

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: GORDON HALM [AFRICA - GHANA]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL

DATE: JANUARY 16, 2008

C = CHRISTOPH

G = GORDON

Tape 08.15

C: First of all, for the record, if you could state your name and address, place of birth, ethnicity, when you came to the United States and when you came to Lowell.

G: My name is Gordon Halm and I am originally from Ghana. I was born in a town called Winneba. And Winneba is about thirty five miles from Accra which is the capital. I happen to be in Lowell because I left Winneba to go to Liberia where I found my wife. And during the nineteen eighty nine civil war in Liberia... before the war started, my wife had an opportunity to come over here, because her brother was here and her brother invited her to come. And when she came to the United States, that was in nineteen eighty nine, and shortly after that the Liberian war started. When the war started I was in Liberia and you can just imagine what it's like when there are gunshots here and there every day. But with the help of some friends I was able to make it and join my wife.

C: How did you get out of Liberia?

Gordon: At the time the rebels had not taken the airport, so I was able to get some help from some friends and board a plane. When I came I was living with some friends in New York City, because at that time my wife and I had no contact, so through New York friends I was able to locate her phone number and I called her and she told me she lives in Lowell, but she didn't want me to live in New York because the life over there was truly difficult for me at the time, so she invited me here to Lowell. That was nineteen ninety five.

C: There's also now a pretty big Ghanaian community in Lowell isn't there? Because I know at the Elliot Church there seems to be a lot of people from Ghana.

Gordon: Well, I happen to be an elder in the Elliot Church. I was there when Reverend Malone was there, David Malone. I've been an elder for about six years, I served my time six years, but I'm currently an elder in the church as well. There is a Ghanaian community. In the past we were trying to form a Ghanaian Community of Lowell and through that I started an independence celebration service in the Elliot Church. Our Independence Day falls on March sixth, so every sixth of March I invite friends from Ghana and other African countries to come celebrate our independence through prayers and stuff like that. Through that the Ghanaian community became connected... now we have an established group called the Ghanaian Community of Greater Lowell where, I don't know if you remember or might have heard that, last year was the Ghana fiftieth anniversary, so we put up a very huge program in City Hall. And the community is growing.

C: Here at the University it's tangentially relevant to the topic, or maybe just out of curiosity, for example, this piece was given to me by a Ghanaian student, but she lives in Worcester and I've had a series of students from Ghana who live in Worcester. Do you interact with the Worcester community at all?

Gordon: In MA actually we have what we call the Ghanaian Association of Greater Boston, which is all the Ghanaians in MA. I happen to be the second Vice President of the Ghanaian Association in MA, so we know when we have programs a lot of people from Worcester and everywhere will come to our location.... But the Ghanaians in MA, the larger group is in Worcester, I think there's about five thousand or so.

C: That's what my students are saying, but since your wife is Liberian, so you interact more with the Liberians or the Ghanaians, or does it matter?

Gordon: You know I traveled and was in Liberia for a while, and I have traveled to Nigeria, so I tend to have more connections with other African countries because if I see them, they see me as one of their own, so I interact with them. Naturally I go and get along with any group no matter if they're Ghanaian, Liberian, Sierra Leonean...

C: So you must speak a lot of languages too then?

Gordon: Yes, but I've lost a lot of them because if you don't use it as everyday language.... I have a lot of friends from Cameroon, Liberia, Uganda, and I work at the African Assistance Center, so I happen to see a lot of Africans from many African countries.

C: I want to go back now towards the script, but this is interesting to me and I think for the project. Obviously the civil war was the pushing point for you to come to the United States; did you have any preconception about America before you came to the US?

Gordon: Oh yes, big time! When we were in Africa we saw America as the land of milk and honey, and I think the media also portrays that message to us. We think the US is the land of opportunity and yes it is, but the idea we had was that things were so easy here, but not until you come over here, you have a different mindset altogether about what you perceive this country to

be. Though this country, no question about it, is the greatest country on the earth, but you have to work extremely hard for what you need here. So, it's different.

C: When you interact with family back in Liberia and Ghana, because they think you live America and this is the land of milk and honey...

