Interview with
ELINOR DES VERNEY SINNETTE

This transcript is an edited version of a telephone interview with Elinor Des Verney Sinnette, former Chief Librarian, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, by Debra Newman Ham, Specialist in Afro-American History and Culture, Library of Congress, on August 22, 1991.

DNH: Please tell me about your background, particularly how you became interested in oral history.

EDS: I have a B.A. degree from Hunter College, a Masters degree from Pratt Institute of Library Service in Brooklyn, New York, and doctorate in library service from Columbia. It was during the time that I was doing my doctoral work at Columbia that the university's oral history research office offered the first course in oral history. I applied because I knew that I needed to have this type of training to work on my dissertation, a biography of black bibliophile and collector, Arthur Schomburg. This was, I believe, 1973. The course was taught by Louis Starr and Elizabeth Mason and there were about 25 of us in the class. It was very exciting and worthwhile.

As an assignment for the course I conducted an oral history interview with psychologist, Dr. Kenneth Clark, about Schomburg. The experience of taking the course and doing that interview revealed to me how important this type of research was. Of course, I also realized its importance to the documentation of black history. I was hooked.

DNH: Did you actually participate in the Columbia University office of oral history research's ongoing documentation project?

EDS: Yes, I was to conduct an interview with a very important retired member of the library school faculty. That did not go well because the person was so aged that his recollections were no longer sharp. The second interviewee to whom I was assigned--I was looking forward to it very much--was Bayard Rustin. I appeared at his office at the appointed time all ready to conduct the interview and Mr. Rustin turned me down. He wouldn't go through with it. I was very disappointed of course, but that's the way things go.

DNH: Did you conduct other interviews relating to Schomburg?

EDS: Oh yes! You see, oral history interviews are very important as far as biographies are concerned. Although I had his papers and those of fellow bibliophiles to work with, I had to talk with people who knew and worked with Mr. Schomburg in order to get a better view of him as a person. I interviewed his family, librarians who worked with him, and members of his clubs. In this way I got both positive and some very interesting negative impressions of this man. It sort of enabled me to round him out, you know, he came alive for me.

DNH: How were you able to use the interviews when you were writing the dissertation?

EDS: I hand transcribed each and every interview. I sat down next to the tape recorder and typed. I made some serious errors but I learned through them. For example, I drove up to Mahopac, New York, to interview Regina Andrews, the black librarian who was instrumental in establishing the separate black collection at the 135th Branch of the New York Public Library in the 1920s, subsequently called the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I was very careful to set everything up for the interview. I had my extension cords. I looked around the room very carefully to make sure that everything

[Sinnette interview continued]
was just right. However, it was a very, very hot day in August and I had not noticed that there was a fan behind the overstuffed chair where Mrs. Andrews was sitting--one of those silent fans. When I began to transcribe Mrs. Andrews' interview I had to listen for her words underneath the sound of that fan. It was a nightmare.

DNH: Now, after you finished your dissertation, how did you continue to use your oral history?

EDS: I returned to Nairobi, Kenya, and had no intention of doing anything further with the dissertation or with oral history.

DNH: Why were you in Nairobi?

EDS: My husband Calvin was teaching at the Medical School at the University of Nairobi, and I was on a UNESCO assignment training library assistants at the Kenya Polytechnic.

DNH: What happened to make you continue your work in oral history?

EDS: We returned to the states, to Atlanta, Georgia, where my husband was involved with the new medical school at Morehouse College. I was unemployed. I wanted very much to teach at the library school in Atlanta University but somehow a position could not be found for me.

The president of Atlanta University was really a very forward thinking man and a good friend of mine. I approached him and asked if he had considered oral history training for the curriculum. "Do you know how helpful oral history is?" I asked him at a social gathering. "Are you interested in it at all?" He asked me if I would submit a proposal for the establishment of an oral history program at the university and subsidized my attendance at the Oral History Association conference held in Savannah that year. That was, I think, 1978.

DNH: So you must have been keeping up with the oral history field a little bit if you knew when the conference was taking place.

EDS: This was desperation, Debra, this was desperation. After I returned from the conference, I submitted a proposal for the establishment of an oral history program at Atlanta University. About the same time I approached the president of the Atlanta chapter of the National Medical Association (NMA). I submitted a proposal to him to conduct an interview with the oldest black medical doctor in Atlanta, Dr. Horace Nash, who was almost one hundred years old. Dr. Nash used to go into his office on Auburn Avenue three days a week to take care of some of his "loyal patients." I impressed upon the president of NMA the importance of the knowledge Dr. Nash had about black physicians in Atlanta. I conducted a series of interviews with Dr. Nash, transcribed them, and turned them over to the Atlanta NMA chapter. By that time a year had passed and Calvin and I were about ready to leave Atlanta.

When Calvin returned to his alma mater, Howard University, Dr. Michael Winston was the director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (MSRC). He asked me to come in to talk to him and offered me the position of oral history project director at MSRC. A grant proposal had been written and he wanted me to take over the directorship of the proposed project. Unfortunately, the proposal was turned down. Dr. Winston then included a position for an oral history librarian in the budget for the following year. He asked if I could wait to join the staff in that position. I was 55 years old at that time. I

[Sinnette interview continued]
wanted the position, so even though I was offered several other jobs, I decided I really wanted to work at Howard.

On September 8, 1980, I became the oral history librarian at MSRC. My mandate from Dr. Winston was to establish an oral history department in the Manuscript Division of the MSRC and to inventory and organize the tapes and transcripts from the Civil Rights Documentation Project. Dr. Vincent Brown, professor of Political Science at Howard, had directed this project. It was funded over a period of three years, I guess, and a very, very expensive project it was. The tapes had been deposited at Moorland.

DNH: What would you consider to be your signal accomplishment at MSRC?

EDS: During the eight years that I directed that program, I not only got a handle on the civil rights material but also established four other oral history projects. The first one was the oral history of the national Shriners organization, formally known as the Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order of the Nobels of the Mystic Shrine. They came to the MSRC every year to donate thousands of dollars to enhance the programs and projects of the MSRC. Each past imperial potentate, the leader of the shriners, was to be interviewed. I conducted six interviews.

The second project was what we call the black military oral history project. An advisory committee of former members of the military units that served during World War II in segregated units suggested persons to interview from the Tuskegee Airmen's 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 366th army regiment.

The third was the history of Howard University. We were trying to get an idea of what went on at the university years and years ago. There was also a donor's project. People who deposited their papers in the manuscript department were to have an oral history interview if they had not already written their autobiography or had a biography written about them (which most of them did not).

I worked as oral history librarian for eight years and then I was promoted.

DNH: Who actually did the interviewing for these projects?

EDS: With black military I did some and the members of the advisory committee did some of the interviewing. In other cases I hired individuals on contract to conduct the interviews.

DNH: Were you able to get most of this material transcribed?

EDS: Yes. I generally got what I needed but I did not have a staff. I had a good budget. The first interview that I conducted was with Ophelia Settle Egypt, who herself conducted oral history interviews for Dr. Charles Johnson at Fisk University in the 1920s. The interview was transcribed and beautifully bound. We had a reception and ceremony when it was deposited but I had no staff, no clerical assistance, I was all by myself. It got to be impossible to try to run the department with no staff.

DNH: Do you have any concluding remarks?

EDS: Oral history is so important. I intend to continue in some way to encourage its use in documenting black history. Membership in OHMAR has been very, very helpful. OHMAR was recommended to me when I came to the Washington, D.C. area. People in the organization have been extremely helpful. It is a very supportive group and I appreciate the help I have received.