



**Berkshire Historical Society at Herman Melville's Arrowhead**  
780 Holmes Rd, Pittsfield, MA 01201 | [berkshirehistory.org](http://berkshirehistory.org)

**Invisible Community Project**  
in partnership with  
**Housatonic Heritage Oral History**

**Elizabeth Caesar**  
**0:00:00 to 57:40**

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**Isaac Crawford:** This is Isaac Crawford. We are at the home of Elizabeth Caesar on Daniels Avenue in Pittsfield, to interview her for an oral history, for the Invisible Community.

Hello, Elizabeth.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Hi, how are you Isaac?

**Isaac Crawford:** Fine, thanks, and you?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Fine, thanks.

**Isaac Crawford:** OK, let's begin with some questions. You have an idea of what the background of this is all about. We discussed that, right? So, who were your parents?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** My parents was Helen Blanche Fry, that was my mother. And my father was Lloyd Morehead. [0:00:55]

**Isaac Crawford:** Where were they born?

0:00:58

**Elizabeth Caesar:** My mother was born in Pittsfield. My father was born in North Carolina.

**Isaac Crawford:** When did he come to Massachusetts?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** He came to Massachusetts probably when he was about 12. They ended up in Boston.

**Isaac Crawford:** Why did the come to the Berkshire area, you have any idea?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Well, my grandfather, my father's father, I never met. They came, and my grandmother was a highly domestic woman. Cooking and sewing and artsy and craft things. My grandfather was—he wrote, he was a writer. And so that's why they came here. It was just three boys, on my father's side. My mom's side there was eleven children.

0:02:02

**Isaac Crawford:** Do you have any idea of your grandparents, who they were?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** My mother's?

**Isaac Crawford:** Yeah, your mother's parents, or your father's parents.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yeah. My mother's parents was Louis and Elizabeth Fry. You want to go back further?

**Isaac Crawford:** Well, if we can.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** My mother's grandmother was Bess, because she came from Courtney, Ireland. I can see her right now. In Berkshire. They owned that Berkshire [0:02:39], down there, in the gully.

**Isaac Crawford:** So she was Irish?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. Very stately [blind? blond? 0:02:46]. Totally [blind? blond?].

**Isaac Crawford:** Is that right?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. She'd come from Courtney, Ireland. And my grandfather was—my great grandfather was a Cherokee Indian. From somewhere in Pennsylvania.

0:03:03

**Isaac Crawford:** It's amazing the number of blacks who have Indian blood. Almost all... You said, she was born in Ireland. How about your great grandfathers, you know where they were born?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** No, I don't remember where—grandpa, he was a Hoose. That's right. They were, no grandma was a Hoose. Right. My grandmother was a Hoose, so they were born up in Berkshire, way up in Hinsdale, somwheres around there.

**Isaac Crawford:** That's another old-line family in the Berkshires, the Hooses.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah.

**Isaac Crawford:** I've seen the name several times in the census, back in 1900, and 1870.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Her name was Bess Hoose.

**Isaac Crawford:** Bess Hoose. You were born in Pittsfield?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** That's right.

**Isaac Crawford:** And you've been here all your life?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** All my life, with exception of four or five years, when I went to Detroit. For a different kind of nursing.

0:04:00

**Isaac Crawford:** [0:04:01] let you out. You have brothers and sisters?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** I have one sister, and I had five brothers. One died. John. About six years ago.

**Isaac Crawford:** And their names?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** My sister's name is Rosemary. Durant now, first Morehead. Then my brothers are Bill Lloyd Morehead, who lives in Detroit, 70 years old. And then me. And then Donald Morehead, he lives in Seattle, Washington. Bank president, and he's 66. Then there was John, which died six years ago. And he was also the owner of the Riverside Café, located in Pittsfield.

0:05:00

Prior to that, he was a big—I think in the union in New York for fabrics and stuff like that. And then there was Melvin, lives here in Pittsfield. And then there was Bruce, my brother Bruce, lives in California now. And my sister Rosemary.

**Isaac Crawford:** Those that left the area, any idea why they left?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** My brother Bill left because he couldn't find suitable employment for himself. Because he got out of the army I guess when he was about 20, I think. My mother—my father died when I was young. So he must been about 20 when he left, because it was too much. There wasn't anything to do here.

0:06:00

Now he was educated and all that, but couldn't apply anything, because there's nothing here to apply for what he know.

**Isaac Crawford:** What field was he in?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** He was more into sports. Baseball. And you didn't have the money, because both of my parents died—my mother died in 1949. My dad died in 1947, so I was 18 and 19. My brother's just a year older than I am.