Gordon: Yeah they still...one cannot know it or understand it until you get here. So even though we tell them that this is a great country, but everything we have we have to work extremely hard for that. You know in Africa, though people are very busy, you can't compare that to this place. In this place, if you don't pay your mortgage for a month or two, the next month you are out, but over there time is not that precious. But over here because I know I have an interview at eleven I have to be there by eleven, back there it's different. Over here we are more programmed, more time conscious and we have to move faster, but life in Africa is a little bit of a slow pace and more relaxed, but over here it's fast moving.

So are you a citizen or a green card permanent resident?

Gordon: It's still in process.

C: How long have you lived in Lowell and whereabouts do you live in Lowell?

Gordon: I live on Bridge Street in Centerville, and I've been living there for over thirteen years.

C: Do you own the place?

Gordon: Yes.

C: Do you consider yourself as being part of the Centerville neighborhood?

Gordon: Yes, in the past I used to attend the neighborhood meetings on Monday nights. We would go there and raise concerns and issues in our neighborhood, but since I went back to school and the work load... I haven't had a chance to attend the meetings of late. But as long as we've been there, working hard and paying our taxes, we are still considered part of the neighborhood, but let me just throw this in... I think about two years ago, it was on Sunday, we were getting ready to go to church, and when we came out, we had a Toyota Sierra we had purchased new, but we came out and the whole thing was gone. There were breakages into our cars, people throwing eggs at our building and we kept reporting all these issues until they came and took the car. When they came and stole the car we were very devastated, we were very saddened that someone could possibly do this. At that time we were not sure who was behind that and my wife and I have three sons, eleven years, nine, and four years, and we get along with our friends and neighbors. So at that time it was such a difficult time for us, but the Lowell police and officials supported us through the ordeal and they assured us it wasn't race related, but at the time we felt that it was, because they had come and done graffiti. After stealing the van, they came and ruined all kinds of signs on the new van, so it was pretty scary. The kids were scared, we were scared ourselves that this could happen to us. But with the help of the police, they took the matter very seriously, and the news, Channel 7 came to our house and covered the story so we had people calling us from Boston and everywhere because they saw my

wife and I on TV. That's where we really felt the support of the African community and not necessarily only Ghanaians, but people from Boston, they all wrote letters to the mayor and the chief of police, so we felt that if you have the network with other neighbors and friends, it goes a long way.

C: Did you experience other forms of discrimination or racism similar to that?

Gordon: You know what, since we bought the house, we were living there six, seven years and had no problem with our neighbors. Our neighbors are all white and Spanish, and sometimes when they go on vacation they give us their keys, and sometimes they go for about a week, and that's how it is. When the trash man comes and the barrels are in the street, before you know it, they come and take our barrel to our back yard. And all of a sudden they were breaking into our cars, throwing eggs at our house and all this and all that. At the time we felt like we were being targeted, but as of today, whoever is behind the attacks, we don't know and the police still don't have the answer. The unfortunate thing was that the van was recovered about a week after we made the report, and they found it on (Fletcher?) Street, and they had burned the inside. The sad thing about it was... the way the insurance [company] handled the whole issue. I think they felt that probably we had something to do with that, so the rental car that they were supposed to give us, they weren't giving it to us. They were not forthcoming. They told us to go and find a lawyer for an examination under oath or whatever they call it and my wife and I told them we were not going to get a lawyer and pay even one cent to a lawyer to defend us in that. We bought our car and somebody stole it and burned it to ashes and we have to take a lawyer and do an examination under oath? We felt like we don't belong to this place. We felt very discouraged and saddened and we didn't take the lawyer. And we went to the examination and they asked us where our lawyer was but we said we don't need a lawyer. They asked us if we were prepared for this and I said yes, and we sat down. For about two hours they were asking me questions and later on they told me they noticed some stuff and would call me back to get additional information and I said whatever additional information they needed I would provide it. They said it would take about a week to get back to us and I said okay. So the next day I was driving and my cell phone rang. I picked up the phone and one of the insurance detectives mentioned his name and he said they just wanted to apologize for what we have been going through, the emotional stress and all of that, they had just found out that you guys had nothing to do with that. And I said, "You told me it would take a week and now you've made it in twenty-four hours?" So that was sad.

