and they sing in the choir. My three grandsons is the altar boys of the Scotland AME Zion Church. One of them is the preacher, one of my younger (grand)sons.

SCHARF: Tell me about the preacher because I have heard him preach a little bit, and offer prayers. He can't be more than about seventeen years old.

CURTIS: He's seventeen years old.

SCHARF: He's not really a preacher yet?

CURTIS: Well, he has a license, but not a preacher to baptize and give communion. But he has a license to preach anywhere if anyone will ask him to come out to preach, he could do it.

SCHARF: Perhaps you'd better tell us what kind of a church this is and something about how it's organized and governed.

CURTIS: Well, the Scotland AME Zion Church is a very religious church, and we have organization together that it is in with the other organization of the churches, the AME Zion Church of Scotland. We belong to the organization of the Philadelphia and Baltimore and Washington Conference. We have a meeting once a year of the Baltimore Conference which we have to vote and send delegates to, this Conference, so that we may get our preacher back.

We can ask our preacher back, but the Conference has the say whether we can get our preacher back or not.

And the work that we do in our church to raise our money to pay our preacher is by We have a group of different kinds of organizations. We have a Stewardesses Board. We have a Trustee Board, and we have a Poor Steward Board. We call it the Ministry of Kindness. We raise money to help to pay our preachers. And then we have a Men's Day program which goes out and raises money. We have a Women's Day program which raises money, and all this money is risen and brought back to our church to take care of our church business, which is to pay our insurance on our church, the building of our church.

We haven't been too long built a new church--remodeled our church. I wouldn't say built, but remodeled. We used this money to help to meet those bills and things to pay for that.

SCHARF: Mrs. Curtis, for the long period that I have known you, and I guess this is going on thirty years now--will be eventually--you have had a great many responsibilities in the church. Now what are some of the things that you have done actually in the church?

CURTIS: Well, I used to be the chairman of the Trustee Board, once. Then I was the person of the Missionary Society, and I was a Conference worker once, person of the Conference worker. Now I am the Ministry of Kindness, person of that, of which I am a class leader. We have five classes in our church, and I am number one class leader. We have a meeting one night a week, which is very nice, and we have to make reports to all these organizations that we are head of.

SCHARF: Let's just go back a minute. Now, first of all, we didn't mention the fact that your church has, as you say, been rebuilt in recent years. I can remember when you had a dedication of your church, and that was a big job. Do you have any idea how much money you had to raise to do that?

CURTIS: To have this. . . .

SCHARF: To rebuild your church.

CURTIS: Well, I don't know exactly.

SCHARF: You had a mortgage on it, didn't you?

CURTIS: We had a mortgage on it, but I don't know exactly how much money.

SCHARF: Do you still owe money on the mortgage?

CURTIS: I think we owe some money. I don't know exactly how much.

SCHARF: But I also remember that you had new pews, and you had a nice heating system, and you had air conditioning put in there, and you had carpeting, and you have furnished a kitchen in the basement for the dinners that you serve and the receptions you have. All of these things represent a good outlay of money. Now, how do you think you were able to do this? First of all, tell us how many members you have.

CURTIS: We have, I'd say, about sixty members, but the pews that we bought, each member volunteered to give a pew. Although we paid all but \$700, we had some white friends to give us \$700 on our pews. Also they gave us a refrigerator. They gave us a stove, and they have given us, I think it was \$2,000 to help us fix our preacher's study. So we have had some help with those people that gave us. I won't call their name because they don't like for you to call their name.

SCHARF: Well, this was a very generous thing for people to do without having their name attached to it. They weren't proud. They were just genuinely interested. Why do you suppose they were so generous in making these gifts to your church?

CURTIS: Well, one of our members worked for these people, and she was always talking about our church, how nice it was. They were very good Christians themselves, and they wanted to do something for God, and that is why they picked our church to help.

SCHARF: And that kind of a gift, I guess, has made the rest of you work hard, too, because you are so appreciative of it.

Well, tell me something about your preacher, Reverend Randall.

CURTIS: Well, we all like Reverend Randall. We've had Reverend Randall for about eight or nine years. Reverend Randall has been a very active preacher. He has worked right along with us, and whenever we put up five dollars, Reverend Randall will put up five dollars, too--he and his wife. He is really a nice. . . . He knows how to go about building and helped us in a lot of things of which we didn't know how.

SCHARF: He helped to plan?

CURTIS: He helped to plan.