**Isaac Crawford:** You were married, of course.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Uh-huh.

**Isaac Crawford:** Your husband's name?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** John.

**Isaac Crawford:** Caesar?

- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yes.
- Isaac Crawford:** Children?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** I had actually 13.
- 0:07:00 I had a set of triplets, which did not live. And my daughter [Wynn? 0:07:06], was a twin. Then I had two [0:07:11], I just lost them.
- Isaac Crawford:** You had 13. That brings up that old joke, are you a good Catholic? [0:07:23] [laugh]
- What type of work did you husband do?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** While I was married twice. First husband was a tree-climber for—it was probably the fourth generation in Belton, Massachusetts, where the Caesars had their own landscaping business.
- Isaac Crawford:** What was the relationship between the ones involved and then your husband? Like Archie?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Archie Caesar? Mm-hmm. Brothers.
- Isaac Crawford:** Oh, brothers.
- 0:08:01
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. That was John, John senior was John junior. Yeah.
- Isaac Crawford:** And the other husband's name was?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Bill. William Caesar.
- Isaac Crawford:** And he worked?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** He worked for the railroad. Boston and Albany railroad, about 31 years. And he was in the army.
- Isaac Crawford:** How did you meet?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** How did I meet Bill? [laugh] I don't know. I just met. The thing that's amazing about John. John Caesar could not get in the army because they said he wouldn't allow them to put white on his [union? 0:08:51] sheet. Because they wouldn't put the word [negro? 0:08:59]. They wouldn't, they would not. They put him 4F, or whatever you call it, so he could not get in.
- 0:09:09 I thought that was interesting.
- Isaac Crawford:** He didn't want to be labelled as white.

- Elizabeth Caesar:** No, he didn't.
- Isaac Crawford:** He looked white, didn't he?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Very, very, very, very. There was no getting out of it. We were hurt a lot behind that stuff. People were still very ignorant. And the Caesars still ignorant to the fact.
- Isaac Crawford:** Some are today.
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yeah. They still are. As far as I'm concerned.
- Isaac Crawford:** OK. Do you belong to a church?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yes.
- Isaac Crawford:** Name?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Price Memorial A.M.E Zion Church.
- Isaac Crawford:** You have some fond memories of church gatherings, church events?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah, I was brought up really in St. Stephen's Church for 21 years.
- 0:09:58
- So I remember, you don't do as I do, you do as I say, mother. Saying, "you are going to church." So we all would traipse to church, all seven of us. Winter, summer, it didn't make any difference.
- So yes, fond memories. Because I was in choir, and I told my mother I didn't like choir, and she said, "well, you don't get everything you like." I said, "well, I don't." The one that taught us how to sing called my mother one day and said, "Mrs. Morehead, I want to tell you that I don't think your daughter is material for singing." Oh, I was acting up awful. I was going like a frog. "Ooo, ooo." I was removed from the choir, instantly. [laugh]
- Isaac Crawford:** You planned it that way, right?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. I was going to sing the worst. Really I can't sing, I really can't.
- 0:11:03
- And then I can remember us—because there was probably three black families in the whole church. The church was very, very big. I thought St. Stephen's was big to me. It was the Lois family, the Fry family, and the Morehead family. That's all I can remember.

**Isaac Crawford:** Are you a member of any civic or community religious organizations now?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah, I'm a deacon, and now I'm a person around church. I've been on every board you can think of in Pittsfield. Red Cross, NAACP, and ABC and D and E.

0:12:00

**Isaac Crawford:** So where and when did you go to school?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Went to Bartlett school. In those days, they had a little thing when you were 3-years old, that you could go to school and sleep. Now they have all this great big business of incomes, and all that stuff. And all you had to do was have your parents working, so I've been in school since I've been 3 at Bartlett school.

Graduated from there, then went to Tucker school, which was not a community school. I mean, you came home for lunch, and you better be back in time, or you'd get the switch. Then I graduated from Pittsfield high school.

The thing that I can remember, I told my mother that I wanted to be a nurse, and school department thought I'd make a better chef. I didn't want to be a chef.

0:13:05

**Isaac Crawford:** Home ec, they wanted you to take.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** I did, I took home ec. Yeah. I was really good. I really was good. Meer Kapless [?], I made very cake that Meer Kapless ever had, because some people have natural talents, and I must have had it. And I got a free scholarship to Boston University, everything paid for, and that was a lot. I told mom, "mm-mm, I'm not going to go, mm-mm."

