

1906 McFaddin Ave Episode 4: Transcript

Continuing the Conversation: Staff Life at the McFaddin-Ward House

Music

KT: Hello and welcome to 1906 McFaddin Ave!

I'm Kara Timberlake, Communications/Marketing Manager here at the McFaddin-Ward House.

RH: And I'm Rayanna Hoeft, the director of educational programming.

This episode of 1906 McFaddin Ave is part of our series focusing on African American history not only at the McFaddin-Ward House but also in Southeast Texas. Today, we're interviewing historian Judy Linsley, who's completed extensive research on the lived experiences of the staff who worked and sometimes lived at our historic site.

KT: Judy published a 1999 journal article in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, a scholarly publication published by the Texas State Historical Association. Judy's publication titled "Main House, Carriage House: African- American Domestic Employees at the McFaddin-Ward House in Beaumont, Texas, 1900-1950" details the social, political, and economic implications of those working in the domestic arts specifically in Jim Crow segregated Beaumont during this unique time in American history.

Thank you for joining us, Judy. It's always a pleasure talking history with you.

JL: Thank you for having me. I always really enjoy talking about history.

KT: Okay, let's dive right in. So, at the very beginning of this article, you mention sociologist Thorstein Veblen, and he talks about the doctrine of conspicuous consumption, and then you make that tie to the household employees, and you make a note, "Not only did they reflect a family's social position, they were also absolutely essential to the operation of a prosperous turn-of-the-century household." Can you describe a little bit about what conspicuous consumption is, and how this ties into the household employees?

JL: Well, conspicuous consumption was a notion – Veblen made up the phrase – but it was very apropos at that time because you had some families that had amassed fabulous amounts of wealth and people wanted to emulate that and one of the things that they had was - in their possession - was an enormous house, at least one, and they had to staff that. And so, the employees – the more you had, the better ones you had, the more elegantly they were attired and comported themselves – the better it made you and your house look. It was all part and parcel of the house and its furnishings. It would be the equivalent to the most fabulous set of furniture anybody could have. You had the

very best employees, you had more than anyone else. They did things that other people's employees were not – maybe they had to do double-duty, well you had a specific employee for one function alone and that was all part of conspicuous consumption.

RH: From 1906 when the family moved in the house here until Mamie's death in 1982, the McFaddin and Ward families had about 106 household employees on staff over the course of that time period. Why do you think somebody would enter the profession of domestic employee? What would their motivations be?

JL: The motivation would be that the alternative was usually a very difficult manual labor. They could work in the sawmills; they could work in the rice fields around here. There wasn't a lot of choice particularly for females. If they were lucky enough to get a little more education, they could teach. They could become a practical nurse, but domestic work was just about all there was open for Southern Black women in the early 20th century.

RH: So, the majority of staff that worked here would have been women, then?

JL: Probably. It depends on what you're talking about. The McFaddins would have wanted a male chauffeur for sure and a male yard person. The butler position – a male was considered a little more prestigious than a female. The maid was not considered quite as, I don't know, as exalted of a position as the butler. So certain positions almost had to be filled by a man. But the others – the laundress, the cook, the maids – upstairs and downstairs if you had enough to have that – the nanny for the children or the nursemaid as they were called around here mostly – those would have been female. And that was considered a much better position for a woman than having to work out in the fields.

RH: So, what other kind of jobs would have been available for women? You mentioned teacher, perhaps field worker, what other things were African American women doing in Beaumont during this time?

JL: There was probably – depending on the year we're talking about – you could have maybe trained to be a practical nurse. When some of the African American clinics opened here, they did some training. I'm not sure about in the early years of the twentieth century, I don't know exactly when that came to be. And the other thing would have been in a commercial establishment. You could have been a maid or a cook for a commercial establishment. There weren't a lot of choice in jobs – I'll put it that way – for African American women.

RH: So definitely restricted opportunities for that demographic group?

JL: Oh, absolutely.

RH: Let's talk a little bit about this concept of paternalism that's mentioned multiple times throughout the article. Can you describe what that was specifically relating to our family?

JL: In the absence of any governmental assistance or any sort of programs, it was quite often the only thing that African Americans could turn to for assistance and what that was was the employer took care of the employee in return for the employee's loyalty. I mean that's a very simple way of putting it.