C: So, you've had good times and bad times.

Gordon: Good times and bad times, yes. As immigrants we certainly do. I know everyone has their story and this is our story. We haven't moved. We are not afraid after what they did, so we still live in the same place and we still get along with our neighbors.

C: There are more and more people of African descent moving to Pawtucketville and Centerville right?

Gordon: Yes.

C: Do you feel like that's helping? Like the greater visibility helps or does it make it even worse?

Gordon: We haven't really heard of anybody from Africa being attacked. Yes, there were a few people moving around where we live, a few blocks from our place, but we haven't heard of any attacks on anybody else. But you know, we just don't know whoever did that and the motive behind it, it's in the hands of the police, but it was yes, a difficult moment. It makes you afraid to go home, because first they break into cars and all of that, now they took the whole car and burned it into ashes, and what is next? So, it was a difficult time for our family. But time heals, so time has healed that emotional stress. I had to even quit my job because of that. I would be at work and the insurance would call, the police would need us, and it was a lot.

C: And so your employer wasn't happy to accommodate that?

Gordon: No, I quite on my own. I was a supervisor in a nursing home?

C: Is that when you then started working for the African Cultural Association?

Gordon: No, I had two jobs, as most of the immigrants do... because you cannot make it on one job. So I quit the other job that I had and stayed with what I am still doing, so that during the day when the insurance called or the police called, I could be available to go right away and all that, but I really, at that point, it was very stressful.

C: So currently you work two jobs?

Gordon: I work at Life Links. We work with people with developmental difficulties, and for the past year and a half I had a part-time job at the African Assistance Center where we help Africans who come to Lowell find resources in the city. I am currently an undergraduate at UMass Lowell. Since I started school... it's difficult to maintain that.... So I left the African Assistance Center, but I go there to volunteer whenever they need me.

C: And your wife is working too?

Gordon: She graduated from UMass last year in June and got a BA in developmental disabilities. She also works with Life Links.

C: So are you planning on getting a degree in the health field as well?

Gordon: Right now my major is psychology. I would like to become a community psychologist. That's what I'm hoping to have my MA in. That's what I'm working towards now.

C: Do you still have parents and grandparents that live, in your case, in Ghana and in your wife's case, in Liberia?

Gordon: I have lost both parents, and my wife's father got killed during the Liberian civil war, but her mother and other siblings were able to make it to Ghana, so they are in Ghana at the moment.

C: Are they in one of the refugee camps there?

Gordon: When they went at the beginning they were in the refugee camp, but now they've been relocated to a different town. So that's where they're living now, in the eastern part of Ghana.

C: Are they thinking of going back to Liberia?

Gordon: The conditions, I mean just imagine ten years of civil war, bodies burnt to ashes and people don't even know, can't even find their relatives, their family. Some people have lost their whole entire family. I know it is difficult. Some people are visiting, people are going back, but not necessarily to settle.... People are trying to go and access the place and see if it is okay to live there. So people are making connections back and forth, people are going back to survey and all of that, but I know eventually people will go back, but at this point I know people go there for visits.

C: Where do you consider your home? Is it Lowell, Ghana, Liberia?

Gordon: Well, I consider Winneba as my home, it's the town where I was born and grew up, so I consider Winneba as my home, but Winneba happens to be in Ghana, so that will be my first home and Lowell is my second home because this is where I live now. This is where all my kids were born, and so I'm part of the community, part of Lowell. We are very productive citizens of Lowell, so we consider Lowell as our second home.

C: Do you think of going back to Ghana at some point when you're older, ready to retire?

Gordon: Yes, I would like to go back because right now the technology is very fast growing, we can call Africa any time of the day, unlike before when you cannot access a phone line. Even though we talk to them, it's not like seeing them, because I haven't seen my family in a long, long time.

C: Have you been able to go back at all since you came here?

Gordon: No.

C: That must be really hard.