We discussed. My father and my mother and my aunts. In those days, at least in our family, everybody discussed a big situation like that. So I ended up taking the test, [0:13:54] test, in Albany, New York.

0:14:00

In one of those hotels, I can't think of the name. That was probably eight hours long.

**Isaac Crawford:** Wow.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. It was a long, long thing. All my white friends said they got accepted. So I wanted to know how come I didn't. So my mother said, "well, Tubby, maybe they [0:14:29]." So I went over to the Bishop Memorial, was the name of it. House of

Mercy Hospital. And I asked her, knew what was my grade. She said they couldn't give that information out. I said, "well, I think you can." I was very aggressive, even at that age I was aggressive.

And I said, "OK, I'll go to St. Luke's and they'll find out." She said, "it'll cost too much money." I said, "how do you know it'll cost too much money, for what?" "To get your grades." I said, "well, you said I didn't pass, so what difference does it make." Oh, I was really upset with that woman.

0:15:10

My mother said OK, I could go to St. Luke's and ask the nun. Head of the nursing. I had a 96.2 average, I'll never forget that. 96. And this woman was going way down to Mississippi, and I didn't know much about the south anyhow. And she's going way down to Mississippi. Close as she could get, me, was in New York, to go to—yeah, yeah. Went down and told the nun. A matter of fact, it was in a New York—one of those magazines that they put out about how they were so discriminatory against me.

0:16:03

Which was true. They were. I got into St. Luke's in 1947. And didn't have much trouble until I hit Springfield for orthopedic nursing. And they really gave me a hard time. Because they didn't like blacks. It was very well-known that they didn't like blacks. Black patients were like a segregation. It was there, right there. And I was, what?—20, I guess, by then. You can do—I believe, anybody can do anything they want to do. You got to know the right ropes.

**Isaac Crawford:**

There are a lot of people who grew up around here say, "oh, there were no prejudices around here. When I was young, everybody loved everybody." That's not true, huh?

0:17:02

**Elizabeth Caesar:**

I wouldn't say so. I would not say that. I would say, maybe, on top, if you were a good housecleaner, or what kind of work did your mother do. What kind of work did any of them do. But see, I wasn't going to settle for that kind of stuff. I really wasn't.

I mean, the cooking business was about as far as—I love cooking, I'm not saying nothing about that. I'm just saying that is not what I wanted to be. And if I had the opportunity. My mother had a pay of 25 dollars, true, true. She had to work very hard to get that—25 dollars back then was a lot of money.

**Isaac Crawford:**

That's the second case I heard about that. There's another woman I interviewed who applied for a job and the personal said, "we don't hire colored."

0:17:58

**Elizabeth Caesar:**

Colored people. I wouldn't be happy. [That what she said, I wouldn't.? 0:18:02] "How do you know?" I told you I was aggressive, I really was. "How do you know I wouldn't be happy?"

Well, needless to say, I got into St. Luke's. And my mother died, I told you, in '49. And my dad died in '47. So I had to get from the bishop, permission to live at home. So I raised my five brothers and one sister, and used to get up at four o'clock in the morning. That was the contingency that they had on me.

I had to be at the school at five o'clock in the morning. Go to church at St. Jo, every morning. We can forget about St. Stephen's, because I wasn't even [included? 0:18:57]. I had to turn quickly into a catholic [0:19:00]. That's what I wanted to be.

0:19:04

And it was a lot. No, no. Then there was—and now, there still is, as far as I'm concerned, undercurrent, underlying, so deep that—

**Isaac Crawford:**

What sort of jobs have you had in the nursing field after you finished?

**Elizabeth Caesar:**

I have had nothing but jobs that I was in a supervisory capacity, teaching capacity. I worked—I set up three clinics when I was in Detroit, Michigan. For nothing. For freebies. And I got organized other people to come in and—polio, it was for polio.

From there, I never worked as a plain, ordinary nurse.

0:20:00

**Isaac Crawford:**

Is that right? Not on the floor?

**Elizabeth Caesar:**

Mm-mm. Always it was a supervisory capacity of some sort. The first check I ever got from St. Luke's, I went downstairs and she said, "Ms. Morehead." I said, "yes." She said, "you're not to discuss your pay to anybody." "OK." I got 37 dollars and 50 cents. Ten days work, and straight days.

Went upstairs, and of course I forgot all about what she said. I really didn't. But someone asked me, "what did you get, what did you get, Tubby Morehead?" I said, "I got 37 dollars and 50 cents." Wow. Ten minutes later, I was down in front of the nuns again. "We thought we told you not to discuss." I said, "I didn't discuss, I only told somebody what they asked me."

