

DeKalb History Center

Lithonia Community Engagement Oral History

John Benton, Patrice Benton

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

All right. So it is what, Wednesday, October 16th, 2024. And Mr. Benton, can you please say your name for the recording, please?

Speaker 2 ([00:12](#)):

John Benton.

Speaker 1 ([00:13](#)):

John Benton. Mr. Benton, can you tell us about, yeah, let's start with your beginnings. Where'd you grow up? Where were you born? All that good stuff.

Speaker 2 ([00:23](#)):

I grew up in Lithonia.

Speaker 1 ([00:25](#)):

Yeah,

Speaker 2 ([00:27](#)):

Off Panola Road. Matter of fact, there was a street named after my family, right off Panola Road, Benton Drive. It used to be a dirt street, but my dad and his brother was the first two people to build a house facing each other on the street.

Speaker 1 ([00:46](#)):

Wow. So your dad was the first Benton in Lithonia, or were they come before? Was it great grandparents, or how long back, do you

Speaker 2 ([00:56](#)):

Know? I really don't know. I know I've been there all of my life, and that's been seventy years or more.

Speaker 1 ([01:04](#)):

Was your dad born in Lithonia as well?

Speaker 2 ([01:07](#)):

I think he was born in, I think Monroe, I believe Monroe, Georgia.

Speaker 1 ([01:13](#)):

And do you know how he came to be in Lithonia?

Speaker 2 ([01:17](#)):

No, I don't.

Speaker 1 ([01:23](#)):

So you were born and raised there. Do you want to talk about, do you have siblings? Yeah,

Speaker 2 ([01:29](#)):

I have what? I got three brothers left and one sister, or one sister deceased and one brother deceased. But the rest of 'em stayed within Decatur, Lithonia area

Speaker 1 ([01:40](#)):

And what was it like growing up in Lithonia?

Speaker 2 ([01:46](#)):

It was pretty nice. It was like, I guess, kind, kind of a family oriented community. Everybody basically knew everybody because we all went to the same school and a lot of relatives and stuff. So it was, like I said, it was more of a family oriented community, so to speak.

Speaker 1 ([02:09](#)):

And what kinds of things, and we'll get to school in a minute, but talk about what kinds of things you did for fun as a kid.

Speaker 2 ([02:16](#)):

Well, we came home. We played football or basketball in the street. And basically that was pretty much it, really.

Speaker 1 ([02:32](#)):

And what schools did you go to?

Speaker 2 ([02:34](#)):

I went to Bruce Street

Speaker 1 ([02:38](#)):

And Bruce Street. Was kindergarten through 12th grade

Speaker 2 ([02:42](#)):

Or? Yeah, elementary through 12th.

Speaker 1 ([02:44](#)):

Elementary through 12th. And do you remember how many kids were in your senior class? How many of you?

Speaker 2 ([02:51](#)):

It might've been about 30, if that many. Yeah, one very many.

Speaker 1 ([02:59](#)):

And what year was that?

Speaker 2 ([03:00](#)):

I grade was 65, 67. 67, I think.

Speaker 1 ([03:09](#)):

And what was high school? What was school? Did you do sports or any clubs or anything? In high school?

Speaker 2 ([03:16](#)):

Football and basketball. And that was about it. Football and sports was the thing right there.

Speaker 1 ([03:27](#)):

Was there a mascot? What was the team name?

Speaker 2 ([03:30](#)):

Eagles.

Speaker 1 ([03:31](#)):

The Eagles. Okay. Bruce Street Eagles. And then you graduated in 67. So what'd you do after high school?

Speaker 2 ([03:45](#)):

Well, I worked for a little while and then I got drafted into the military. I served in Germany and Vietnam.

Speaker 1 ([04:03](#)):

And how long were you overseas?

Speaker 2 ([04:07](#)):

Lemme see, not quite three years when you get drafted. At that time, you only served two years anyway, but I spent most of my time, well, all of my time really, after I got the training that I went to Germany for a while, then from Germany to Vietnam, and that was it.

Speaker 1 ([04:29](#)):

Okay. And so, training was in the States before you went overseas?

