

**TRANSCRIPT – MARY A. MOULTRIE**

**Interviewee: Mary A. Moultrie**

**Interviewer: Otha Jennifer Dixon**

**Interview Date: Monday, June 23, 2008**

**Location: Local 1199B Office  
Charleston, South Carolina**

**Length: Approximately 41 minutes**

Otha Jennifer Dixon: For the record could you state your name for me.

Mary Moultrie: My name is Mary Moultrie.

OJD: And we're located in Charleston.

MM: Charleston, South Carolina.

OJD: I just want to, as I said a few minutes ago, talk to you a little bit about your experience in the 1969 Hospital Strike. One of the things I want to start with is where you're from. Are you from Charleston?

MM: I'm a Charlestonian, always here. Graduated from high school here, left here after graduation in sixty and went to New York. Lived there for about seven years or so, a little over seven year and came back. Worked at Medical University Hospital, it was Medical College at that time.

OJD: So when you came back, that was the job you got?

MM: That was the job that I got. I had worked in New York as an LPN, a waiver nurse. They gave you on-the-job training, working (1:03). When I came here they didn't want to recognize my --. They did not recognize my certificate that I got there as a waiver nurse. They didn't know about it. I was supposed to work as a nurse's aide. So that was my position when I got here.

**Mary A. Moultrie**

OJD: Was that a demotion? Were you paid less here?

MM: Definitely, Charleston paid less. When I first went in I was making less than a dollar thirty an hour. When we went out on strike in 1969 I was making one thirty an hour. So, this was like sixty-seven.

OJD: So you got back here in sixty-seven?

MM: I came back here in the latter part of 1967.

OJD: So, the strike happened in 1969, so a couple of years. Your parents, are they from Charleston?

MM: Yes, uh huh, the Sea Islands.

OJD: I am not familiar with that.

MM: Wadmalaw Island (2:03).

OJD: What did your parents do?

MM: My parents did nothing, really. My father was a naval shipyard worker. My mom was a housewife. She did do some work in white folks' homes, when we were much younger. Other than that she just stayed home and took care of her children.

OJD: Growing up --. Because I am always fascinated as to how people got involved or get involved in politics or any sort of activism. Were your parents involved?

MM: My parents were not involved. As a teenager, I don't know if you are familiar with Mr. Esau Jenkins.

OJD: I've heard of him.

MM: I worked with Mr. Esau Jenkins. I got a job in a restaurant that he had in Charleston. I got to be friends with his children. Mr. Esau used to take me around with

**Mary A. Moultrie**

him doing his political things. I would help make speeches and help with voter registration and other things that he was involved in.

OJD: How old were you?

MM: Sixteen or seventeen years old.

OJD: You said you left after you graduated in sixty.

MM: In sixty.

OJD: Even before that, what was life like here in Charleston?

MM: Well, it was separate. We didn't come in contact, too much, with whites because our high schools --. The schools were predominately black. My mother worked in a white person's home, but we weren't really in contact with them. Sometimes we would see them come pick up my mother or if they had something to bring for her they would come. We knew them but there wasn't too much communication. We were definitely not involved as kids are today. They go to school together and the schools are integrated. At that time it was different. It was strictly segregated.

OJD: You went to a black high school?

MM: I went to a black high school and I lived in a black neighborhood.

OJD: What was the name of the high school?

MM: Burke High School.

OJD: Didn't Mr. Saunders go to Burke as well?

MM: He probably did, I don't remember.

OJD: As far as the Civil Rights Movement here, were you active in the movement?

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: During the sit-ins and stuff like that I left. I was in New York. I definitely was not --. I wasn't a part of that. When I came back here and went to Medical College I knew that things were different from the hospitals that I had worked at in New York. In New York everybody, black, white, Puerto Rican, everybody got along well. When I came here I could see the separatism. Blacks didn't sit in the same lounge. They had a lounge, we had a locker room.

OJD: When you came back here, working at Medical College, give me a sense of, in those two years from the time you got here to when the strike actually happened, what was going on? Were people talking about the issues, the low pay; the unfair working environment?

