

Listen to Dr. Ralph Proctor Jr. (1938–2024), former Professor of Ethnic and Diversity Studies at the Community College of Allegheny County and civil rights activist, talk about life in the Hill District neighborhood, including Black hair care and learning about race as a child. This interview was conducted and recorded by Charlene Foggie-Barnett and Louise Lippincott on July 6, 2011.

**Excerpt 1: Teasing Black men about their hair care**

And the men, you know after they get finished teasing the women, I said, now you guys up there, you're laughing your butt off, I've got some stories about you too. "What?" Well, it has to do with Murrays, Tuxedo, and all that axle grease you used to put in your hair? I said yeah, you know that before your mom couldn't get that comb through your hair, you grease it up and they slide right on through. And they'd die laughing – "Ooo, I forgot about that!" – I say yeah, and then, um your mother or your sweetheart was fussy about all the grease you got on the pillow slips [...]

[...] on the doilies on the couch, you know 'cause your hair was greasy. (CFB: Mm hmm, [chuckles]) And I said, you know, and you couldn't keep it, I mean you couldn't just do it at night and then go to bed and get up in the morning because it would be all messed up, so you had a stocking cap, ok? And we all know there were two drawers: one with the perfect stockings, and one with the ones with the runners. And no dude ever got one from the perfect – "Nah boy, you get one from that drawer." And I'd say you know, invariably, what

would happen, that little runner in the middle of the night would spring into a hole, and you wake up in the morning with a stock of hair stuck straight out, stiff as a board [chuckles]. So, so then what you had to do was run to the bathroom, take a washrag – you folks call them washcloths now, we called them washrags back then – heat that sucker up under the faucet, put it on that hank of hair, melt the grease enough that you can whip it back into the rest of it, put your stocking cap back on for a little bit, and you were cool. But you can't have a girl touch your hair because the hand would slide straight through it [chuckles]. You know, "Eww, look at this!" Ok, so I say it was cool because your hair was stiff, perfect, but I said you know, a tornado could pick a dude up, fly him fifty yards, smack him into a brick wall, break every bone in his body, but his hair would still be perfect [laughs]. So, you went through it too, brothers! And why did we go through it? I mean we can laugh now, but what were we doing? We were trying – one of the pomades men used was called "La 'Em Strate," la-em-strate, L-A, E-M, S-T-R-A-T-E, because it was designed to take curly hair and make it straighter, so what were we trying to do? We were trying to be acceptable, and acceptability entailed having straight hair.

**Excerpt 2: Struggling to learn what "colored" and "white" meant as a kid**

For me, that brings back memories of having a best friend who was white – um, but I didn't know he was white. Because I had heard when I was kid about what white people did to colored people, so I just decided, ok, I'm not going to play with any white boys – any white people, period – I'm not going to deal with them. 'Cause if they that bad, I don't want to have anything to do with them. I didn't know what the hell a white person was. So, one day I was outside playing and my mother called me in and said, why were you gettin' ready to kick Mrs. Russell? And I denied any intent, but I was

getting ready to kick her, and you know, that was my answer to anybody bigger than me – kick ‘em in the shin and run like hell – because they can’t run when they’re kicked in the shin, you know? They’d be hoppin’ up and down yelling [chuckles]. She said, what did she do to you, honey? Mrs. Russell’s your friend. She told me I was playing with some white boy, and I wasn’t playing with no white boy – you know I don’t play with white boys. She said, what are you talking about? I said Jimmy! “Jimmy is white.” I said no he ain’t!

She said what color you think he is? “Pink. I don’t play with white boys, he’s pink.” “No, white.” I said, no, pink! “White,” “Pink,” back and forth. And I said, mom you taught me my colors, he ain’t no white boy. So, long and short of it, we fought about that for awhile, then I brought a Superman comic book to her and I said, what color is this border? She said, white. I said yep, what color is Superman? She said, white. I said no, pink – he’s pink, Jimmy’s pink – I wasn’t playing with no white boy. So she’s looking exasperated, and she says what color is my sister Carol? She said Carol is colored. I said I know she’s colored mommy, what color is she colored? She said colored. She got to have a color ‘cause I can’t find “colored” in the crayon box. So she said, she’s colored. I said, wait a minute, so she, Jimmy, and Superman are the same color – how could one be colored, and two be white? See, I never understood that, never did.

**Excerpt 3: Responding to photograph of Walter Hamm (2001.35.6469)**

I’m looking at us. I’m looking at us being defiant. I’m looking at us saying we don’t have to look like you in order to be beautiful or handsome, you know. You can’t do this hairstyle, so f-you. [LL laughs] That’s what I’m looking at. You know, we can be cool, we can wear crazy clothes. We don’t have to be colored versions of white people – that’s what I’m looking at. I’m looking at standing tall, getting your ‘fro, being militant, being angry, saying uh-uh, all of our lives you told us to clean up, be like you and we’d be acceptable and that was a lie – well here’s what we think about that now. Yep, that’s what I’m looking at – got my Caddy, got my ‘fro, got my blue jeans – all kinds of bellbottoms, got my leather coat down to the floor, I’m Shaft baby! [soft chuckles from CFB and LL] You hear me? I’m Shaft! That’s what I’m looking at. Proud and defiant.

**Excerpt 4: Playing the Numbers**

I nearly fell out when I saw one of Teenie’s photos. It was um, I forget what folks said it was – somebody gave them wrong information... It was, it was ah, Buzzy and a whole bunch of dudes countin’ the take for the numbers that day. You know, it wasn’t some “charitable thing” – charitable my butt [laughter]. They’re counting the take from the numbers, you know, nickels and dimes and quarters. You know, ‘cause people always say – I am not one of those folks who think that people did something terrible by playing the numbers. Everybody I knew, including my mother, played the numbers. It was a way of gettin’ that little bit more money, and every time she’d hit, she’d call all of her kids, and we’d have to come over and get a little bit of money. And I always put it in a slush fund, so when she wanted something, I’d spend that on her, you know, but I don’t think there was anything wrong.

**Excerpt 5: Responding to photograph of steel mill (2001.35.7740)**

Ok, steel mill! Um, simply the ubiquitous shot of a steel mill – the pollution, the stories flood about World War, um One, the Great Migration – when blacks were recruited to come here to work in the lower paying jobs in the steel mill. But what is painful is, those lower paying jobs, which were only open because whites went to war, made Black men middle class. And yet they were the poorest paid of the people in the mill. And it led to some interesting kinds of things with Black women, who as you know were more educated as a class than Black men. And so you would find these strange marriages between women who wanted to marry at or above their economic level, but couldn't find Black men, except men who were like working in steel mills. So you found a lot of social workers, um, teachers, who were married to folks who were working in the mill, because the mills paid very well. But we were still at the lower end, still at the lower end. And I think of an old gentleman I interviewed years ago who was a hundred and eight who told about riding on the back of streetcars – and I called the essay “A handful of soot,” because he said, you know, in those days if you were fortunate enough to have a job that you had to wear a white shirt, you had to carry three shirts to work because it would be dirty by the time, noon you'd have to change your shirt because it would be filthy. He said you could sit on the back of the streetcar and hold your hand out, and by the time you got where you were going, you'd have a handful of soot. That's how filthy this was. But, the steel mill helped a lot of Black folks – even though they were discriminated against – um, make it.