Speaker 2 ([04:33](#)):

Yeah, I was in Fort Benning.

Speaker 1 ([04:38](#)):

Okay. So Army,

Speaker 2 ([04:40](#)):

Fort Benning and Fort Jackson came from Fort Jackson to Germany. And from Germany to Vietnam.

Speaker 1 ([04:54](#)):

Did you learn any German when you were over there?

Speaker 2 ([04:57](#)):

You learned how to say a few things. I can't remember what it was. But you learned how to say, well, actually, in Germany, most of the younger people could speak English. They had an American high school in Germany, so most of the younger German kids could speak English.

Speaker 1 ([05:13](#)):

And what about in Vietnam? Did you see combat?

Speaker 2 ([05:20](#)):

No. Okay. I'm glad about that. Well, I say it like this. I saw when we was flying in, because you could see all the explosions and things going off, and I was in the transportation unit. I used to drive a big rig, but I always said I got blessed because when I got over there, I worked in the transportation office, and then I have to do that now. My job was to go take a report on how many vehicles we had out, how many we had available, and that was it for me.

Speaker 1 ([05:54](#)):

Fantastic. Wow. So you left Vietnam sometime in what, the early seventies? Yeah. And then came back to Lithuania?

Speaker 2 ([06:06](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 1 ([06:07](#)):

And then what happened?

Speaker 2 ([06:08](#)):

Well, when I left, actually, I was in the hospital. When I left Vietnam, I was at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington. I had a spinal issue. And so that's where they sent me to be cut on while I was in another hospital. But I, in Augusta or something, I can't remember. But it wasn't a very good hospital, ([06:38](#)):

But at the time it was a lot of veterans coming from Vietnam that was really, really hurt. And so you would see people just, life would never be the same physically or mentally. And you used hear a lot of people screaming and hollering, just I guess from the combat experience, I guess some of 'em might've been still reliving that kind of stuff. But that was the worst part for me when being in that hospital. But

then when, and I was in the hospital in Vietnam, and then I was in the hospital in Japan for a while. And then from there I got to Augusta and from Augusta, which they couldn't offer. Like I said, there was so much stuff going on there. They could, well, I wouldn't say they couldn't, but they wouldn't. And I was glad. So I was sent to Walter Re where they had my spinal operation, and that turned out great. I'm still here and moving.

Speaker 1 ([07:44](#)):

So at that time, you were in your early twenties, I'm thinking? Yeah, early twenties. And you had come back to Lithonia, you eventually made it back to Lithonia. So in 20 plus years, what changes did you see in Lithonia, if any?

Speaker 2 ([08:02](#)):

Well, a lot of changes now. When I first got back, it really much type of change. It was basically the same people, same. It just looked the same, because like I said, I was only gone for about three years. So wasn't that big of a change when I got

Speaker 1 ([08:19](#)):

Back. But growing up and being a 20 something year old man there. How long did it take for you to sort of clock that? There were changes happening in Lithonia?

Speaker 2 ([08:39](#)):

Pretty much. Well, after I got back from the military, you could see the changes in the city and the people were more acceptance of each other than it was before then. Yeah. But that's pretty much it, really, just to accept them people. And then at that time, well, before I went in the military, it was the black school and then the white school. Then I think my last year, the people from Bruce Street, well, they gave, some of 'em was choice. You could go to Lithonia High, you could stay at Bruce Street, but then they was getting ready to close it anyway. I think they closed it my last year it was closed. Then everybody went to Latonya High, but now it's a police precinct anyway, down.

Speaker 1 ([09:41](#)):

So you eventually had your medical procedure and you're back in your hometown. Did you find work or did you start a family or what happens then?