0:21:05

Well, I didn't know that they went by the pay by your excellence in working.



- Isaac Crawford:** So you had more than the rest?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** More than somebody that's been there ten years. Grace Noonan, that's who was mad at me.
- Isaac Crawford:** I guess so.
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yeah. Now she had been a graduate nurse, and all of that stuff. She had been there about—
- [sound cuts off]
- What I was saying a second ago, I thought right there after I had gone to learn to be an organizer, that was a key point in my life of being discriminatory.
- 0:21:57
- Isaac Crawford:** OK, Elizabeth, let's take you back to your childhood years and what kind of games did you play as a child?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Hopscotch.
- Isaac Crawford:** Everyone says that.
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Hopscotch. Hide and seek. Marbles. I wasn't too much into sports, you know, baseball. I really wasn't. I played an awful lot of doctor. Fixing the dolls and fixing the neighborhood kids.
- Isaac Crawford:** Is that what prompted you to want to be a nurse?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Probably. Probably. Because I wanted to go to India when I was little, about 24, and be a nurse over there. Because there was so much poor.
- Isaac Crawford:** Did you learn any nursery rhymes? Did you chant any of those when you were a kid?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. Used to sing—what did I used to sing? Mary had a little lamb. I remember that. I sang a lot of church songs. Can't sing, but you know what I mean. Hummed them.
- 0:23:05
- What else did I do? I was more into trying to help the neighborhood kids, even at 9-years old. Because I had to raise those kids. Before I went to school, I had to get three kids outdoors before I could go to school.
- Isaac Crawford:** So you had a lot of household chores. Even as a child.
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yeah.
- Isaac Crawford:** Cooking, cleaning.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Washed clothes. Because my mother—at that point, my dad was sick in the bed for four years, and my mom worked two jobs and a half, every day that I can remember of her life. [GE? 0:23:47] and cooking and another cooking job. Every weekend she would have us take beans and bread up to Bartlett school, where she cooked.

0:24:02 Then she did laundry also, for the White Tree Inn on Wendell Avenue. We had to do that. We'd go through the park on the sled. No, we really—it wasn't no, "would you please."

**Isaac Crawford:** So it wasn't just chores, it was almost a full-time job.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yeah. Because, like I said, I raised everybody but my brother Bill. Raised John, Donald. And then when my mother died, I made sure that those guys got a job right quick. And one was 12, and one was 10. "If you guys want any money, you got to go out and get some."

**Isaac Crawford:** They stayed in school and worked, or did they...?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, no. No, no. Everybody went to—one worked for, Joe Roberto, which was on Columbus Avenue, that was brother John. And he was a hustler, though.

0:24:58 He also worked on Saturday and Sunday, after church. He worked at the Sheridan Hotel. Little hotel up there. And shining shoes. That was John.

Brother Donald, was still in his sports. He did a lot of sports stuff. But people had—for instance, when my mother did die, I think she had the biggest funeral I ever seen in my life. At least 2,600 people were there. I remember the article.

**Isaac Crawford:** Wow. [0:25:36]. What a life.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, my mother. Well, my brother Donald was the first black president in Pittsfield high. And I was the first black nurse from that graduated from this city. I was followed right after.

**Isaac Crawford:** The year after you, there were three or four others.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah, yeah. [0:25:59] was for one. From Bishop Memorial. She didn't have no 96 average.

0:26:06

**Isaac Crawford:** She got in?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah, she did.

**Isaac Crawford:** Why, did she pass?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yes, she did pass. That was my cousin. She looked like she was an Indian, yes. So I have some reservations about folks saying certain people can't get into certain things. You got to pursue it, you got to go ahead and go.

**Isaac Crawford:** Some of the values and lessons that your parents instilled in you?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** "If you can't"—this was my father's [0:26:39], "if you can't afford something, you don't get it. You work for whatever—you don't steal, nothing in this house that your mother or myself, don't know where it comes from, is out." That's it. No need talking about it.

0:27:00 We ate excellent. My father was an excellent cook. My mother was also. There wasn't no fancy stuff, but it was very—I really never ate hot dogs and that stuff, until I was about 10. We had stews, really hearty meals, as far as I was concerned.

With prayers said at every meal. If you didn't say them, especially my father, if you didn't say them [in unison? 0:27:31], you just didn't eat that, you didn't eat. My father was tough on that. Tough. I don't know, his mother must have been tough on them. She really—you just didn't play at the table.

