**UMBC Course Cultural Documentation in Participation with Communities**

**AMST 358**

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**Steelworkers United Union Hall Local 9477**

**Dundalk Ave, Baltimore, MD**

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Interviewee: Addie (Lorretta) Houston-Smith (**AH**)

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**Part 1**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stpOHB_QGyo>

[00:19]**AH:** Okay, My name is Addie Lorretta Houston-Smith. I’ve started working for Bethlehem Steel Sparrow’s Point in 1974. I worked at Enoch Pratt Free Library before filling out an application for the steel mills. I couldn’t imagine what I would be doing in the steel mills, so I took vacation, filled out an application, and I was hired. I was hired as a laborer, and I was hired in the pipe mill. And in the pipe mill, we had jobs like grinders, hookers, and it was funny because when I had, when I first got laid off, my first experience with unemployment, I had to tell them the type of job that I worked, and I said, ‘well, I was a hooker’, you know, and the lady was ‘you were what … at Bethlehem steel?’ You know, and I said ‘Oh, let me explain the job to you’. I was a crane follower, and I hooked up these long cables, and I would pick them up and hook it up to the cranes, and that was what a hooker did, you know. And I made a lot of money doing that, so I didn’t leave. I did 30 years at Beth Steel and I stayed there. I also worked in the tin mill, I worked in the rod and wire mills, I worked at the 42 and the 56 inch coal mills, and I worked at the new coal mill. When I retired, I was working at the new coal mill. I was a crane operator, I was a coordinator, and I enjoyed the job. I really enjoyed my job, I had my own crane. I was assigned to a crane, and it was a new crane. I had air-conditioning, I was an older woman, and I’m going through the change, so I needed air. So they gave me the, I had an air conditioned crane. They all were air-conditioned crane, okay. Now I did not grow up in Dundalk. I’m a city; I’m a product of the city. Back in the day, my uncle and my father, they would catch the train, when it was the streetcars, to Bethlehem Steel. They used to go all the way down to the mills, so by the time I got there, it had changed; we could drive a car then, okay? Modernization. So, as I went on, I became involved in the union, I became a union official; I was the chairperson for Women of Steel for 9477. I taught the women a lot of things, when we would have issues in the mill, we would have meetings once a month and, and any type of issue that needed to be resolved, I was the person. And we would talk to, and we would talk to the superintendent, and we would see what we could do to get our issues resolved. Like feminine needs for the bathroom, and anything else we need, you know. And they were usually cooperative with us, you know. They would do, you know, or try to participate and give us what we need. And… I’m the oldest of twelve kids, I wanna say that. From the mills, I’m the only child in my family that ever worked in the steel mills. I have three daughters that I raised. Swing shift was very hard. If I worked daylight, I cooked my meal when I got home. If I worked 3 to 11 I would cook before I went to work. If I worked 11 to 7, I would cook dinner when I got off. And that’s how we managed. And I’ve been married for 44 years. So I have a story to tell. Bethlehem Steel was good to me. I’ve had my issues, I’ve been fired, you know, for situation that I had, but I was rehired, and I became the president of Women of Steel.

**[04:57]MS: Would you like to talk about that situation or…?**

[05:00]**AH:** No, Not particular.

**[05:03]MS: Did you live in the Dundalk area, or did you live in the city?**

[05:06]**AH:** I didn’t live in the Dundalk area. I grew up in the city, I would say I’m the city connection. I grew up in the Lafayette projects near John Hopkins Hospital. And I actually worked for Pratt Library at Broadway in New Orleans before I came here at Bethlehem Steel.

**[05:30]MS: Did you feel that there was discrimination against women, or what was it like being a woman at Sparrow’s Point?**

[05:34]**AH:** Very hard. There was discrimination against women and a lot of times I felt like I was discriminated against. And I was not a quiet person about it, and it got me in a lot of trouble, lots of times, because I wanted something done, you know, and I would talk about the issues that involved myself and a lot of other women.

**[06:00]MS: And being President of Women of Steel could you talk a little about that. How it came into being and why.**

[06:13]**AH:** They came into existence to try to organize the women, wouldn’t have babysitting services, you know. A lot of us had children, and we had to find some way to take our children, and there wasn’t any child care so we could get together, we could talk, you know, and find out what well if someone has any suggestions, you know, about how they can get child care. Because it was very difficult in the mills, you know, the women didn’t have any… You gotta take the child to the doctors, you know. There wasn’t anything close. We were at Sparrow’s Point, on an island, you know. And it was very difficult, you know. We talked about racism, we talked about, we fellowshipped a lot it the bathrooms, through tears. You know, to keep each other strong. And there were a lot of problems, but we would resolve them

**[07:12]MS: And racism as well? Did you experience that or in that environment was it also discriminatory?**

[07:18]**AH:** Towards jobs, sometimes. I would apply for a job and I wouldn’t get it because they would give it to someone else even though I had the time, I had the experience, they would give it to someone else. A younger person, because of , I think it was age, my age. And I had gotten up in age and they didn’t felt like I could do the job, even though I know I was qualified to do the job. So that happened a lot to me. And I did not like it. I was labeled a trouble maker. Darleen had to represent me a couple of times. And, that was, then I just settled down, I knew I didn’t have long to go, so it didn’t matter anymore, you know. That [unclear] I delt with it.