MM: People were suffering and there was very little said about it. It happened in December of sixty-seven. Five, well they were nurses' aides and LPNs, went to work during the Christmas holiday, I guess no one really wants to work. When they went on duty that day the nursing charge, which was a white RN, because at that time all of your registered nurses were white. You may find a couple that have come from other places but they were predominately white. The nurse refused to give the workers report on the conditions of the patient. She offered them an ultimatum, "you take care of the patients or your go home." They insisted that they weren't doing anything without getting a report. You don't know what to do. She was in a really bad mood. Being in charge she told them, "either you go to work and take care of the patients or you go home." They went home. Then they were fired. When I heard about it I knew Mr. Saunders. I talked with Mr. Saunders about it. He got in touch with some other people, local people, Reginald Barrett and them, who had some connection with the Department of Health,

**Mary A. Moultrie**

Education, and Welfare. That's when we first started talking about grievances and found out that this was not an isolated case that it was widespread throughout the hospital. It wasn't just one RN being nasty, there were all kinds of conditions. That's when we found out about the salary. I had just come in. I was making a dollar and thirty an hour but there were people who had been there ten or twelve years making a dollar and thirty an hour. The heavy workloads, people being fired --. If a white RN wanted to fire you, she could do it. No grievance procedures or anything like that. Nursing students come on the unit for what they called field work and you would have to teach them what to do but if they didn't like you and wanted you fired then you were fired. It was just a really bad situation. They didn't have any respect for us whatsoever. They would call some people out of their names. Call them monkey grunts, things like that. It was just bad. I spoke with Mr. Saunders and we started these weekly meetings. They were able --. The people who worked with HEW were able to get the five people back to work. We knew at that point that we needed to do something. Mr. Saunders, he was the leader, he would tell us that the doctors had an association. He didn't like that way that unions were or anything like that. He never told us that we needed to be a part of a union, he just said that doctors have an association, nurses have an association, and you all need something. That's why we started coming together like that. Started off with about five or six of us and each week we would say that when you come in next week bring somebody that you can trust. We wanted to keep it out of the ears of the supervisors and it just kept growing and growing. Until it got to the point where --. We were meeting at Reginald Barrack's real estate office. It got so large, we couldn't meet there anymore so that's when they called in Isiah Bennett. He was a part of the Tobacco Workers union and they had a

**Mary A. Moultrie**

union hall on East Bay Street and we started meeting there. It just kept growing. We started asking to meet with the president of the hospital to let them know that we had concerns.

OJD: Excuse, I don't mean to cut you off, but about what time was this?

MM: Sixty-seven is gone. We were way into sixty-eight. Cause we started to get the five back. That was in sixty-seven. They got back in sixty-eight because this was like Christmas time, a week or so into the next year.

After we sent the letter to Dr. McKoy, he kept refusing. He sent out this flyer throughout this hospital saying that the union only wants your money. Which was an insult because if you are making a dollar thirty and hour you don't have any money. We had nothing really to lose so people really got upset about that. We got even more members. So we kept on asking them to meet with us and then he did. So then Isaiah Bennett suggested that we get in touch with the hospital, a union that worked with hospitals, and that's when 1199 came in. 1199 had a relationship with Reverend Abernathy and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Once they came in they invited them. They had me write a letter asking them to come and help us. That's when Senator Robert Ford and everybody came into Charleston. They started working with the youth and the churches. The rest of it is history.

OJD: Give me an example of what a meeting looked like. On any night --. Because you said that you all met weekly?

MM: Yes, we met every Thursday.

OJD: What did you all discuss? How did the meetings go?

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: We talked about grievance. Mr. Saunders and them would bring in inspirational speakers. Trying to keep the group motivated, keep everybody on fire so that they would go back and try to encourage others to come out. We had a lot of people --. Clivern was one of the persons, I had never met and now he's a judge in Washington. He used to come on a weekly basis and a lot of other people. Ministers, they kept bringing them in. And the business people --.