But it meant that the employer would take care of them and that even – depending on the relationship between them – it could even mean that the employer took care of the employee in his/her old age after they couldn't work anymore. They would pay their medical expenses, would buy their uniforms, would certainly sometimes give them - in the case of the McFaddins, they could stay in the Carriage House rent-free and could eat all three meals in the house, and it would basically be the same meals that the McFaddins had with some exceptions of course like banquets and things like that. As far as what the cook prepared, it would be the same as what the family ate. And so, there were benefits that transcended the pay which was a good thing because the pay was uniformly low for domestic work even though the McFaddins had the reputation for paying more because Ida wanted the very best employees she could get.

RH: In your research, was the paternalism of the employer reciprocated by the loyalty of the staff here at the McFaddin-Ward House?

JL: In some cases, it was. They had some employees who worked for them for years and years. Probably the most notable one was Cecilia Smith, who we actually interpret in the Carriage House as one side was her apartment. She worked for them for 40 years. But others did. Louis Lemon, the cook, was there for 37 years. Cecilia's mother, Brunie, worked for at least 40 years for them. They had some who were very loyal. W.P.H.'s chauffeur, Tom Parker, was. Other times they had people who came in and worked for a day or a week and left. There was something about the employment that was not to their liking. And I think it depended a whole lot on the person and on the McFaddins.

KT: So, you say in your article that "In the South, paternalism was reinforced and further defined by this rigid segregation, since the overwhelming majority of domestic employees were African American," and I just want to put some numbers into this as well.

In 1900, about 77 percent of all Southern domestic employees would have been African American, and then we see in 1920 that that number has increased to 82 percent. Just so we get that full picture of who would have comprised these household employees.

So, segregation was really this foundation of this Southern racial social structure and how did that play a part in these household employees and specifically that relationship between the employees and their employers?

JL: Well, I think the McFaddins specifically, and I think almost all the employers in this area, would have assumed that anyone who came to work at the house for them would be African American. There was one quote I read, I believe that was by Mamie McFaddin Ward's niece, and she said there was only one white person who had ever really applied for a position at the house, and Mamie briefly hired him but didn't like the idea. It just disturbed her for some reason. I guess she didn't think that white people should be doing that sort of work or maybe she didn't even trust him because she felt he should be doing something else. But yes, it was overwhelmingly African American, and I do remember they were having trouble filling some position – I think the upstairs maid or the downstairs maid – and she mentioned that if she could get – it was a Swedish national – I don't know whether that meant there had been a number of Swedish immigrants who were looking for household work – I have no idea where she got that source – but she said she would do that, but it never happened.

RH: That's interesting. I know in some of my own research from the barons of the Northeast, specifically the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts and those folks, they wanted these Swedish women to work in their entryway. Again, part of that whole idea of conspicuous consumption, so they were the preferred domestic for that area, so I thought that was so interesting when I read that in your article as well that Ida specifically mentioned if she could get a Swede that would be her preference, and I thought wow look at the emulation and that diffusion of wanting that particular person to open your door for your guests and to greet them.

JL: That emulation – it really just cascaded down the social scale. Because as you say, Ida had the idea of a Swede from the Vanderbilts and all of the other wealthy, wealthy families. And all of the whole social custom thing kind of traveled down the scale. That for instance the Vanderbilts et cetera had afternoons when they were at home, and people would come and visit them and they would kind of hold court for a while. Then people would come in, and I'll say have a cup of tea – the ritual was you did not stay long. You came in, maybe had a cup of tea, visited briefly and then went on to the next person. And you might make seven or eight calls in one afternoon if there were enough people at home. I noticed that there were certain afternoons that Beaumont society ladies were at home. When Mamie married, there was an extra card that went into the wedding invitation, and it said at home after June whatever, and so that meant she would be available for people to come by and visit. After she married though, she and her mother paid one afternoon six or seven social calls. So, it was something that you did but that traveled up the domestic scale. Even for instance, ladies having a rest period in the afternoon, women who say farmer's wives and things, if they could do that, they would have a little period in the afternoon to rest and relax. It was kind of like well if the fine ladies can do it, so maybe we can too.

RH: That's interesting. But of course, the domestic staff would not have had that privilege of rest in the afternoon as they were tending to everybody's needs and making the tea and answering the door and making the teacakes and all of the things that went behind the scenes to create these afternoons of leisure for these particular people.