**[08:12]MS: You mentioned that you grandfather and father worked at Sparrow’s Point.**

[08:15]**AH:** My father and my uncle worked at Sparrow’s Point

**[08:19]MS: I’m sorry, so it’s been in your life, this idea of Sparrow’s Point, is that what led to you applying for a job?**

[08:23]**AH:** No. I applied to Sparrow’s Point to make the money. I mean, we made good money, you know, and when I got my first paycheck, I knew I wasn’t going back to Enoch Pratt Free Library. Why not? What I made in 2 week for Enoch Pratt, I made in 1 week at Bethlehem Steel. So I stayed. And I enjoyed my job. I was a crane operator, I was the best crane operator there was. I loved my job.

**[08:53]MS: Can you tell me a little bit about being a crane operator? What exactly are you working on? Does it change always or is it usually the same kind of [unclear]**

[09:02]**AH:** Some of the crane had what they called moving cabs. And you could, the crane actually, it’s on a rail, like a railroad, like the trains, okay? And it’s just, a moving cab, you could move back and forth with it, okay? Stationary cab, it’s just at one end of the building, it’s either on that side or either this side, and you just go up and down the rail. And you pick up, well my job was picking up coils, pipe and things like that. You know, loading railroad cars, and anything else. Trucks, you load trucks, and I mean, it was really amazing, we had hooks, slings. We had what they called C-hooks, we had hooks that rotated, I mean, it was really amazing. And a lot of times when I would come down, a lot of the female operators, a lot of the guys would look up when they see you come down, ‘Were you up there?’ You know, and it was like a really amazing, it was a women up there, you know. And there were really amazed. But it wasn’t really a bad place to work, you know. Because, you know, we had our issues too, you know and we were women and it was something new for the men. When we first go hired, you know, they had to get used to us working in the mills. And being a women, I was gonna have it my way. It was my way or no way. And that’s the way it was

**[10:37]MS: When you look back, what really stays with you, the memories or stories that really…?**

[10:42]**AH:** The people. Even now, I get teary eyed, because you worked with these people all your life, and then all of a sudden, it’s all over with, you know. And sometimes, you know, you might not remember each other’s names, when you see someone in the street, but you go, ‘you worked at Bethlehem Steel’ and my kids always have this joke. They tell us, ‘God, when she gets around those people, boy, they all get loud.’ We worked at a steel mill, okay, we don’t need mics, we don’t need any of those stuff when we talk to each other. Can you imagine, we’re in the middle of Macy’s and you run into, to your coworkers and everybody in the store is looking at them, ‘are they crazy?’ ‘Look how loud they are.’ But’s that the joy we have for each other. And that’s how it is. Even the formans, I mean, some of my formans, we have one named George [unclear]. I’m gonna mention his name. He used to get on my nerves but when I see him now, last time I saw him, I think it was in Costco’s. And I’m in the middle of the store going, ‘Hey George’ and he like, ‘Loretta’ And we’re just hugging, you know, ‘how’ve you been?’ I mean that’s the way it is, you know. I mean you miss these people because it’s a part of your life. You were there forever. And that’s the way it is.

**[12:13]MS: How are you doing now?**

[12:15]**AH:** I’m going fine, I’m in college. I’m getting, working on my bachelors, in bible college. So I can teach my children, my grandchildren and I’m fine. And I work out at the gym, haven’t lost a pound but I’m there. I’m just… to keep my healthy, you know? So… because I do know working at the steel mills from the asbestos and breathing, we catch the cancer and a lot of diseases that we have, so you have to stay active.