Speaker 2 ([09:50](#)):

Well, I had my procedure in Washington DC and I worked at Sharian carpet company for a little while. I worked with them for a little, because I had a couple of uncles worked there, and they Sharian was kind of like a family-oriented business at the time. And then after that, after I worked there for a while, I got drafted into the military. And then when I came back, then I worked at this clothing store downtown called Walters. People called it the sneaker store, but it's been there for over 50. I had a brother work for over 50 years, worked for this guy, and then I worked for him for a while. Like I said, I got drafted, then I came back and I worked a little while. Then I worked for a computer company, data processing, National Data Corporation. And I worked with them for about 18 or 19 years until I got sick and I had the brain aneurysm, then I had to take a medical retirement for that. So now I just enjoy doing nothing.

Speaker 1 ([11:04](#)):

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Yeah, I can appreciate that. So, is Walters still in Lithonia? Is it still there?

Speaker 2 ([11:10](#)):

No, no, no. It was on Katie Street, downtown Atlanta.

Speaker 1 ([11:13](#)):

Oh, okay. Downtown, right next to

Speaker 2 ([11:14](#)):

Georgia State.

Speaker 1 ([11:15](#)):

And it's not there anymore.

Speaker 2 ([11:17](#)):

Oh yeah.

Speaker 1 ([11:17](#)):

Oh, it is there.

Speaker 2 ([11:18](#)):

It's probably about the longest standing free-standing store in Atlanta at this point.

Speaker 1 ([11:23](#)):

Wow. Decatur Street, you said, and you worked for National Data Corporation. What did you do for them?

Speaker 2 ([11:32](#)):

Well, I worked in the, we did rotating jobs. I worked in the print shop. I worked balancing clerk. I worked front desk. Well, every six weeks or so, you would rotate from one job to another. So you learn everything in that.

Speaker 1 ([11:53](#)):

Yeah. And then what about any civic or church groups in Lithonia? Did you participate in anything like that?

Speaker 2 ([12:08](#)):

Nothing but the mayor course, at the church.

Speaker 1 ([12:12](#)):

The mayor course?

Speaker 2 ([12:13](#)):

Mayor course? Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([12:14](#)):

What was that?

Speaker 2 ([12:15](#)):

It was an all-male choir.

Speaker 1 ([12:17](#)):

Got it. Okay. Male choir. That's cool.

Speaker 2 ([12:20](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([12:23](#)):

So what part do you sing

Speaker 2 ([12:25](#)):

Out of tune? Tenor

Speaker 1 ([12:30](#)):

Tenor. Oh, that's so good. What church is it? Big

Speaker 2 ([12:37](#)):

Miller Grove.

Speaker 1 ([12:39](#)):

Okay. Are you still singing?

Speaker 2 ([12:40](#)):

Sometimes. I don't sing as much as I used to. Pastor is Bishop Miles E Fowler.

Speaker 1 ([12:51](#)):

How long have you been going to church there?

Speaker 2 ([12:53](#)):

My entire life. Oh, wow. My mom and dad, granddad, all of them went to that same church, brothers, sisters, everybody. Wow. Pretty much raised up in that church.

Speaker 1 ([13:04](#)):

Right. And obviously you have Patrice, your lovely daughter.

Speaker 2 ([13:09](#)):

Absolutely.

Speaker 1 ([13:11](#)):

Tell us about your family.

Speaker 2 ([13:14](#)):

That's my

Speaker 1 ([13:14](#)):

Family. That's your family.

Speaker 2 ([13:21](#)):

I was blessed to have her.

Speaker 1 ([13:22](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 2 ([13:23](#)):

Yep. She takes care of me. Sometimes she want to whoop me. But

Speaker 1 ([13:28](#)):

That's what daughters do with your dads.

Speaker 2 ([13:31](#)):

Probably because I've done something a little crazy. That's life. I'm not perfect.

Speaker 1 ([13:39](#)):

But you're enjoying your life in Lithonia. You still, are you still at, are you still at your house on Panola Road in Benton Drive? No. No. Okay. Is that house still there?

Speaker 2 ([13:49](#)):

No, not now.

Speaker 1 ([13:50](#)):

Okay. What's there now?

Speaker 2 ([13:52](#)):

Nothing.

Speaker 1 ([13:53](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([13:54](#)):



It was so, but people tore it down and nothing but big trees growing up where the house used to be.