OJD: During this time, had there been a leadership established?

MM: After a while. We had an election among our group and that is when I got the position as president, the head of it.

OJD: So you guys were operating without a name at this point, just kind of getting together?

MM: Until 1199 came in and right away they chartered us. We had to come up with a name, that is when we came out with Local 1199B.

OJD: Your leadership was moved from one spot to the next?

MM: Right.

OJD: Did you have a vice-president and a secretary?

MM: Yes, uh huh.

OJD: Who were those people?

MM: Jack Bradford was my vice-president. He lives in Charlotte, North Carolina. Rossetta Simmons was one of the vice-president because she had the group from the County Hospital.

OJD: Did you have a secretary?

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: Yes, Ernestine Grimes, she lives in Washington, D. C. She was down here recently because we had a reunion last year. Sadie Brown, she's Green now, she lives West Ashley somewhere.

OJD: You said Sadie?

MM: Yes, her name was Sadie Brown but she's Green, Sadie Brown Green.

OJD: She was your what?

MM: She was one of the secretaries.

OJD: So you had more than one secretary?

MM: She was the financial. I have that information at home. Probably the next time I will get that. Make sure you have everybody. One was the financial secretary, one was the recording secretary.

OJD: Moving from this organization to be chartered by 1199, you all became 1199B, the Union's involvement, did it change the way that you all operated at all?

MM: No it didn't. It was just an encouragement. We knew we had somebody to back us. They didn't come in to run the union, they kinda came in to lead us in the right direction. We still had our own meetings.

OJD: Oh, even separate from --?

MM: No, we just continued.

OJD: Just like you were?

MM: Just like we were.

OJD: Did you have a sense, at any point, that it was getting difficult to organize people? To get people to actually come in, because you said it was consistently growing.



**Mary A. Moultrie**

Was there ever a struggle to get people to get on board? Was there concern about backlash from the hospital?

MM: At that point, we had already passed that point. When we first started we had to go back for people. I don't even remember people having a fear of being fired or anything like they got now. Today they are really afraid. It wasn't too hard to convince people to come. It was always like if my friend comes then I'll come. "Well, who all come?" "Who's going to be there?" Once you let them know and it's there people they're going to come. When the twelve of us got fired that's when everything just blew up.

OJD: Now you all were fired because of your involvement?

MM: Well, we were invited to the meeting. We finally got a meeting, supposedly with Dr. McCord, twelve of us. We were invited to the meeting. When we got there, McCord wasn't there. Plus they had twenty-five or thirty other people, black and white, who outnumbered us. They had some of the older blacks who had been there umpteen years.

OJD: At the hospital?

MM: Yes. Everything was ok. They were in the meeting.

OJD: So they were there to basically refute whatever you guys were saying?

MM: Right, right. So we refused to meet. We told them we weren't going to meet. We wanted Dr. McCord. We got up, marched out of the meeting, and went to Dr. McCord's office. That was our first demonstration.

OJD: The twelve of you, were they all women or was it some men as well?

MM: It was two men.

**Mary A. Moultrie**

OJD: At what point did Reverend Abernathy, I think Mrs. King came in at some point --?

MM: When they came in, we were already on strike.

OJD: What was the sense of their arrival? Were people relieved for them to be there?

MM: People were excited. There was definitely no turning back then. We got support from all over. To have people like Rev. Abernathy, especially Mrs. King to come here was motivating.

OJD: So there was no resentment?

MM: No, no, everybody welcomed them. At least we did, I don't know what the other leaders, how they felt.

OJD: You mean outside --?

MM: Yeah outside but the hospital workers, our group, we were happy that they had come in. I was strictly union. I was not one of the people on the outside pulling all these strings and stuff. I found out later that there were a lot of meetings that I knew nothing about. A lot of stuff that went on.

MM: Outside of what you were focused on?