JL: That's exactly right. The domestic employees made it possible for the other ladies to be able to rest.

RH: That's interesting. So, thinking about this whole hiring process and what that looked like, how were these people found? Was it by word of mouth? Did they have ads out in the newspapers? Because I know that even ads were racialized at that time to only seeking certain groups of people for certain jobs around town. So, what did that look like for the McFaddins?

JL: Generally, the McFaddins and that would have been either Ida or Mamie – Ida in early years but Mamie took it on fairly soon after she got married. Mostly it would have been word of mouth because she would talk to maybe other employees and say, "Okay, do you know of anyone who is looking for work?"

There were times that Mamie actually was pretty frantic about trying to find someone and she and Carroll even drove to Louisiana several times looking for someone, but I think they must have had a lead. It's a diary entry and, so you don't get a lot of detail, but that they would go to Lake Charles or somewhere like that, looking for a butler or chauffeur or a yard man and, or another maid.

Generally, though, it was word of mouth, and I don't think she did ads until maybe she did begin to get desperate which would have probably been in the early forties. She does talk about interviewing in her diary, interviewing three or four people some afternoon, and so you figured she had to put out some ad somewhere or they wouldn't have known to come there at that time, but she would look far and wide when things got desperate and they did, particularly during World War II.

KT: So, you mentioned word of mouth, but it worked both ways as well. It wasn't just for the employers, but employees were able to talk about "Is your boss respectful? Are they kind or do they pay well? Are there benefits?" It worked both sides, which I thought was really fascinating.

JL: It is because it also revealed that even though there were horrible inequities as far as the white people having you know, the, the power over employees, because they control the purse strings, still the employees weren't without some resource. And they certainly learned how to work that. And if the reputation came about that you were not a nice person to work for, you know, they would probably not apply.

And the McFaddins did have the reputation for paying fairly well, and they on the ranch at least, they had the reputation for feeding very well, you know, the ranch hands. And they were in general regarded fairly favorably. Now, the other thing too, is that if an employee got mad at an employer, or if the employer was not happy with the employee, even if the employee got fired, they could nearly always go find a job someplace else.

But it was not as though there was this great void up there. And even if someone said

that if someone quit from the McFaddins and went to work for one of the other families or went to apply, it wouldn't necessarily mean that the other family wouldn't fire them, wouldn't hire them, I'm sorry. Because who knew why, and if you needed someone you were going to hire them. They could almost always find employment somewhere else.

RH: You spoke of the staff using their resources. Can you talk a little bit more about how perhaps the staff could demonstrate their agency in these complicated times where they didn't really have a great deal of social or economic even political power was restricted. How did they demonstrate their agency and kind of exert power for their own circumstance, even a little bit of power over the family?

JL: Well, they could object to things. They could get angry. Like I pointed out, they could quit, and evidence in the records indicates that Mamie - even though she was sometimes the most critical one as compared to Ida as to how people's work was going - she also seemed to be a little more hesitant to fire them. She would tolerate what they would have called backtalk then. And maybe in some cases, employees having had too much to drink or something like that, they would put up with some misbehavior rather than have to go out and go through all that trouble to hire someone else, particularly when sometimes there wasn't a lot of availability.

RH: Yeah. Especially moving into some of the social issues from the two World Wars and what that looked like for supply and demand for labor, labor shortages, and that sort of thing too.

JL: Right.

KT: I also want to add to that. You said this so wonderfully and succinctly that employers would go to extremes to maintain the system expanding much time and effort, tolerating walkouts, quarrels, eccentric behavior, and what they saw as unreasonable wage increases, because they were so dependent on these employees.

And I love to think that these employees, they had some power and some autonomy, not very much, but they knew they did have some, and they were able to wield a little bit of control about where they were and how they were treated.

JL: Right. And they did - they learned how to utilize that. And it really kind of seems absurd to us today to see in the correspondence between Ida and Mamie - I think it was about 1942 or 43 which would have been during the war - they needed another maid for the upstairs because Ida's sister was going to come and spend Christmas. Mamie was apparently just frantic that she couldn't find somebody to set up a proper household to create the proper environment for her aunt Ouida. They finally ended up putting Ouida in a hotel because they didn't have enough people to properly staff a household so that Ouida would feel like she was being treated right.