Speaker 1 ([14:00](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([14:01](#)):

No, I stay on Miller Road up by the middle grove. What's that? Middle Grove Middle School. I stay right

Speaker 1 ([14:11](#)):

Behind that

Speaker 2 ([14:12](#)):

Same

Speaker 1 ([14:13](#)):

Street. And are your parents, are your parents deceased?

Speaker 2 ([14:17](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 1 ([14:18](#)):

Are they buried in Big Miller Grove Cemetery? Is there a cemetery?

Speaker 2 ([14:22](#)):

No. What is that cemetery down there?

Speaker 1 ([14:26](#)):

Bruce Street.

Speaker 2 ([14:27](#)):

Oh, Bruce Street? Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([14:28](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([14:29](#)):

It's a cemetery behind the old school. First school I went to where it's pretty much torn down. It was just a rock school. Everybody went to the school and there's no petitions between the school, a poll grade here and a grade there.

Speaker 1 ([14:47](#)):

Have you seen what they're doing? They're sort of revamping the Bruce Street School area as a historic site. Yeah, the Arabia Mountain Heritage Alliance is working with City of Lithonia to sort of rehab that

space. Not necessarily recreate the school, I think, but to create more of a historic monument kind of area, public space. It's really something. They're doing a great job over there. Yeah. So in high school or in school, just in general, did you have a favorite subject?

Speaker 2 ([15:34](#)):

History and home economics

Speaker 1 ([15:39](#)):

Yeah,

Speaker 2 ([15:39](#)):

'Cause I could out cook everybody in the class.

Speaker 1 ([15:42](#)):

Is that right? Is he a good cook, Patrice?

Speaker 3 ([15:47](#)):

Not anymore.

Speaker 1 ([15:47](#)):

Not anymore. He

Speaker 3 ([15:49](#)):

Doesn't cook. What? Say what? Say he doesn't cook. He's enjoying the retirement.

Speaker 1 ([15:55](#)):

Yeah, of course. So then, back then, what was your favorite, what were some of your best dishes that you made? Well, of

Speaker 2 ([16:02](#)):

Course, fried chicken or, I tried cooking a cake one time. It wasn't the best, but it was a cake. It was edible and just basic soul food. Really learned from mother being that I was the youngest, I was always around her. So I learned how to cook from her.

Speaker 1 ([16:27](#)):

Very nice. And history. Is there a particular point in history that you're more interested in than others?

Speaker 2 ([16:34](#)):

Just basic American history from civil war to slavery to just basic American history.

Speaker 1 ([16:49](#)):

And then when you were in Europe, what did you see or learn or want to learn, if anything, about their history in Germany?

Speaker 2 ([17:00](#)):

When I was in Germany, like I said, I got a chance to go to places that I read about, heard about in history, like Dachau where they burned the Jews. And I got a chance to go to that area to see that. And well, like I said, I was in transportation, so I went all over Germany and I went to Belgium, Holland, different places, because like I said, I drove big rigs. I took supplies to different areas all over Germany.

Speaker 1 ([17:44](#)):

So what did you do about the language barrier?

Speaker 2 ([17:48](#)):

I

Speaker 1 ([17:48](#)):

Would imagine you'd have to read the road signs. I would be terrified about reading my way. Well,

Speaker 2 ([17:53](#)):

They have international road signs, so you learn about that. So it's not too much of a problem. And like I said, most people in Germany could speak a little English anyway, so it wasn't a whole lot of barriers, especially with the younger people. So the language barrier is not that great. And I think from what I understood, that most of them have English classes the younger Germans did at that time anyway. I don't know if it's still that way now.