OJD: Right, they were probably supposed to be trying to settle the strike and this thing and that thing. I was a rank in power although I was a leader. I stayed with the people. Periodically, I would travel around trying to get support, finances and stuff like that. I flew a lot of different places. A lot of things, like the meetings they had behind closed doors, those doors were closed. I wouldn't know anything about them til later.

OJD: What impact did those meetings have? Who was meeting?

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: Some of the union officials, some of the community leaders. Mr. Saunders can give you a better idea because I think he was inside some of those meetings.

Reverend Andrew Young, they met with a lot of people.

OJD: Were those meetings supposed to be in conjunction with what you all were doing?

MM: Yes.

OJD: Did they have an impact, ultimately, on how the strike turned out?

MM: I don't know. I really don't know. [Laughter] I don't know whether they were just meeting because they were just meeting.

OJD: I want to talk a little bit more specifically about these women who were involved in the strike. Several of the pictures that I have seen, I've seen women with their children, out and in the heart of things with their kids involved. I think that speaks to how entrenched the women were in that particular moment. I guess one question I want to ask first is, out of the people who did strike or the people that were coming from the hospital, the majority of them were women but were there a lot of men that had these positions that could have been involved but weren't. Or was it just that most of the people involved were women?

MM: Most of them were women. Most of them that worked in the hospital were women.

OJD: Whenever this started, were husbands supportive of women? Did they have a hard time? There has been this idea that women belong at home and that they shouldn't be --.

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: I don't think the women had any problem who had husbands. The majority of the women who were out there were single moms, heads of household. Some of them had as many as ten or twelve children.

OJD: Now during this time, were you married?

MM: No, I had one daughter.

OJD: How was that experience for the two of you? Was she there with you?

MM: A lot. She was there. She was two. When I first went out there she hadn't turned two yet but I used to bring her to the union hall and stuff with me so I wouldn't lose contact with her. Some of them had their children everyday. Even though we were marching some were pushing kids in the strollers, some were walking. My vice- president even led a march with children.

OJD: Just the children alone?

MM: Just the children alone.

OJD: Switch gears again to talk about the union, 1199, and them coming in and chartering you all. What would you consider to be some of the weaknesses of the union and their coming in? A better question, do you think you all would have been as successful if they had not come in?

MM: No, we would not have been successful at all because when they came in they came in with experience. They knew about fundraising. They had PR people that could pull the press together so that we could get the coverage that we got. We certainly would never have made it without 1199. I don't think we could have made it without SCLC either because they had expertise in mobilizing, getting marches, and working with children and stuff like that. We needed everybody that was here.

**Mary A. Moultrie**

OJD: So, one without the other wouldn't have been --?

MM: It could not have worked.

OJD: Was there ever any tension between these entities, people from SCLC or the locals?

MM: I don't know what happened afterward but as far as I know that wasn't any conflict whatsoever because 1199 already had a working relationship with SCLC.

OJD: For you in your life, what has been the impact of that moment, of the hospital strike, your work --. I read somewhere that when you went back to work it was really difficult for you because of your notoriety at that point, because of who you were and that you had been involved in the strike. What was that like for your going back to the hospital?

MM: It was hard and I hadn't really gotten to the point that I could actually talk about it. There's been a lot of workplace mobbing, if you are familiar with that. I went through a lot. It's not easy. I can't talk about that at this point. But I have overcome. I stuck it out as long as I could.

OJD: You were there for how long after?

MM: When we went back I stayed until 76'.

OJD: Obviously whatever happened was --.

MM: There was a lot of picking on you and stuff like that. It was bad. When I left there I went to the city. I worked in recreations for a while. There was some of that there too. People coming and find out who you are and they don't really get to know you.

OJD: So they make assumptions about what you've done.

MM: Yes.

**Mary A. Moultrie**

OJD: Obviously you have made some sacrifices for this, that work, for yourself, and for the people around you.

MM: I think during the strike everybody made some sacrifices.

OJD: If you had to do it again, would you?

MM: Look where I am at. I am trying to get something started now.

OJD: Absolutely.

MM: [Laughter]

OJD: So in spite of the hard times --.