But they would, I mean, occasionally Mamie would put in her diary, she was desperate to hire whoever, butler or chauffeur, or something like that. The amount of stationery

and ink that was expended during the time of national warfare, when even rationing maybe should have taken up more of their time and energy, but they really were frantic when they felt they weren't going to have enough employees.

RH: So, what was going on? Why was there such a labor shortage during the war?

JL: Well, during the war, African Americans found out that they could go to work for industry on either coast. It was not as easy, maybe in Beaumont because of the rigid segregation. Although the Magnolia refinery at that time would have employed African Americans and some of the other businesses, but what they found out was if they went to either coast, east coast or west coast, there was a lot more choice, the pay was better. There was not such rigid segregation - if at all. There were benefits like paid vacation and even maybe some early forms of medical insurance - things were just better. And they could really do well there. And there was, there was a pretty good exodus from Beaumont. And particularly after the race riot here in 1943, I'm sure a lot more left because they realized that they could go somewhere where they wouldn't be harassed so much. You did have a lot of men and women who went to work in wartime industry.

RH: That's so interesting. I was going to say the mass exodus of women too because they comprise the majority of this household help. And they also left for these other economic opportunities and social opportunities, too. Yeah. So interesting. So, one thing that I found interesting when I travel around the South and I visit different historical sites, somewhat like ours, is this idea of the benevolent caretaker of the family and this family-like relationship that develops between family and staff. And sometimes for me, that's a little bit disconcerting just because I'm a historian.

And I know that it wasn't so rosy and pretty, and there was quite a bit of, I guess, impediments to success and education and even political participation for people that were of the African American demographic. What would you recommend historic sites do to kind of quell that romanticized nostalgic narrative a little bit?

JL: I guess any advice to another historic site is just do your best due diligence and in the absence of any personal records at the house, just try to find out what the situation was in the whole community at large and that would be through newspapers and censuses and any kind of municipal records that you might have.

RH: I think that's great advice, especially as a former high school teacher, to delve into those primary sources. See, kids, this is why we make you read primary sources and then we make you argue them. So, thanks for backing that up.

KT: We see that these dynamics between the employer and the employee are complex, right? Because in many ways they might have these bonds and they might be affectionate toward each another but there's still that line that can't be crossed. Rayanna and I kind of discussed that earlier. We know that Mamie and Cecilia – they

had that bond - but would Mamie have invited Cecilia to come and participate in organizations or come to church with her.

RH: Basically, what you're saying, Kara, is that history is complicated.

KT: It is, and it's sticky. And that is interesting for historic sites and for historians because you want to portray how history was, and oftentimes history is told from one perspective that is not always multi-faceted. So, it makes your jobs very interesting.

RH: Public historians, we often pose the question who owns history. Because in this moment right now, the three of us do as we're sharing our particular perspective on the happenings here at the McFaddin-Ward House from 1906 to 1950.

KT: So, Judy, what inspired the research for this article?

JL: It was part of my job at the time at the McFaddin-Ward House. I was kind of hired as a research assistant which involved interviewing as many people as I could before they all died and also interpreting everything that we needed to know to do tours. When the museum first opened, the tours were sort of based on decorative arts because that was kind of where Mamie was and where her friends were and what people thought museums ought to do at that time, even historic house museums. Then as time went on, and it wasn't long after the museum opened, the realization is that what people really wanted was the story that went with the house. So, we started looking at the stories, and I had a list of people I was supposed to interview. Then as it always does, one interview leads to another, and we finally realized there was this whole area that the African American employees – that comprised a whole leg of the interpretation of the house. That's when we came up with the three basic themes: the built environment, the family, and the domestic employees. Because those are the three things that you can't tell a story without involving. There was this realization that there was this whole story out there, a whole community of people, that we needed to find out about.

And so, when I did, the curator at the time, Jessica Foy, said she thought I ought to write a paper on it. And we approached the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, and they were very interested in it. And so that's how that got started. A lot of history is like you fall into a rabbit hole, and you have to follow it, and if you get to, that's great.

RH: Well, I think it's great too that in this process, you interviewed quite a few of the staff members and spouses of staff members that were here on site, so you got to hear directly from the source their interpretation of what their time was like here.

And I think we should give credit to Cecilia Smith. Did you collect her oral interview that we have?

JL: I did not. Someone else did, but they did a wonderful job.