Speaker 1 ([18:29](#)):

So if you're out driving and you happen to get lost, you could maybe stop and ask somebody and they'd be able to understand

Speaker 4 ([18:36](#)):

Your

Speaker 1 ([18:36](#)):

Question bit. Yeah,

Speaker 4 ([18:37](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([18:38](#)):

And what about Vietnam? Did you get to explore or was it just to, I guess it's more of a situation of not being able to explore a country that's at

Speaker 2 ([18:49](#)):

War. Drove. Like I said, I was in the transportation unit. I drove the big rigs, and I think I drove one time, and after that I worked in the transportation office. I just go pick up reports and I would take 'em maybe a block or two up the street, show how many vehicles we had out, how many vehicles we had available and stuff like that. So I got, sometimes I said lucky, but I got blessed. Wasn't lucky. It was a blessing

because I've seen people that go out and when I did drive, I didn't like to go out on a time board because when you was in a time board, first thing they do is they hit the front truck, disable it, the back truck, then you blocked in. So they got you then. So it was that situation.

Speaker 1 ([19:46](#)):

So there's been a lot of development in Lithonia, there's been a lot of traffic things. Talk about some of those changes that you've seen over the course of your life.

Speaker 2 ([19:55](#)):

Well, basically the town of Lithonia is, I guess revitalization their new buildings or fixing up the old building and stuff like that. But I can see a lot of difference in what it was when I was growing up, because it really wasn't a lot in the town of Latonia at that time. Maybe I think I can remember one little shoe store and well, now it's a few places that you can eat and stuff like that. But it is really coming along since, I guess since DeKalb County is growing and people are moving to the area and stuff like that.

Speaker 1 ([20:42](#)):

So where did you live in relation to the quarry?

Speaker 2 ([20:46](#)):

Oh, I stayed a long way from the quarry.

Speaker 2 ([20:48](#)):

I stayed up on Panola and right basically at Covington Highway. Panola Road. Covington Highway. And nowhere near the quarry.

Speaker 1 ([21:00](#)):

And the quarry is still there, still in operation? Or do you know?

Speaker 2 ([21:02](#)):

I don't think it's still in operations.

Speaker 1 ([21:04](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([21:04](#)):

I don't, don't think, I'm not sure.

Speaker 1 ([21:08](#)):

Did you have any family members that worked at the Quarry? No. No,

Speaker 2 ([21:13](#)):

No, none of them.

Speaker 1 ([21:18](#)):

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Were there other industries besides clothing stores and the restaurants and the quarry and places like that that stand out in your memory?

Speaker 2 ([21:28](#)):

Well, growing up, basically that was it, because there really wasn't that much in Lithonia. It was a

Speaker 1 ([21:35](#)):

Small town, no small

Speaker 2 ([21:36](#)):

Town, and people really wasn't moving this way. They considered this country.

Speaker 1 ([21:42](#)):

Right.

Speaker 2 ([21:42](#)):

But now it's no such thing as country anymore.

Speaker 1 ([21:46](#)):

Do you remember, were there farms? Do you have a memory of any farms or anything like that?

Speaker 2 ([21:51](#)):

My grandfather had a small farm on Wilburn Road off of Covington Highway. He had a small farm.

Speaker 1 ([22:01](#)):

And what were his crops?

Speaker 2 ([22:04](#)):

Well, he raised cotton for one thing, pigs and

Speaker 1 ([22:11](#)):

Stuff

Speaker 2 ([22:11](#)):

Like that, and garden vegetables and all that kind of stuff.

Speaker 1 ([22:17](#)):

Did you ever help out on the farm?

Speaker 2 ([22:19](#)):

I went a few times. I was too small to do anything, but I would just go be in the way, I guess. But yeah, that's what I can remember that.

Speaker 1 ([22:31](#)):

And are you in your brothers and sisters line? Are you towards the oldest or are you towards the youngest? I am the youngest. You are the youngest. Did any of your brothers and sisters help out on the farm?

Speaker 2 ([22:42](#)):

Oh yeah. My older brothers. Not my sister, but my brothers. Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([22:50](#)):

It's a lot of physical work. Very demanding.

Speaker 2 ([22:53](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. It could tired out.

Speaker 1 ([22:56](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. And are your siblings still in Lithonia?

Speaker 2 ([23:04](#)):

In the Decatur area.

Speaker 1 ([23:05](#)):

Oh, right. You said that before. Sorry. Okay, so nearby.