SCHARF: Use the money wisely? Could you tell us how much money you pay Reverend Randall for his ministry?

CURTIS: Well, we were paying him \$200 a month, but now I think the trustees raised it, but I don't know exactly how much, probably \$300 a month. I'm not sure.

SCHARF: And he lives in the city and has expenses. How does he make enough money from his ministry to support his family and himself?

CURTIS: Well, Reverend Randall used to work in the Post Office in Washington, but now he is retired. It's only he and his wife in the family. So our church, we have a Stewardess Board, preacher stewardesses, to see after those kinds of things that Reverend Randall should need. We are supposed to go into his home and find out whether he needs anything or not,

which he never, but then we always give him money. Every now and then, they will present him with a check, if he does need anything, to see that he has it.

SCHARF: Is this something that is done usually in the AME Zion Church?

CURTIS: In every AME Zion Church this is supposed to be done. I think it is done in all churches, even Baptist--I'm not sure, but I think it is. You do this.

We have a book that they call Discipline, from the AME Zion Church, and each year if they change anything in these. . . . They don't change rules but every two or three years.

SCHARF: What's that called?

CURTIS: The Discipline. Each one can buy one if you want to, and then that tells you just what you have to do, what a member is supposed to do that belongs to the AME Zion Church.

SCHARF: Let's go back now to the preacher. You say the Conference assigns the preacher every year, but if you want your preacher very much, you can ask the Conference to return him, and if they think it is wise, they do. Now that means that eight or nine times already, you have asked the Conference to return the Reverend Randall?

CURTIS: Yes. We have a Zion Elder who comes around. We have a quarterly meeting, four quarters a year, which this Zion Elder comes that one quarter to our church. We have to make reports to him. Then we have to vote. After we make our reports, then he says "Who wants your preacher back?" We vote. We stand or we raise our hand, and that is if we want the preacher back.

But we always raise our hand because we want him back.

And also we have to do the same thing for the Zion Elder. We have to vote for him, too, because after the meeting, he says "Now who wants the Zion Elder back?" So we vote for him, too.

SCHARF: That's kind of embarrassing, isn't it?

CURTIS: Well, it isn't. He knows we like him. He's a very nice man, and he gets elected. . . . We raise money to pay the Zion Elder, too, but we only pay him once a year. We raise money and put that aside, and then when they go to the Conference, they pay the Zion Elder. But so many churches pay him so much, each for those quarters.

SCHARF: Now, you pay him a salary, which you raise occasionally, and that's understandable as the cost of living goes up. He needs money to live. How do you raise, with sixty members or seventy members, how do you raise \$2,400 to \$3,600 a year to pay him?

CURTIS: Well, we have dinners at each others homes. Some of the members have dinners. Some have groups of singers to come in at the church and sing. Then we have a plate we take up for offering. We take up one plate for the singers and one plate for the church, and this money that we raise for the church is for the church and the other is for the singers. We count the money, but we count only what we keep in the treasury.

We do that. We start as soon as it gets kind of warm.

We start having these clubs and things to come in. Each club brings so much money, raises so much money. Then sometime, if the members want to, they can donate money to the church.

SCHARF: Those clubs are earning money for their own churches as well as earning some for you because of your two plates.

CURTIS: Well, the singers keep the money for themselves to have. This money that they take, they keep themselves looking neat. They buy themselves suits. They all have suits alike so they all will be dressed alike. One won't be dressed different from the others, and that's what they take their money for.

SCHARF: That's a group then?

CURTIS: That's a group.

SCHARF: Did your grandsons, at one time, have a singing group that went around to other churches?

CURTIS: Well, they still. I did have six boys. I mean there are just six of them now because one is away, but they do. They sing, yes. They are called the Barnett Singers, and Arlene, the little girl, sings with them. So they do go around yet and sing.

SCHARF: And they are called on to help provide a program for other churches that are fund raising?

CURTIS: That's right.

SCHARF: All of them are able to sing, I take it, and are in demand. What about the offerings, the regular envelope offerings? Do you do that, too, to raise money?

CURTIS: Well, the regular offerings, the envelopes, we get them by the year. I guess most all churches have those offering envelopes, which it has the [Inaudible] that if you collect, what are you going to pay each Sunday. And they have to pay for them. They put in a quarter extra. Each member pays for the envelopes. Some people pledge five dollars a Sunday. Some pledge two and three. So that goes to the trustees to have to pay the preacher and other things that have to be done around the church.