RH: They really did, and if anyone out there is listening and you want to hear Cecilia's voice and her words, please reach out to us because we have tapes and transcripts and all the great things from Cecilia's spoken word about her time here. But she was such an integral figure in the transition of this site from a house to a museum. Can you tell us a little bit about her role in that because honestly, we wouldn't have this museum if it weren't for her?

JL: You're right. We would have great gaps in information. She was of course the maid at the house for like 40 years, and before the end of Mamie's life, she had really become as much companion as she had maid. She was not that much younger than Mamie, and she couldn't really get around that well but she was still here, and Mamie loved her, so they were really more like companions. When Mamie died, Cecilia at that time, she had her rooms in the Carriage House, but she spent every night in the house with Mamie because Mamie did not like to be alone. She knew about where everything was when she came to work there in 1940 or even whether it was older than that because Cecilia's mother had been the laundress at the house for years and years and so Cecilia came with her mother as a child to the house and often would come with her when Brunie worked parties and Cecilia would stay with her because she didn't want her to have to walk home by herself.

So, she knew what was there even as far back as 1906 and 1907, and she was able to tell them so much about the provenance of the collections and about the lifestyles of the family and what they did and where they lived and when they changed the rooms around. She really was just a trove. I don't know how many interviews there are but at least 10 with Cecilia.

Also, on one of them, she talks about her childhood and her girlhood and her life and that was wonderful. But a lot of the time she talks about the furniture in the house, but you'd also get little tidbits about what was going on with the family and with Cecilia in the midst of it. They are wonderful.

RH: They really are. That was one of my favorite things when I got here was to listen to those tapes and hear her voice and read her words. It really helped me grow in understanding of that special relationship between Cecilia and Mamie.

JL: Yes, it was. Cecilia said that Mamie taught her ABCs. And I do know that she came to Mamie's wedding at the house, and I think she stayed upstairs – domestic employees were supposed to be invisible – but she was up there, and she helped Mamie get ready and saw the dress and got to see the festivities.

RH: That's a complicated friendship. So, she couldn't invite her to her wedding, one of the most important days in Mamie's life, but, yet she was still present on the backside of things.

JL: Not just theirs but so many of those domestic employers and employees were very complex - whole books have been written about that.

RH: Yeah, that's fascinating. So, what in your research did you find to be the most fascinating part of all this?

JL: The dependence, the employer-dependence on the employees. The fact that so much time and energy and mental anguish were expended in trying to make sure they had who they needed and how many people they needed and had the right person for the right job. It made me realize that now very few people have domestic workers that just stay in their house all day every day and you would think oh geez how nice would that be to not have to do all that house work but they spent so much time trying to get somebody to come and do that work that they could have done it themselves.

But it just would not have looked right. During the war, Ida writes Mamie that she went to so-and-so's house the other night, someone in their social circle in Huntington, West Virginia, where Ida had come from and she was back visiting and she's writing Mamie telling her that she had gone to some friend's house for dinner the other night and that the woman did all the serving herself. She was sort of reporting it in terms of amazement, but then she went on to say that we all must do our part. For most people, doing your part meant rationing or going to work in the local shipyard, but it didn't mean you had to clean your own house because they had been doing that for years anyway. It was really an eye-opener for me to see that dependence and to see that in their own way the domestic employees did exercise some control over their lives.

RH: They were a big part of the functioning for these families and the caretakers of the family, the children, and the things. That's why we try to give credit to them because we have such beautiful things in our collection, our house is still standing after all these years, and that's due to the work of these people. Their toil is what gives us this beautiful site for people to come to to learn history. We owe them a great deal here. We acknowledge everything that they went through and how difficult that was.

KT: Thank you so much for joining us, Judy. We really enjoyed getting to talk with you and learning a little bit more about history and our site as well.

JL: Well, thank you for having me. This was great fun.

RH: Well, we appreciate your time and being here.

JL: Thank you.

Music

KT: Thanks for joining us for this episode of 1906 McFaddin Ave. We hope you'll tune in for the rest of our series featuring the stories and voices of the African American community in Southeast Texas.

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Follow along on our social media platforms for behind-the-scenes info and to learn more about the McFaddin-Ward House.

This episode was presented by Kara Timberlake and Rayanna Hoeft. Todd Hoeft produced and edited the episode. Music produced and performed by Todd Hoeft with Tom Deemer.