Speaker 2 ([23:11](#)):

Yeah, we all 15, 20 minutes

Speaker 1 ([23:15](#)):

Far. Very nice. I guess going back to the industry in Lithonia, I guess Stonecrest is sort of a big economic development in the last 20 years in that area

Speaker 2 ([23:32](#)):

For sure.

Speaker 1 ([23:34](#)):

Lots of development around that.

Speaker 2 ([23:36](#)):

Oh yeah. Where it is now, it was nothing but woods.

Speaker 1 ([23:41](#)):

It

Speaker 2 ([23:41](#)):

Was nothing.

Speaker 1 ([23:42](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 2 ([23:44](#)):

All the shopping you did, we had to go downtown Decatur downtown. There was the type of businesses in that area.

Speaker 1 ([23:53](#)):

Right. And then they just had the Biolab incident in Rockdale County. Are you seeing any of that in the sky where you're living? No, it didn't come that far. I'm glad about that.

Speaker 2 ([24:08](#)):

Yeah, me too.

Speaker 1 ([24:10](#)):

Yeah, that seems like a bad situation. Yeah. Any questions you want to ask Patrice or things that your dad hasn't mentioned that you want him to talk about?

Speaker 2 ([24:28](#)):

Yeah, she can tell you how great a dad is. Oh,

Speaker 3 ([24:30](#)):

Wow. I don't think this is for that. We know that. We know that. I mean, thinking about industry, where did your parents work? Did they work in Lithonia? Did

Speaker 2 ([24:42](#)):

They, no, they all worked in Atlanta.

Speaker 3 ([24:46](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([24:47](#)):

My dad, my mom worked in Decatur, was a place called Almond (or Almand) Bag Company, where they would go to places like Frito Lay and all this where they made feed actually for hogs.

Speaker 4 ([25:00](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([25:00](#)):

They get all these chips and cookies and stuff, and they would grind them up and make feed for animals and stuff. And when my dad worked, it was a cloth place where the material, he made material and stuff, and I don't know who they sold it to. They made bags and all that kind of stuff.

Speaker 1 ([25:23](#)):

Very interesting. And your grandparents was their income from the farm, or did they have other work that you know

Speaker 2 ([25:31](#)):

Of? My grandfather trying, I'm not sure. I'm not about what the grandfather did, but I know he had that farm, and I think he did a little work for this guy that, I don't know what he did, but he did do some outside work. I'm not sure what he did.

Speaker 1 ([25:52](#)):

I just remembered somebody else, or maybe a couple of people that we've interviewed have talked about a racetrack in Lithonia. Do you have any memories or stories about the

Speaker 2 ([26:03](#)):

Racetrack? I was a little bit young, but I do know where it was that been in the area.

Speaker 1 ([26:11](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 2 ([26:11](#)):

I don't know too much about that one.

Speaker 1 ([26:14](#)):

Do you know what is there now?

Speaker 2 ([26:18](#)):

Well, now anything now that way. Now subdivisions, basically now.

Speaker 1 ([26:22](#)):

Okay. What's the area? What were some of the road names of the,

Speaker 2 ([26:27](#)):

I'm trying to think if you

Speaker 1 ([26:28](#)):

Remember.

Speaker 2 ([26:31](#)):

I can't even remember. Not a race now.



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Speaker 1 ([26:33](#)):

That's okay. But I think that's so interesting that Lithonia had a racetrack. I didn't know that. Yeah. That was interesting to me.

Speaker 2 ([26:43](#)):

Yep. Yep.

Speaker 1 ([26:47](#)):

Anything

Speaker 3 ([26:47](#)):

Else? Let's see. I would just like to go back to the Benton Drive part. You said that your dad built and his brothers built the houses across the street from each other, but there was another brother also down the

Speaker 2 ([27:04](#)):

Street. Oh, yeah. Yeah. After John, my dad's brother.

Speaker 3 ([27:08](#)):

Right. Would you have your

Speaker 1 ([27:09](#)):

Name after I looked like, yeah, your name after your dad's brother. Okay.

Speaker 2 ([27:15](#)):

Yep. Yep. And that was pretty much it in that area.

Speaker 1 ([27:24](#)):

Is Uncle John still around?