MM: I have a passion. I know that working conditions can be better. I've got a problem now with black supervisors. When I was there were very few, if any, black supervisors. But now there are lots of black supervisors. They're doing the same things to their employees that the whites did. The whites are still on top because that's their supervisors and everything just trickles down, get in their head, and they do that to the workers. Then there so much fear. The people are so afraid to come out. I am talking about young blacks.

OJD: You're talking about now?

MM: Right. Some of them have positions. Some of them are still dietary workers. They're not called nurse's aides or assistants anymore. I think they are called some kind of technician. They are still going through but they are afraid to stand up. The difference then and now is that back then everybody stood up. Right now, they want to call me on the phone and tell me what's going on but when I say come to a meeting they won't come.

OJD: So you are involved in doing what right now?

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: Trying to unionize hospital workers. I am working around the sanitation department. We are open for health care workers, municipal employees.

OJD: So you're still involved in 1199B?

MM: I went back to 1199 after I retired from the city after working twenty-nine years. I couldn't stay thirty. I had a few months to make it thirty years but I had to get out of there.

OJD: Was it that bad?

MM: No, wasn't that bad it was just time to quit. It was bad but not that bad. I just wanted to get out of there. We had a reunion about a year ago. The Charleston County Library did it. 1199 came and we invited them and some of SCLC. A lot of the people who were out on strike came from New York; Washington, DC; Raleigh, North Carolina; Charlotte; Durham to be here for that reunion. Henry Nicholas said that he felt the time was right, he is president of 1199 now. He said that things just look right. He asked me if I wanted to give it a shot. I said yea, I have been waiting for this opportunity for a long time. Not knowing how difficult it would be to get people together. But if we get the right people in office, this thing is going to work. So many people here are afraid of what they call the right to work law. Not really understanding what it means. They say, "they'll never have a union here because the right to work law." Whereas it's just saying that maybe they can't sit down and bargain collectively at this point but there is a law that says (30:42). They are so afraid of a union. We've been here a year. We don't have anybody on a contract yet but we are working with the environmental services for the City of Charleston and a few hospital workers.

OJD: After the strike was over, did you leave 1199B, Local 1199B?

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: We tried to maintain the union for a while but we didn't have the dues check off. It was hard to pay the bills. And then we weren't getting any money to support the union. So we paid rent and stuff out of our pockets for a while and then after that we just had to give it up.

OJD: Were there still a lot of women who were involved even after the strike, who tried to maintain and stay on with the union?

MM: No, a lot of people went back to work and didn't want to hear anything about the union. That was a problem I had too. That togetherness wasn't there anymore.

OJD: How did that --?

[Phone ringing]

MM: -- affect me? It made me crazy.

[Interruption]

OJD: So, you said it made you crazy.

MM: Yea, because of the unity that we once had. Some of the workers would see me walking in the hall and would notice it was me and go someplace else. They would go in a patient's room or something. They didn't want to be seen talking with me.

OJD: Interesting. Considering, at this point, that you are back and the union has been revitalized, how did your experience with the 1969 strike, how does that impact your work today? What have you learned from that experience?

MM: During that time, I wasn't in a position like this. It was so much easier because I was a part. I was in there. I was able to get to people. Even though I feel as though I can influence people to come, I can't go in. If I go into Medical University they would recognize Mrs. Mary Moultrie. I am not going to be in there passing out fliers or



**Mary A. Moultrie**

talking to anybody. At one point, they used to follow me. If I went in there to visit somebody, I would look back and the security guards would be --.

OJD: Oh, even if you just went to visit?

MM: Yea, right. I guess they didn't know what I was up to.

OJD: So, still concerned about what Mary Moultrie was up to, even today. How does it make you feel to have made that kind impact on Charleston, on Charleston's history? I saw driving down, there's a Moultrie Street some blocks back.

MM: That has nothing to do with me. [Laughter] Nothing whatsoever. To me, I just feel as though I haven't done enough. I'm not one to get a big head. To me, I haven't done enough.