"I don't like this" and "I don't want that" and there was never of that—there was never that I can remember, never anything separate cooked for somebody else.

0:28:00

**Isaac Crawford:** You ate that or else.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah.

**Isaac Crawford:** My next question, what sort of discipline was enforced?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, discipline, if we didn't do what my mother asked or my father asked, well, spankings. My father wasn't a spanker, he would put you to bed. He'd say, "you can't do that, so that's the end of that." But my mother did not believe in that. She said, "you're going to do what I say, and that's it."

So, discipline, you better never talk back to an adult. Never. Didn't make any difference who they were. You don't do that.

**Isaac Crawford:** You've heard some of the kids today, how they talk to their parents?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Wow. Like my grandmother, she had Parkinson's disease and every one of us kids were told what we had to do for my grandmother.

0:29:06 Because she had it in childbearing, when she was having a child. So she was about 38 when she got it, and she had it for—she died when she was 76. And all of us had to take care of my—[no illusions? 0:29:23] about that either.

**Isaac Crawford:** So you said you did quite a bit of cooking, so you must have some favorite recipes?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Bread pudding.

**Isaac Crawford:** Bread pudding.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Bread pudding, I think is one of my favorite—that I like to cook. And then, my mom used to make a lot of lamb stew. The only thing that we, as a family, did not have to eat—I told you we had to eat or didn't eat at all—was, what's it called? The inside of a—

0:30:04

**Isaac Crawford:** Chitlins?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** No. The inside of a cow. What is that?

**Isaac Crawford:** Chitlins is a pig. Tripe?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Tripe. My dad loved it. So my mother would cook that once a week, and we would have something. But that's the only thing that I can ever remember.

So, as far as eating and getting—every one of us had to be out and up, out of bed, at six-thirty in the morning.

**Isaac Crawford:** One question about the bread pudding, do you put raisins in yours?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** I put raisins.

**Isaac Crawford:** Yeah, you got to have them, right?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yes, yes. It was WPA, my mother and father wasn't on it, but my uncles. And they would bring tons of the raisins and the oranges.

0:31:00

I got tired of raisins and oranges. And my mother used to know how to fix the oranges and make it smell good. We had great Christmases, great Christmases. Fruitcakes, her own fruitcakes.

**Isaac Crawford:** I know you were quite busy, but did you have time to develop any hobbies, side interests?

- Elizabeth Caesar:** Side interests, I think that I was always somebody that—I always liked to talk to people.
- My side interests, I used to like to sing on the porch with Rosemary. [0:37:47] couldn't sing worth a hoop, because I couldn't. I used to go to the park. I wasn't an angel, that's for sure. But I'm just saying the things that we could do.
- 0:32:01 My mother didn't allow—I was 16-years old before I could legally go to the park. I used to sneak off, of course. So, you're saying did I learn any, have any hobbies?
- Isaac Crawford:** Knitting or sewing?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** I sew. Yes, I sew. I made a pair of pants, underpants, for my sister. And my mother said, "those are beautiful, Tubby." She was always saying something was good, even if it looked like who'd [0:32:40]. Got up on North Street, and W.T. Grants, pants fall off my sister, ah. Goes to show you, I had to learn how to sew right, right?
- 0:32:55 So, I had a good childhood I thought. It wasn't all this stuff of, what are you going to do? There wasn't any of these great, big games. My father chopped the tree down for Christmas. I never remember a Christmas going by that somebody, one of the brothers, didn't get a railroad train. At least, [0:33:22] because my dad worked on the railroad. And he shined our shoes, when he thought we were hot stuff.
- Isaac Crawford:** What memories do you have of [0:33:34], Pittsfield in particular since you spent all of your life, any good memories?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yes. I had some good memories.
- Isaac Crawford:** Or bad. Well you mentioned some of the bad ones.
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. The good ones was that, I had a lot of friends, black and white. For some odd reason, I was thinking that, I treated the white people—the older I got the more I understood that I was treating them differently. Myself. Because I was treated differently.
- I was getting overprotected. I was in nursing school. "Don't say too much, because Tubby's colored." So what? [0:34:26] So what?
- Isaac Crawford:** Are there some people that you remember most in the area?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Dr. Baker. Down on Second Street, he had that real little church across from the common.
- Isaac Crawford:** He was a minister.

- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. I was used to love to hear him preach. So on the way home from St. Stephen's, as I said I wasn't an angel, I used to run in there.
- 0:35:00 I had to keep my brothers from saying, "Tubby went over to the other church." [laugh] I was only 9 now, 9 or 10.
- One of the things—because I remember that, I lived at 47 John Street. Far as I remember, there was one telephone, which was in my mom's [0:35:28]. And every time that somebody wanted to speak to grandpa or somebody else, they'd put a pole. Pole out, with a sound, so everybody knew who the phone was for. And they would come down and answer the call. That is true. Very few people—"get out of here, Tubby" I said, "I'm telling you, it's the truth." My mother was the operator. And she also had a very unique way.
- 0:36:00 She'd have a board, about two feet high. And she had certain people, like Aunt Florence, Oliver, and so and so and so, that she called every day, once a week, once a month. Talk. But no gossip. "How you doing?" She was really. I think that's interesting when people have phone calls, call waiting, and all that stuff. Ain't no such thing as that, there was one phone in that alleyway.
- Grandma used to make bread for everybody. Every Friday night. Grandma put out 45 loaves of bread. Every Friday night. [0:36:46] Palsy and her drooling. That was one of our tasks. One of the kids' tasks. To make sure that gram always had a clean cloth.
- 0:37:00
- Isaac Crawford:** Are you familiar with any famous blacks that came from this area, or that visited this area?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Musically, like Fats Domino. Somebody that sang opera, let me see, who was that? [Donovan? 0:37:19]
- Isaac Crawford:** Catherine [Donovan?]?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Seems to me, she was here down—because my brother found the job—yeah, that was her. And then the one that plays guitar. I forgot her name. Oh, what was that woman's name. Anyhow.
- Musical, anything musical, because I couldn't sing, I'd love to support anything. Concerts or whenever they had them, whenever we could sneak in.
- 0:38:00 Important people, that were black. I'm so sure that I remember my grandfather up there on upper West Street, across where the Red Cross building is now, there used to be, for the children,

children's home. Mrs. Wilson, Juanita Wilson worked there. And beyond that, there was a black man that owned a whole bunch of land. And he was an attorney here. I don't know what his name was, but he was an attorney.

**Isaac Crawford:** There were some blacks who had businesses here?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yeah. [0:38:51] I remember doing [0:38:57] who had a barber shop, [0:39:02] my Uncle Louie.

0:39:05

**Isaac Crawford:** Then there was Jerry Oakley?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Jerry Oakley, down on Dewey Avenue. Then there was people that were caterers. I think the most thing I can remember is there was always a black minister in this town. Always. To me.

**Isaac Crawford:** We recently had a [0:39:30] talk about Samuel Harrison, who was at the Second Congregational Church. He was a chaplain in the Civil War, too. He died in 1900, after about 50 years.

Some of them, a lot of people owned property here. [Flags? 0:39:54], on their own houses.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** I don't think so.

**Isaac Crawford:** No.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** I think most of the people lived on Mill Street and Derring Street.

0:40:02

**Isaac Crawford:** Rentals?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Rentals. Yeah. They used to call my friend and myself, anybody that lived past that bridge, the 400s. I was so upset about that, but they did.

**Isaac Crawford:** So how long have been in this house?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Thirty-seven years.

**Isaac Crawford:** So were there any women involved in any commercial ventures in town, had their own businesses, or anything?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Sewing. I'm trying to think who—yes, there was a sewing machine—people used to be a seamstress. Mrs. Staples, I remember she used to be a great laundress. Great, doing those curtains. She took hours and hours and hours to pin curtains on and never put up a flat-iron on. They were beautiful.

0:41:01

**Isaac Crawford:** I've been going through the census records from the early 1900s, and a large number of women were laundresses at home. They do the laundry at home.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. Because mom did that. That was that third job I was telling you, she had three jobs. She used to charge three cents. No, three handkerchiefs, she used to do for the White Tree Inn, a dime. That was another income, so you're talking about her with GE, her cooking for Mrs. French, on Wendell Avenue. She did that right after she—that's why we didn't see her too much.

She really—she sewed. Aunt Dort sewed. My Aunt Dorothy They professionally sewed for folks.

0:41:59

**Isaac Crawford:** Some reflections, what did you do in your life that you're much proud of?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Going to Russia.

**Isaac Crawford:** Going to Russia?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah.

**Isaac Crawford:** When did you do that?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** I did that about 12 years ago. I was chosen, and I was very, very, very happy about that. I wanted to keep up nursing anyhow. Because I always liked that kind. Nursing, I told you that. I went for 16 days. I was chosen from about 100 nurses. Now, I never put my name in there. I still don't know whoever did.