SCHARF: In other words, you have a budget, and so much money has to be put aside to keep up the church, to heat it, and to provide the lights, and then salary for the preacher.

Now the trustee board of which you have been chairman at one time has some responsibilities, and what are they?

CURTIS: Well, they are responsible to see after the church, to see if anything goes wrong in the church. Anything that happens to the church--the same as you keep up your home. That's what the trustees are supposed to do.

SCHARF: And do they have any responsibilities toward the preacher?

CURTIS: Yes, they have to see that the preacher gets paid. Then if they don't have enough money to pay the preacher, then they come to these clubs, have a meeting for the members and they come to the club and they say "Well, we need so much more money to pay the preacher." And they give it to him, but they always have it. They are very nice about it.

SCHARF: Well, does everybody belong to a club or just those who wish to belong?

CURTIS: Well, we always like to have everyone in the church

working in some kind of club or members of a club. We have the chairmen of the club, and then we get the members to join our club.

SCHARF: Well, do you have names for your clubs or numbers?

CURTIS: We have names--Willing Working Club and. . . . As I said, we call these. . . . We call it a club, but we have a Willing Working Club. We have a Home Mission Club, and different clubs. We have a group of ladies that sees to the cooking, and she selects her members.

SCHARF: Now on what occasions do these people have to cook?

CURTIS: When we have Women's Day and we have a group of preachers to meet at our church once a month in the summer. They cook and get the food ready.

SCHARF: In other words, they entertain. They have hospitality.

CURTIS: Yes.

SCHARF: I have been to your church. The last time, you were having sort of a history day, and I don't know what else you were celebrating. I kind of forget, but you had a visiting preacher and his choir, and afterwards you entertained some other ministers from the area, and you had a very nice dinner and reception. Is that one of the things you do with the hospitality. . . . ?

CURTIS: That's what the ladies do. Anything like that we have, those ladies prepare the dinner.

SCHARF: Do they have to provide some of the food, or do they have a fund that they can spend?

CURTIS: They have a fund that they can spend, and sometimes we don't want to use the fund. Other members of the church will give food, cook it and carry it there to give.

That helps keep the money in the treasury.

SCHARF: Now you said something about the Home Mission Club. Do they have a special job?

CURTIS: They raise money. The Home Mission is for to help the young preachers to go and study, so we raise money, and we have to send \$50 each year when they have the Conference for that, to help the young preachers to study.

SCHARF: Now does the Conference run its own school for preachers?

CURTIS: I don't know. I think they send them to the schools. They don't have their own schools, but I think they have a seminary somewhere they send them to.

SCHARF: Now your grandson who has a license to preach, the license was given by the Conference?

CURTIS: By the Conference.

SCHARF: And will he perhaps go on and try to study to be a minister?

CURTIS: He will. He is going to do that.

SCHARF: And then this Conference will help to . . .

CURTIS: Will send him there.

SCHARF: . . . provide his school money. The Ministry of Kindness has a happy kind of sound. What do they do?

CURTIS: Well, we give to the people that need and families in the community that don't have enough, have a large family, and maybe they can't get their rent paid or they don't have enough food. We find out, and so we will go to their home and give them money to spend. If someone gets sick and doesn't have what they should have to have, we go to the

home and we see that they have it.

SCHARF: Do these have to be members of the church?

CURTIS: They don't have to be members of the church, just the community.

SCHARF: Just the good will toward the community. You mentioned earlier special events like Men's Day and Women's Day. Are these fund raising days?

CURTIS: These are fund raising days. This is the time when we try to raise two or three thousand dollars, which we mostly generally do.

SCHARF: On each one of these days?

CURTIS: Each one of these days. Well, the women and men always try to beat each other. The men always have their program first and then they will raise around two thousand dollars, something like that. And then next will be the Women's Day. We have never beat the men yet, but we have come pretty close.

SCHARF: With a membership of sixty to seventy, and let's say about half of you have to raise two or three thousand dollars at a time, this is a big order. How do you go about doing it?

CURTIS: Well, the men have programs. When those kind of days come up, no one else takes in as the days of the Sundays in the church because we leave it for the men to raise their money. Well, they will have dinners. The men cook their dinners, and they will sell the dinners.

SCHARF: To whom?