OJD: In that, I read somewhere that you left here and did some work in Georgetown in the early 70's with the steel mill.

MM: We went there in support of them. I never did, you know, just to say I'm unionizing down there. We were asked to come and we went.

OJD: We as in, you mean 1199?

MM: Yes. Just a group of us.

OJD: To support? To show support?

MM: Um hm.

OJD: So you weren't actively involved in anything they had going on?

MM: Just there to show support.

OJD: You said that you have not done enough. What more do you feel like you want to do?

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: I would like to see a union, 1199, in Charleston. I mean with a contract, bargaining rights.

OJD: I read, and I actually met with Ms. Frazier last week.

MM: Marjorie?

OJD: Um hm. When you have women like Ms. Frazier, Ms. Amos- Frazier and Ms. Whipper who were actually going into political bodies and being in government agencies, being able to work on that level, has that made a difference for black women in Charleston in terms of having them in positions of leadership? Has that had an impact?

MM: Oh yes.

OJD: What kind of impact has that had?

MM: It let's women know that these are things that they can do. You don't have to be walked on. You could reach higher. Just to see other black women, let's young black women know that if you train properly and you're educated enough you could get these positions. Whereas before women, even with the education, weren't able to get a good position.

OJD: Going to strike for a minute, just thinking about after the strike was over and you went back to work. I know there were some negotiations and some things did change. Was it enough change for you to be satisfied?

MM: No. It wasn't enough change. They came up with a grievance procedure. It worked for a little while. They would allow an employee to take somebody in with them to represent them. They allowed me to do that a few times. Then after that, oh no you can't bring Mary Moultrie, you have to get somebody else. That lasted for a little while but after that things just reverted back to how they were, almost.

**Mary A. Moultrie**

OJD: Was there a pay increase?

MM: There was a pay increase.

OJD: I guess with the changing of times, you had more, or I am assuming that more black women were in positions such as RNs. So there was also a cause for you to change --?

MM: Oh yes.

OJD: One of my final questions is, I heard you say that you are still trying to organize hospital workers, so there is still work today in 2008 that needs to be done?

MM: Oh yea, a lot of work that needs to be done. Numerous complaints, but like I said before, they won't stand up. They won't stand up.

OJD: So what are they struggling with today that people weren't struggling with then?

MM: Poor working conditions.

OJD: Like what?

MM: Low wages.

OJD: Still low wages?

MM: Overworked, stuff like that.

[Interruption]

OJD: You were saying they are still struggling with --?

MM: The pay is --. They are making better wages than then but it's still not up where it should be. They are still being disrespected. People just being fired, they don't have a say in their work.

OJD: And those are the terms of the poor working conditions? They're still --?

**Mary A. Moultrie**

MM: Yea. They're facing a lot of issues. The work scheduling and stuff like that. They don't have a lot of say so in anything.

OJD: You say people are dealing with a fear so they are not as involved as they used to be? They are not meeting like they used to?

MM: No, I'm trying to get them out to meetings and say hey you coming to the meeting but they never show up. They are afraid. I had a workers appreciation day at the International Long Shoreman Hall. 1199 put a lot of money into it, twelve or thirteen hundred dollars just for food. I sent out a thousand invitations to hospital workers, just put them in doors and stuff like that. I had fifty people to show up.

There were three young ladies there. They were fine until the union president got up to talk. You should have seen them just running. "Oh, I gotta get out of here." I said, what is wrong." "We gotta go, we can't be caught here." They just left frantic.

OJD: How does that make you feel at this point?

MM: It's sad. I'm talking young people. It's really sad.

OJD: Where do you see your work going from here?

MM: I am hoping that we will be able to get the right people. If we could get the right people in they could do some work in there. They could unionize that place, organize it. We just have to get the right people. Because you've got to have some get up and go.

OJD: Ms. Moultrie, thank you for your time.

MM: Ok.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Otha Jennifer Dixon  
August 26, 2008

**Mary A. Moultrie**