**[12:55]MS: And so you miss, obviously, your coworkers and your friends, is there anything else you miss about Sparrow’s Point? Or this community, were you involved at all in Dundalk?**

[13:05]**AH:** Not really. Because I did a lot in my own community, you know. I did go to the college down there, like I said, I was very active with the union because I was one of the union officials and I participated in the Marches on Washington, and a few other things… the rallies, and I mean. They were exciting; I remember we went to a rally in Pittsburg, Stand up for Steel, for all women, I mean, and it was maybe 5,000 women in Philadelphia walking through the streets with our signs, ‘Stand up for Steel’ when the company was in trouble. And it just unfortunately that we waited til the last to start modernizing and it started affecting, you know, the company itself, you know. It was just old. And it needed to do, make a lot of imporvements. Everybody else around us was rebuilding, you know, but we didn’t. And I really feel like that’s what hurt, hurt our company.

**[14:12]MS: Is there anything else you would like to add, or Brandon, do you have any questions?**

**[14:17]BR: I was curious about what you guys did for fun, with your coworkers after work?**

[14:22]**AH:** Oh, honey… well we can gather together with each other, we can go up the road to Mickey’s, sit there and play the machines; it’s like a big casino at Mickey’s. And you go up there and eat, you know, and you just sit there, they play cards, they did a lot of things. But for me, I went home. I had work to do, I had another job. When I left Bethlehem Steel, I had to go home and take care of my children, so that’s what I did. I had a family. But we did other things like at the, we had a Christmas party for children, I participated in those things. You know, like, Women of steel, we do Christmas party, like breakfast with Santa, we did a lot of things like that, you know? And of course the old fashioned union meeting, we see everybody at the union meetings, you know. So… anyone else?

**[15:29]MS: anything else you would like to add?**

[15:32]**AH:** No, that’s basically it. I call myself the city connection. I come from the city, and I lived in the Lafayette projects, and like I said, I’m one of twelve and John Hopkins were our hospital.

**[15:51]MS: Actually I do have a question about that though, in your neighborhood, did you know a lot of people that worked at sparrow’s point? Was it a place that…?**

[15:58]**AH:** Yes, a lot of people worked for Bethlehem Steel, that lived in my neighborhood. I lived in the tall building there were 11, there were 6 tall buildings, there were 11 apartments on each floor, and there were 11 floors. And a lot of people would catch the street car and come to Bethlehem Steel, in my neighborhood. That’s a lot of buildings but they have demolished them. They, they imploded them. You know, they are not there anymore. The whole community is gone, and now it’s called Pleasant view. Yeah…

**[16:44]MS: Thank you very much**

[16:45]**AH:** You’re welcome

**Part 2**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqpkWmoE0_Q>

[00:08]**AH:** As you know, my name is Loretta. And I wanna talk about the first time I started the work at Bethlehem steel, 1974 July. My first assignment was in the pipe mill. And when I, when we entered the mill, the guy said to us, ‘ladies watch out for the moving cranes’ So, of course none of us had experienced working in the, in a mill before at all. So when the crane started moving, we all got up against the wall like this and we were petrified. And here comes this crane, moving, and we’re like ‘which way do we go?’ But he forgot to tell us that it had a moving cab and to watch the cab at the operator who was the current the lift. And we learned that later, but we so petrified, we did not know what to do, we were like, and the men thought it was so hilarious. They wouldn’t tell us any different. They wanted to see our reaction to how we would react, we would react at the moment. And they said ‘Watch the moving crane’ we were all stupid to the fact that it had a moving cab. Alright, the next thing is they took us around and introduced us to all the machines. And like I said, we had a job, we were grinders, and we were hookers, and it was just so fun, we were rollers. And it was just so funny, like when we had to go to unemployment to sign up for these jobs, and they said, ‘Well, what did you do?’ and we would tell them the things that we did, they were ‘Where did you work at?’ ‘We work at Bethlehem Steel’ ‘As a hooker?!’ ‘Yes! That’s what I do.’ So, we had this, you know, explain what a hooker actually did. I had a babysitting problem and my Forman had me come in one night. I had to open the mill, I had to turn the lights on to do my job. And during this time, I didn’t have a babysitter; I didn’t know what to do with my child. And like I said before, a lot of us had problems with our children. Where were we gonna leave them? You know, and this was on 11 to 7. And I looked at my daughter, she was two. I grabbed her little pillow, and she had on her little pajammies, and I drove to Bethlehem Steel, and I carried the up the ladder with me, into my crane. And there she stayed, she slept with her bottle, and I, until I completed the end of my shift. I had no babysitter, I think my husband was working and we were having, you know he was where he was doing that time, but I had to do something. I couldn’t leave my child at home. And I couldn’t, I think back then like ‘Wow you put her in a crane.’ But there were nobody there but myself, there was nothing else I could do. But take her to work with me, with me. And that’s what I did