Gordon: It is hard. Hopefully when everything is all straightened out, we'll be able to take the children to go and see... I would like to go back and see where I started.

C: It would be good for your kids too. You kind of have this mixed cultural background in your family, what ethnic background in Liberia is your wife from?

Gordon: Her parents migrated from Ghana to Liberia and were naturalized citizens of Liberia, so even though she was born and raised there she was still connected to her Ghanaian roots. We blend very well.

C: Do you try to educate your kids in terms of teaching them your native language, songs, or culture?

Gordon: Well, it's sad, sometimes I sit down and wish my children could speak my native language, and I do blame it on me as a parent. My wife would take part of the blame and I would take part of the blame, and the reason I'm saying that is that I think if we had spoken the language at home and kept speaking it every day since they were born they would be able to speak it. Right now they understand, but can't speak and I also think that has to do with the day care they went through and the school system and all that. When we have dressed them in traditional African attire, let's say for Sunday school or whatever, they have felt very uncomfortable, like they are sticking out, until the festival began. And I told you how the festival began, when I started the Ghanaian Independence service in our church, many of the people from other African countries would be invited too. During the programs, because after the church service we had music and dance and people would bring all kinds of food and all that, and I thought if I'm able to put all this together, why don't we kind of make it like a festival time? So I thought of making it a festival where all of the people from the different African countries would come together and showcase their culture and music, food and all that, so that's how the festival came about. The kids, when they went to the festival, saw other kids wearing traditional attire.... Now the kids are happy to dress that way, they are proud to wear it.

C: Let's may-be switch to religion and social networks. You talked a little bit about being an elder in the Elliot church. What role does the church play in your life and what role does the Ghanaian community play in your life?

Gordon: Well, I think the church is a good place to go. Back in Africa I went to Anglican school, and Anglican is more like Catholic, and the church and the school were connected. So every Sunday we have to be in the church and the church is where we learned to differentiate good from evil. The church is always considered the place where a child will be trained in a good way so that when he or she grows up they will not deviate from the good teachings of the Christians. The Elliot church, for example, it has embraced the community, the African community, Cambodians, Brazilians, etc. So when we go to church the spiritual peace is there. We go and worship our creator and it's also an opportunity where we can, as church members and friends, communicate and also help one another. Like for example, if I lose my job and I have a friend to talk to, that friend might have an opportunity to speak to his supervisor and make a recommendation for you. So the church is where we go for our spiritual growth and also we have a social network. When things happen to you, the church is there, the whole congregation is there, so it's emotional and spiritual support.

C: Why the Elliot church?

Gordon: I went to Elliot church because of my wife. Her background is Presbyterian, so when she started coming back in nineteen eighty nine, there were all the African community churches that were around here, but she had this strong Presbyterian background. So when I came over, obviously I had to worship where she worshipped, so that's how I became part of the Elliot church.

C: The Elliot church is very active in the community with the Thanksgiving feast and so on.

Gordon: The Thanksgiving feast for the past two years, I have been the coordinator of that, and we serve meals to about three hundred to four hundred homeless. During Thanksgiving last year, for instance, the amount of turkey, and also the people, not necessarily from our church, but from the community, they will call the church and our pastor and the secretary will forward the message to me and it might say we have a group from this place that would like to volunteer and leave their name and I will call them. It's very touching... It's amazing, people will cook the turkey and bring it, bring pies... So the church is very connected to the society, and when the homeless come you see them all lighten up. Thanksgiving is one of the positive things that the church continues to do for society.

C: Have you ever had family come here from Liberia or Ghana to visit you, or is that not feasible?

Gordon: It is not common for a family member to visit here and to visit me because you have to go a visa issued and you have to go through a whole lot of requirements and if you don't meet the requirements then your visa is denied.

C: Have they just not tried because they know they won't meet the requirements or is it something else?

Gordon: Well, you don't try if you don't think you will make the requirements, but what has been helpful of late is that we have the green card lottery, so if a family member plays and happens to win, then you have the chance of getting here. That has helped a lot of immigrants to come to the United States. Had there not been the lottery, believe me, there would not be that many people in this place. Wars obviously too pushed people to migrate from places like Liberia, Sudan, Congo, and other places.