CURTIS: To their friends. A lot of the men work. Some

work at night, and they, too, the younger men. Well, they have friends, and they tell them "We're going to have a dinner", and they come by and buy the dinner, and some they will carry it to them. Then they will have singers as I said we had. Then they put out envelopes, Men's Day envelopes. They will beg and ask people to give them something on Men's Day.

SCHARF: To friends.

CURTIS: Their friends. And that's the way they raise their money. Then they will volunteer to give twenty dollars, besides the money they raise. Then they will have a preacher preach on that Sunday, and all the collections taken up are for them.

SCHARF: The women? You told me from time to time some of the things you were doing. Would you like to tell me some of the interesting things that you have done to raise money as a person in the?

CURTIS: When I raised my money, I made chicken sandwiches and sold to the Bethesda Country Club caddies. I knew a man who worked in the I guess you would call it the . . .

SCHARF: The golf shop?

CURTIS: . . . the golf shop. I would fix these sandwiches and carry them over, and then he would sell them for me and collect the money and bring it home. Well, I used to do that on Saturdays and Sundays. Then when they had holidays, I would fix up the sandwiches. I would make twenty dollars on holidays and ten dollars on Sundays and Saturdays. I kept that money and turned it into the church. One year, I raised \$150 like that.

SCHARF: And you did that on weekends after a whole week of work yourself?

CURTIS: I'd get up early on Saturday mornings and Sunday mornings and cook these sandwiches and carry them over, and then I'd go on to church.

SCHARF: And you cooked for your family, too?

CURTIS: And I cooked for my family.

SCHARF: That's amazing. Would you like to say something about the use of the church in connection with the new development in Scotland?

CURTIS: We have had a lot of white members come and visit our church, which they do right often. Then, we don't know who this man was who came by and gave us the air conditioning. I think everyone likes our little church and the place where it is at, and we do have a lot of friends.

SCHARF: It's right on the side of the road. People travelling to the new developments up and down Seven Locks see it. Is that how they have gotten interested?

CURTIS: I think that's how they got interested in it. They like to come in and see it. We are very friendly with anyone who comes in, and we invite them back.

SCHARF: And as I recall, doesn't Reverend Randall belong to some association of other ministers in the neighborhood?

CURTIS: He belongs to an organization with white preachers. He is the only black preacher that's in this organization.

SCHARF: I remember, too, that when you were planning as a community to give land and get new houses, that the meetings were often held in the church.

CURTIS: All the meetings of the new development were held

in the church. Yes, they have a meeting every month at the church, the basement of the church. That's where they hold their meetings. Then in our church, we have study halls. We have the

SCHARF: Study halls for children?

CURTIS: Study halls for children. Then we have people to come and teach, help the children in this here, and we have the

SCHARF: Didn't you have some classes there for grownups, too?

CURTIS: We have classes for grownups. We are going to have a sewing club there, but it hasn't started yet.

SCHARF: In other words, the Scotland AME Church, since it has been rebuilt and added to, has very comfortable quarters for all kinds of community activities. It becomes kind of a center of life.

CURTIS: That's right, and we have. . . . I can't think of what I was going to say. . . . where you take children when they are sick.

SCHARF: Oh, the clinic.

CURTIS: That's it. The clinic. We have the health clinic there once a month.

SCHARF: That's convenient, isn't it? Everybody in Scotland can walk.

CURTIS: Walk down to it.

SCHARF: Very good. Well, Mrs. Curtis, I have enjoyed speaking with you, and we'll keep this. . . . Oh, perhaps you want to say something else before we stop.

CURTIS: The Scotland Church and a Potomac white church have a FISH Club. It's called the FISH Club. Each year, we give canned food and bring it to the churches, and then we select people who can drive and carry people to the hospital or things like that. If someone has to go to the clinic in Suburban Hospital or wherever they go, they will give their name, and we have a committee to see to someone that will come and pick them up. That's called the FISH. That's the Potomac white church and our church in Scotland.

SCHARF: I'm glad you mentioned that. Somebody else told me about two clubs, one of them called FISH, the other name I don't remember, HELP perhaps. That's a service for people who need something in a great hurry, and if there is no other person ready to give it to them, they call a number, somebody's telephone, and food goes and the other things you mentioned.

CURTIS: Yes. That's right.

SCHARF: So you and a Potomac church are working together to provide assistance to this FISH club. Well, that's very interesting. I took care of their telephone calls one day, and I'm glad to know somebody who works with FISH. This will be all we will do now, and perhaps later, if you think of more things that we ought to record about the community and the church and your family, we'll come back again and tape some more.