**Isaac Crawford:** It worked.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** There I was. Because I was working for mental health then, 333 East Street in Pittsville. But I worked for [0:42:50], that was for mental health. And I was chosen, so I went there. I remember my brother John drove me down there.

0:43:00

We had a class. It was 2,000, from all over—we went to John F. Kennedy, to meet with the other people. And brother John took me when I was going to Russia. Now this wasn't that many years ago, in order to get there, my brother John gave this kind of party up at [0:43:30], so I could have enough money. Because nobody knew what it was going to entail.

**Isaac Crawford:** You didn't have to pay your own way though?



- Elizabeth Caesar:** Not all of it. But if you wanted anything, you had to. I think the trip was, I want to say, 3,700 dollars. And they paid 3,000, I remember now.
- 0:44:00 That was the most important, because—well, that was one of my highlights of my life. Because I could push it back, and that's before the [0:44:12] came in, in Russia. So you could see all the stuff that really went down in Russia. And people.
- Isaac Crawford:** They were still communists at the time?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yeah. Like, I was saying my prayers, very soft, to myself, almost to myself. I was just saying, god bless whatever, whoever. A knock came at the door and I went to it, because I was in a room with another girl named Kathleen, and they said, "cease." "Cease what?" This guy must have been six feet six, and that black hat. So I was, OK.
- 0:44:57 Because before we went there, we had to do—I studied about six months here, in this house. Had to learn some Russian. What meant what and all that stuff. So, I guess they got tired of coming down, because they only really came down three times. And the last time they came down, the same night, it was three of them and they took my bible away. I was upset. In Russia, you had to go to where they chose you to go.
- Isaac Crawford:** Not where you wanted to go.
- Elizabeth Caesar:** No. Like, we went to see Madame Butterfly. It was a great show, great musical, but—
- Isaac Crawford:** You're not into opera?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** —not really. I got an article out of myself, if I can find it. Someone let me take a mink coat, so I was sitting in the opera, and I wasn't paying much attention. And I knew someone was behind me, walking past. So I got up, and they had cut the coat right in half. I about flipped. No insurance over there. I couldn't collect a penny.
- Isaac Crawford:** They were just [0:46:24].
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah. And a very beautiful place. But just somebody wanted, [0:46:33].
- Isaac Crawford:** You'd think there'd be a lot of fur wearing in Russia, with the cold climate?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** There was, there was. You had to wear—we fortunately got out of there like two days, because there's set days like spring, everybody in this part of the country I think does their planting and whatever else. There, everybody, they had to have their

mittens and all their winter garb on. Like, say October, maybe November 1<sup>st</sup>, everybody.

0:47:13

So there was a lot of discrimination, and everybody's hair was orange. I did not believe that. Anybody who got their hair done.

**Isaac Crawford:**

It was orange.

**Elizabeth Caesar:**

I had to write a paper that was then, 12 years ago, it was produced and done in Phoenix, Arizona. And I did get an A+ on that. One of the highlights—they asked questions, now what did I like—what didn't I like about it. I said, "well, I didn't like the fact that nobody made no fuss over me."

0:48:00

They didn't understand. I said, "because I'm the only black woman who's over here, now how come nobody, you know. I'm not the same as you guys, so cut it out." So that was that.

Now I have been offered several jobs, to go and train, since then. But I've never. You know, illness and all that stopped me.

**Isaac Crawford:**

What changes have you noticed here in Berkshire in your lifetime? In what ways have things changed?

**Elizabeth Caesar:**

I think you can't walk the streets as free as you could, day or night. I do not think that you can—the discrimination is still here, but the discrimination when I was growing up, was very pronounced. You'd go in a restaurant, and zip. There was a reserve.

0:49:00

When I went in the door, there wasn't no sign in there. I could read. There was about 15 of us, ended up in jail for a couple of hours, because we were—well, I wasn't going to move.

**Isaac Crawford:**

This actually happened?

**Elizabeth Caesar:**

Oh, yeah. Right there down on—Johnnie's Restaurant on West Street. No, I wasn't going to move.

**Isaac Crawford:**

What year was that?

**Elizabeth Caesar:**

I would say—let's see, I graduated in—so it was 1949. There was Barbara Walker, a whole bunch of us.

Not me. But I wasn't the only one that got up there, with Bessie Eagan and all those guys. She was then the matron, or whatever you want to call it.

**Isaac Crawford:**

They didn't want to serve blacks?

0:49:55

**Elizabeth Caesar:** No, no. The sign—I went in there and I swear there was nothing on no table. And all of us, because I went in first, and then behind me, everybody else came in. We knew what we were doing. We knew we wanted to sit there and that was that. I'm telling you, reserved sign went [smack sound].