C: Let's talk a little bit about power and politics in Lowell. Do you think there is a fair representation of the African community in Lowell? Do you feel like people on the city council reach out to the African community?

Gordon: Yes, I would say that city hall is our home and the city officials, the current mayor, Bill Martin, he is a very good friend and very supportive. And all the councilors, Councilor Rita Mercier and Bud Caufield, they very much have the interests of the African community at heart. Whenever there is a program and we invite the mayor or the city councilors and all that, if their schedule permits, they will come and support it. And just imagine? We have during the Independence celebration. We have a flag and we go to city hall to do a flag raising. So at city hall the Ghanaian flag is flown in the sky for a week or two, and I think that's pretty incredible. Driving by Merrimack Street you see the Ghanaian flag, the Liberian flag and all that.

C: Would you like to see more representatives that aren't sort of the old white ethnic groups like the Irish or French Canadian? Would you also like to see in the future Cambodians, Africans, Vietnamese, Brazilians, etc.?

Gordon: It is our community's dream that we will see one of us be a city councilor, but it does take an individual to take that on, the whole community cannot put you there until there's somebody. You can't just become a city councilor in a daydream. Obviously you have to become a citizen, and I know there are people that, a lot of African people who are citizens, but maybe they haven't had the call yet. I know some day somebody could become a city councilor, somebody that feels it is there call and they would like to so that, and I think that person will get the support of the community. But I think at this point nobody has made the step, but it's still in our hearts and minds that someday one of our brothers or sisters could make it.

C: Do your kids go to public school?

Gordon: My kids, like I said I have three boys, and we started them in a private school nearby our house, but there came time when we thought the tuition was too expensive. We have moved the sixth grader and the fourth grader to the new charter public school, so that's where they go now. We have a kindergartener who is still in private school.

C: Are you happy with the quality of the public schools in town?

Gordon: The school is good. So far the kids have not had any major problems. The teachers, the administration, have the whole social well-being of the kids as a priority, to make sure the kids take their reading very seriously, and also that school is more diverse. The private school had only a few minorities, but over there you have Cambodians, Spanish, and Africans are also coming in. So when we go over there we see more diversity, and even though the private school has stricter discipline, it didn't mean that the kids were always better behaved. It's a good school and the teachers are always on top of the kids if there are any concerns or issues they will call or arrange a meeting to see how best to resolve whatever the situation is. I went through a public school and public school made me who I am today, but I think the important thing is for the parent to stay on top of the kid and stay involved with the school. If you put your kid in a private school you don't get involved and all that.

C: So do you participate in PTA meetings and that?

Gordon: Yes, they call it PET and we also last year went to, because I believe the state cut some funds from the public school, so the school put together parents from the school to go to Boston to the State House to petition them to stop cutting the funds. My wife and I went. We go to association meetings as well.

C: Okay, let's quickly switch to the Lowell National Historical Park. Did you ever visit the museums downtown that are affiliated with the Park?

Gordon: Yes, I have and if you go to the Mogan Cultural Center, you know how they have exhibits, there was a piece, they have a photograph of me, they did like a survey. The piece is there, and they have the story of me "Coming to Lowell" it's called. And Mehmed Ali, who was the director of the Mogan Cultural Center and is running for city council, is also a very good friend of mine. So I go to the Mogan Cultural Center and I volunteer there and I also volunteer for the National Park for the Lowell Folk Festival and things like that.

C: So, say if there was an exhibit on the Africans in Lowell, would you be interested in that?