Speaker 2 ([27:26](#)):

No.

Speaker 1 ([27:26](#)):

No. Okay. And how does one go about getting their name on a street? Do you know how that happened?

Speaker 2 ([27:37](#)):

Actually, we were the only two families on the street, actually. It was a dirt road

Speaker 1 ([27:45](#)):

And

Speaker 2 ([27:46](#)):

They owned property. And when my dad owned property rent, so the county decided, I guess they just decided to name it after the people that lived on the street because Okay,

Speaker 3 ([27:57](#)):

Amazing. That's been one of my inquiries actually. As we were driving here today, I was like, I need to go by zoning and planning. I really would like to know when that date, because I've been collecting death certificates and birth certificates. And at one point things said route or in obituaries route, but then it changed to Benton Drive. So when did it change to Benton Drive?

Speaker 2 ([28:23](#)):

Because it used to be Route two, Lithonia, Georgia. The street didn't have a name. It just had a route, rural Route two. Do

Speaker 1 ([28:33](#)):

You have any idea about when it changed roughly what year or time? No,

Speaker 3 ([28:40](#)):

That's really interesting. I'm curious to know as well. And I was born in 76, and I know my mom, she told me when she was dating my dad that it was still a dirt road. So to me, I guess I don't think of myself as old. I'm like, so that's fairly recent that it was paved. I'm 48, but just thinking about, that's not that long ago in my mind that it was a dirt road. And so I just think about when you asked my dad, did things change after Vietnam? Benton Drive is such an anomaly. It's like once you drive on that street, even now, it's like a time warp because it's family. And I think in the exhibit there was someone named Shy on, her mom lived on that street. I used to walk past a miss. I think that's her mom

Speaker 4 ([29:35](#)):

Really. When we

Speaker 3 ([29:35](#)):

Go up there, dad, I want you to see the person's name, the last name, Shy. She's in the exhibit upstairs. And probably Ms. Shy's daughter married, one of my father's brothers, my uncle. Wow. Small world, isn't it? Small world, isn't it? Yeah. And then there was another name Maguire. So my grandmother speaking, my father knowing how to cook, I'm like, you got to talk about Grandmama your mama now. She was the cook. Everyone after church would come to her house. And all my family, so my grandmother was, she used to cook for the football team. She

Speaker 2 ([30:14](#)):

Was the grandmother house was like Piccadilly on Sunday. Everybody from the church and everybody, the community came to her house.

Speaker 1 ([30:23](#)):

She must have had to get up at the crack

Speaker 3 ([30:25](#)):

Of dawn to feed that when she

Speaker 2 ([30:26](#)):

Cooked all day on Saturday, all day,

Speaker 3 ([30:27](#)):

All day was my Saturdays with her. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, my hands, would I be, the food would come here. Oh my gosh. And Saturday she had a garden next to the house. So we would pick things from the garden or whatever she didn't get from the garden. We would go to the store. And basically all day Saturday was cooking, cooking, cooking, shelling peas.

Speaker 2 ([30:51](#)):

Everybody was coming, half the church

Speaker 3 ([30:52](#)):

Cakes. Wow. A sweet potato cobbler. Peach cobbler. Pound cakes,

Speaker 2 ([30:59](#)):

Two or three cakes,

Speaker 3 ([31:00](#)):

Sweet potato pies. It's like, oh, I just threw this together. Patrice, do you like to cook? Not so much any, you know what, I have moments spurts.

Speaker 1 ([31:14](#)):

Yeah, I was just thinking it would be amazing to have those recipes from your grandmother and have a family recipe book or something. For those of you that like to cook, I don't like to cook either, if I'm honest. But I'm just saying for those people that like it in the family, you could have a family cookbook or

Speaker 3 ([31:32](#)):

Something. That sounds amazing. Yes. Now his older sister, she lived further down on Benton Drive, the oldest sister. So the street is Benton Drive, but then it turns into Miller Road, Miller Grove Road. So that's where my uncle John lived further down. And then my dad's oldest sister, Bessie May, she lived in a cul-de-sac at the end. Now she cooked like that as well. So that was the two houses you go to. But yeah, some of that tradition unfortunately was lost. I think with it happens. It happens. People move. But the Benton Drive in itself, it's like you can drive down the street now and just it seems like you're in a different place.