**Isaac Crawford:** Just like that, huh?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Who was it reserved for?

**Isaac Crawford:** That was the only table available?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** No, she—they put them all over.

**Isaac Crawford:** Oh, on all the tables.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Oh, yeah. Because there was nobody in the shop, for goodness sake. And I'm talking about 1949, because I must have been—I graduated in '50 from St. Luke's. And [0:50:47] black and whites, down to Johnnie's Restaurant.

**Isaac Crawford:** Have you noticed any other changes over the years?

0:51:00

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Well, I think Berkshire County on the whole, I don't know if they'll ever really, really change, because they're—I don't know, they're kind of sneaky, and I don't know what to say. You got to ask why did they pick you. Did you pick me because you needed a token, because if you did, I'm not going to be it. I mean, right quick, I'm not going to [sit on? 0:51:30] your boy.

I just think that the walking, for one thing. And getting credit. I don't think black people got much credit very easily. I think you can get it now, because everybody else gets it. And that's the only reasoning. I think there's not enough of politicians. In this town.

0:52:03

I don't know if there ever was too many to start with.

**Isaac Crawford:** You mean black politicians.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah, black politicians.

**Isaac Crawford:** Two councilmen, I think. Jeanie Williamson now, and then Bill, what's his name before?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Ross. But he was on the school committee.

**Isaac Crawford:** Oh, he wasn't a councilman?

- Elizabeth Caesar:** No. Mr. Stockton was. Yeah, he was. But Bill Ross is the only one that I can remember.
- Isaac Crawford:** Is it because you think they wouldn't be elected, or they just don't to bother to run?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** I don't think it's not because they wouldn't want to—no, I don't think so at all. Personally, I mean. Like, I was going to run for mayor back in the 60s. And some lawyer [Vayshawn? 0:52:54] said, "Tubby, go ahead and run." I said, "nah." He said, "yes, you can."
- 0:53:00 But anyways, I didn't. And they had the platform all written up for me. Exactly what to say, not to say. All this stuff from Boston, all this stuff. Wow. So, it's who you know, it's not what you know. It really is.
- So, I think I've been in organizing and nursing and a people's person, my whole life. That's what I think.
- Isaac Crawford:** Well, do you have anything else you want to add?
- [sound cuts off]
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Just telling Isaac about Saul Alinsky, that was—he was a really great organizer. The man that did the grapes in California [0:53:58]. Just maybe about 12 years ago, when he stopped the grapes from picking, and he taught you a whole lot.
- 0:54:08 You either made it or you didn't. He could tell in three days, whether—that's why they didn't take your check. Just send it back, because he could tell whether you were going to. Out of that, there was 18 out of the class when I went in, and in the end of 10 days, there was only 12 of us. Final graduation day, there was only 6 of us. He was very, very good. Very, very good.
- Isaac Crawford:** This was, you saying?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** Saul Alinsky, his school is still up in Chicago, Illinois.
- Isaac Crawford:** How long were you there?
- Elizabeth Caesar:** I was there six weeks. Kept one of my kids there with me, to send him to school. To keep him there, so I could finish my course.
- 0:55:05
- Isaac Crawford:** You have any other artifacts or material that might be of interest?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** No. That was also put in the paper. That was a great controversy that. Not the Iron Curtain, the other, what I was just telling you about, Alinsky. They were really very upset that I was going to come in, back to Pittsfield. But Alinsky said I would never do anything here, because of the way—I had to send back to Chicago, when I got back to Pittsfield, for six months, the daily things that I did. And it wasn't going to change. Black people were not together. He could see this without even—

**Isaac Crawford:** Being in the place.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** —no.

0:56:00

**Isaac Crawford:** You said that was in the paper also?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Yeah, so they can check that out.

**Isaac Crawford:** What was his name?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Saul [spells] Alinsky.

**Isaac Crawford:** How do you spell Alinsky?

**Elizabeth Caesar:** [spells incorrectly] I think.

I have a BS, Bachelor Science degree. About seven points away, because I had gone to any kind of school, or any school you can think of, on behavior, with black and white. I studied that.

0:57:00

**Isaac Crawford:** I'll give you this to fill out, background information, and then also have a release form that you have to sign.

Well, Elizabeth, I want to thank you for all the information you've given me and helping me out today, in this interview.

**Elizabeth Caesar:** Thank you, very much. It was great, great to talk to somebody about old times. Thank you.

**Isaac Crawford:** We'll see you later.

0:57:35

*[Recording ends]*