Gordon: If they had an exhibit or a piece on Africa or something like that, I think people would like to go there. Currently I don't think the Africans visit the National Park. They don't because they don't really see anything happening for them, so maybe an educational piece on Africa. And obviously people would like to see themselves or hear about their country and all that. So I think if they had a piece about African immigrants at the Center that could draw people and also maybe some sort of activities or entertainment to draw the crowd to the Park would also help. Because I'm involved, I know that the Africans don't visit the Park. Even the picture of me and another lady from Nigeria, she's the Director of the African Assistance Center.... Some of the people from school went and they said they saw my picture and all that. So seeing someone that they know, maybe some activities, something about the immigrant community will help access the immigrant community as liaisons. When we had the Ghanaian Independence Day celebration, I spoke to Mehmed Ali and they were able to give us the visitor's center, they have like an auditorium, so we showed an African movie. So without the park we probably would not have gotten a place of that nature to show the movie, and a lot of people came and it was great. It was really, really great, so maybe if that thing continues, it will create a connection. It was great, it was really good.

C: So what are your dreams for yourself and your family, for the city, for your life? What are your dreams and aspirations as you continue your life?

Gordon: Well, my dream is always to do the right thing, to stay healthy, and also to complete my MA in community psychology, because I see myself as reaching out to the disadvantaged to make a difference in someone's life. What I would like to see is my kids grow up to become good citizens wherever they are. It is my hope that the children have better lives, that the parents are more focused on their children so we can all live in peace.

C: So the last question is, since we're not perfect, is there one question you think I should have asked you and I didn't ask you?

Gordon: If you have asked me, have I changed someone's life...you know I always say that, well, there are two things and something on my heart that I would like to say. I think about five years ago, and I do an overnight job, and I think it was around three and I thought about how I started my school, walking to school barefoot, two miles back and forth, and now here are my kids going to school with backpacks, books and that. I thought my kids are very, very lucky, but that's not what I went through, I went through the hard way walking, with no shoes. And then I said, even back then it was difficult, I can only imagine how it is now. So I went to the bank and took a hundred dollars and I bought a money order and I sent it to Ghana, to Winneba, my former school, the Anglican Primary School. I sent it to my brother to send it to the school, to the head master, to help the school buy furniture or help people to pay their fees and all that.... We have been helping the school ever since and currently we are doing a two classroom block. We have sent computers, and they have sent us pictures of the kids, they have a video, reporters went to the school and they sent me that. And if you see kids wearing a school uniform, you know they used to sit on tables and all that, but with the little money we sent over everybody has their

chairs and all that. And that alone goes a long way for us, for my family, and the kids are doing extremely well, they bring us pictures and all that. The other thing, if we have time, I had a call from a girl about twenty, early in the morning, and it was a call from Ghana, from this girl, and she said, "You are my father." And I didn't know about having any daughter! She started crying and I told her to talk to me, and she said she lived in Tema which is part of Accra and she was home. Her mother had traveled to Winneba, her mother's from Winneba, and her auntie, her mother's sister apparently went to visit them in Tema, and when she went she apparently asked the girl, whose name is Evelyn, "Where's your mother?" "She went to Winneba." "Where's your dad?" [He's.....]? So the auntie said, "I'm going to tell you something, that man is not your real father, your real father lives in Winneba." And the girl had no idea. The aunt said, "I'm going to show you your father's neighborhood in Winneba, just go to Winneba and ask for this name, this person is your real father." The girl was brokenhearted, but she took a car and went to Winneba and she went to our family home and said to my sister, "I'm looking for my father." So my sister said, "Who is your father?" And she gave the name to me sister. When she gave the name to my sister and my sister started to cry, the girl said, "I want to see my father," but it was my senior brother and he had passed away about two years ago. My sister said, "I remember the mom and I remember the pregnancy, but your father has passed away." She told the girl that she had a brother in the US and that she should call, because in Ghana when the brother passes away, his daughter is my daughter now. I asked her what she is doing right now and she said she had finished elementary school, but had no hope of going to college, so from there I started sending her money, she's a very bright girl, and through that money she was able to go to a teacher's training college and now she's a teacher. She graduated and now she's a teacher. She called me when she was graduating from college and she said that did everything she did was possible because she found me. Right now she's a teacher and sent me graduation pictures and I couldn't control myself. So I think if you have the means to help someone, definitely do it. I don't care if it is one penny I will give it to make the other person's life better, so we can all live, because you never know what's going to happen. What goes around, comes around.

C: Thank you very much for meeting with me.