**[03:27]MS: Would you mind telling me the story of when you saw the ‘Whites only’ covered by the women?**

[03:32]**AH:** oh, and that was right after the crane incident I had to go to the ladies room and as I was entering the ladies room. This was in 1974 and it said ‘Women only’ but as I went to open the door to push it, I could see where it said ‘White only’. They had faintly covered it with green paint but you could still see it, and I could not imagine a bathroom because I guess I wasn’t taught like that. I didn’t knew what racism was or discrimination. Even at that age when I got hire there because I had never experienced it, and that was in 1974. My mother kept me, kept her children sheltered away from that and when I saw, that sign that said ‘White only‘. I mean, I just couldn’t imagine it. You know I’m like ‘Oh wow’ and I said to the other females, I said, ‘Did you see what that says? ‘White only’’. And I question it, I always ask questions and some of the guys, the older men that worked there, they explained it to me that the bathroom was only for white men only, that the black men could not go in there. And that was very very disturbing, cuz I could not, you know, I’m here, ‘all you guys working here together and you couldn’t go in the bathroom?’ And they had a bathroom out front where they had showers and they weren’t allowed to go in there either until they start bring the women in in 1974 because it was the law. They had to hire women, they didn’t have women working there, they deferred the women, they first started coming in 1973, and they only brought in so many. But then they had a quota that they had to meet. It didn’t matter who you were, your mother could have got a job there. You know they didn’t care, they were hiring just women. And I thought you needed a high school diploma, you didn’t need a high school diploma. I was actually put on a job and the Forman gave me what they call a JSA, a job description, and he said, ‘read this’ Well hell, when he gave it to me he had it upside down and I gave it back to him. He said, ‘Did you read it?’ I said ‘Yeah’. He wouldn’t read, and there were a lot of Formans down there like that. They were put into positions but they couldn’t read. They could do the work on the mills but if you gave them something to read, they could not read. And this is the truth, and if a lot of other people would tell the truth, they would probably been in the same position I was, you know. I’m like ‘this man can’t read, he’s giving me something’ And then you know, he said something like ‘Do you understand what you just read?’ and you know I said, ‘yeah I understand’ But I [unclear] he had the paper upside down so he couldn’t read it either. He didn’t know what the hell he was giving me. You know, basically that’s it. You know but I just wanted to share that with you.

**[06:40]MS: Well, 1 second, T talked about how you were a legend, how does that make you feel?**

[06:46]**AH:** It makes me feel good. They call me Rosa Parks in the Mill because I’ve been through so much and I, it was a struggle. I had to fight. I, in the new coal mill, even with Darleen. Some jobs Darleen was on, I should’ve had, you know. I had more time. But it was, when you were coming to the mill, they first thing they would say, I was laid off for 7 years first of all, and they called me back when I came back into the mills to work they put me in the 56 coal sheet mill. I’ve never been in that mill before. I never knew that mill existed until I came back to work and one part was the tin mill, the other side was the coal sheet mills. So I went to work in there and I [unclear] hell in there because I had time. And seniority didn’t mean anything back then. You had to work your way up through a box that they had. If a opening come on, you could sign up for a job. I signed up for the crane department, I had to wait for the list. I mean it was all kind of ways, like old Br’er to outfox you, to keep you from getting a job. So what the heck, I signed up for every job. I don’t care if it was the cranes, the tractors, I don’t care it if was the mill, I did it all. You know, I’m like ‘okay then I’ll do whatever my time, I’ve got all this time. You could only put so many people in front of me’ So, I did what I had to do and I learned every job I could. And basically they said ‘She does everything.’ Granny had to learn what, learn what she had to learn. And I did and basically that’s it. I would you know, I was proud of myself because a lot of things I would do up like ‘Can you do this?’ I was on a, what they call this little job, the road transfer job. Nobody knew this but me. I never learned how to back the sucker up. I would always had to go around the mill and it was like 2 back wheels and one in the front. Is that, am I telling it, is it how it was, 2 back wheels? And it, it’s like a 3, a a a bicycle, a little tricycle. You know you had to maneuver them back it up. And I never could back it up, like a tractor trailer with the 5th wheel, I even did that too. Went to school to be a tractor trailer, to drive tractor trailer, I did that too. Beth Steel trained me for that too. I didn’t get my CDLs cuz I got tired of it. I didn’t want to be on the road driving no tractor trailer, but I loved the job, I had a lot of fun moments, I had a lot of sad moments but the good outweighs the bad. And I would honestly say that. And it was a hell of a learning experience and that’s all I got to say.

**[10:04]MS: Last chance if you wanna tell your, the best story [unclear]**

[10:11]**AH:** I can’t, that’s one I won’t tell. I could see my granddaughter looking like, ‘No she didn’t’

**[10:23]MS: Thank you Loretta**

[10:24]AH: You’re welcome