Speaker 1 ([32:16](#)):

That's so wild.

Speaker 3 ([32:17](#)):

My uncle's house is still across the street and they built their homes. I don't think granddaddy had more than a second grade education, but can build houses

Speaker 2 ([32:28](#)):

That last

Speaker 3 ([32:29](#)):

Couldn't 50

Speaker 2 ([32:30](#)):

Years, couldn't.

Speaker 3 ([32:30](#)):

That's amazing. That last Right. And still there. Yeah. Builders today could learn something, huh? Yes. I'm very grateful for that experience as well. And then the church, big Miller Grove, I think my grandmother's name is on the side of it. It's right next to, it's on Panola Road.

Speaker 1 ([32:47](#)):

What was her name?

Speaker 3 ([32:48](#)):

Bessie Benton. Okay. And so I think my uncle Harris, the uncle, worked at the shoe store Walters as well. So they were kind of some of the founding people in that area. And what I find interesting about the Stonecrest area, at some point that was Lithonia. So I think it's, for me, very important to preserve it so that the name change, you don't lose the history of the people. That's right. That were there. That's right. Absolutely. 50 years from now that Stonecrest, not Lithonia before Stonecrest. So where does that history go? And so just really feeling compelled to make sure that these stories are told and preserved. Absolutely. You mentioned

Speaker 1 ([33:35](#)):

McGuire. Who was that?

Speaker 3 ([33:38](#)):

They were part of the Big Miller Grove Church. There's a lot of McGuire.

Speaker 1 ([33:41](#)):

Is it? Aha. Is Olitha McGuire Reed part of that family? Aha. Yeah.

Speaker 2 ([33:47](#)):

She

Speaker 1 ([33:47](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([33:48](#)):

I went to school with Olitha.

Speaker 1 ([33:49](#)):

We

Speaker 2 ([33:49](#)):

Graduated the same time.

Speaker 1 ([33:51](#)):

See, aha was the first person we interviewed for the series back in whatever year it was. Yeah,

Speaker 2 ([33:59](#)):

It's

Speaker 1 ([34:00](#)):

A small world.

Speaker 2 ([34:00](#)):

I'm sure. We graduated the same class.

Speaker 1 ([34:03](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 3 ([34:03](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([34:04](#)):

Right. Yep, she did.

Speaker 3 ([34:07](#)):

Yeah. So it's a very small knit community. The church was, I think the center of a lot of things. Big Miller Grove. Then eventually you had the middle grove of high school, Miller Grove. People don't know that before these current or modern edifices or these names that there was a small community. I think before that it was called Belmont, the area before. And I saw on one of your websites, not on the website, there was a photograph that said the Belmont School, and it was in that area, but there were no children of color there. So I'm not sure when the transition or maybe the connection, but I know some of the people in that on Benton Drive in that area, the older generations, they refer to the area as Belmont as well. So it would be interesting to know when the transition happened. The name again, like Stonecrest, like the name switched to Latonia, but what happened to that name of those people? So interesting. Just trying to help preserve the history.

Speaker 1 ([35:13](#)):

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Of course. Anything else, Mr. Benton, you want to talk about or add?

Speaker 2 ([35:19](#)):

No, I think we pretty much covered it all.

Speaker 1 ([35:22](#)):

You've had quite a full, A full life. I'm glad to hear you're enjoying

Speaker 2 ([35:28](#)):

Your

Speaker 1 ([35:28](#)):

Retirement.

Speaker 2 ([35:29](#)):

Absolutely. It's

Speaker 1 ([35:30](#)):

The way it should be.

Speaker 2 ([35:31](#)):

I love doing nothing.

Speaker 1 ([35:36](#)):

Thank you so much. That was spent.

Transcribed by Rev AI

Edited by human, J Blomqvist, archivist, DeKalb History Center

The Bentons were interviewed in October 2024.