

Pittsburgh Oral Histories

Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



LA

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at her home

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Interviewer's Note

At 98 she has seen all the changes on The Hill and in the city. Founder of "Your House of Beauty," she opened her business in 1944—the first of its caliber for Blacks in the city of Pittsburgh. World-traveler, author of an autobiography, she is still a member of the African Heritage Classroom Committee at the University of Pittsburgh. A woman of great ambition who has surmounted many many difficulties, her energy and her vitality belie her years of wisdom and experience.

Interview

[When I arrive at LA's home, she is working on a customer's hair. While she is occupied, she gives me a copy of her self-published autobiography to read through and to look at: Your House of Beauty: The Long Hard Struggle. Self-published, with photos, here in Pittsburgh.]

bc: You've lived such a long life. You've done all these things, accomplished all these things. I've been reading in your autobiography about the riots on The Hill. This is like this huge panorama.

You were born in Alabama.

LA: That's right.

bc: Then you zigzagged back and forth between the South and the North.

LA: Yes.

bc: There's so much to talk about. Let's talk about your business: how you got involved with cosmetology, with being a beautician.

LA: When I came back to Pittsburgh, I was 17 and I had gotten married. My husband's sister gave me the money to get back to Pittsburgh. The year that I came back to Pittsburgh was the year that Equitable Gas had a big explosion on the North Side. 1923. And I've been here ever since—off and on. But, the first time I came here was in 1917.

I went to school with my sister in Opelika, Alabama. They had a high school there for Blacks. I never graduated. I never got a high school diploma because, at the time they were giving out the diplomas, I was pregnant. I deliberately got pregnant so I could leave the South. I knew I would have to get married. (All decent girls got married then.)

My husband had brothers and a sister in Cleveland; he was joining them. The baby was stillborn. As soon as I could, I returned to Pittsburgh. We were both too young for marriage.

I never got a diploma; I tried to get it later on and I didn't; and later on after that I tried to go back when they finally started having evening classes, but I couldn't get out of housework early enough....

Now you want to know how did I get into college: I got into Pitt. When World War II was going on, they were opening vocational schools so that people could go to school in the evening and learn a trade. (I was doing housework, but I was not happy with that from the way that I was treated. I was making six dollars a week! Six dollars a week!) I got hired at Kaufmann's as a maid and I worked in the lamp department and millinery department.... That was my section that I had to keep clean—a whole half a floor. And the pay at Kaufmann's was \$13.50 a week. I was very happy with that. I was there for a year or so and that's when the union came in. I had gone to school after doing housework and while I worked at Kaufmann's and then, when the union came in, they let all the girls go. [Through a friend and co-worker I was able to get a job at the Evangeline Hotel, which is run by the Salvation Army.] (When I worked at the Evangeline Residence, the streetcar fare rose to ten cents; then upwards to 13 cents.)

That is when jitneys came into play. There was a Depression. Unemployed men with cars got to stops ahead of the streetcars. They picked up the passengers for the same price—the difference was the jitneys would take people to their door. The City placed cops at the busy stops because jitneys took their riders. They made such an impact that drivers were arrested for lingering near a streetcar stop. Jitneys would drive slowly past the streetcar sign and gesture lightly to waiting passengers. Many got into the cars. (I walked to work for the savings and the exercise; I rode home because The Hill deserves its name!

Through the vocational schools I went to beauty school. I stayed in beauty school three years. I went through regular beauty school and then I taught cosmetology to people who wanted to learn how to do hair as a trade so they could earn a living—the country was coming out of a Depression. Vocational schools were started for people who had dropped out of schools and needed to learn to earn a living.

bc: Was the school you attended integrated?

LA: No. But the teacher that I had—Wynona Graves—who opened the school—the LaSalle Beauty School, she went to Philadelphia and she went to an integrated school there and she came back and opened one here—La Salle—the first in Pittsburgh that featured cosmetology for both Black and white hair. I started off at one school—the Ella Rene Beauty School, the first to open for Blacks in Pittsburgh—and when I saw they were wasting time, I couldn't be bothered—you don't waste time. Time is precious. So I quit the first day I went. I turned around and started going to La Salle because, to me, my time was precious. I was still working at the Evangeline Hotel. My first choice was a massage school, but the

only school in town did not take Blacks. I felt that, if I was not permitted to make “Bodies Beautiful,” then I would beautify the hair and face.

At that time [cosmetology] was one of the few occupations offered Blacks where they could attain independence. I stayed in Beauty School because of my short hours there; I was too unsure of my skills to quit the waitress job that I had.

[LA talks about juggling work and school and how the hours available to her for work interfered with improving and advancing her life; yet, she worked around the obstacles and overcame the obstacles. She was, in fact, able to get her beauty school teacher’s license.]

The Captain at the hotel allowed me to change my hours to a straight shift—from six a.m. to three p.m. [In that way] I could attend Pitt’s late afternoon and evening classes.

At that time the State opened up vocational schools to teach dropouts to learn a trade. Any person that had a teacher’s license in any trade could earn a teaching certificate to teach in a vocational school. I had a teacher’s certificate in cosmetology—but I could not teach in Pennsylvania.

When they permitted Black teachers—because white teachers did not know what to do with Black hair—they hired Black teachers. I did substitute work in the system because I had opened “Your House of Beauty” in 1944—the first of its caliber for Blacks in the city. (Also, I would have taken the job from another person.)

After I got my teacher’s license, I still stayed with the Evangeline Hotel. I started going to school afternoons and evenings. Do you believe it—credits were \$32! You had to take a certain number of credits in order to get certified. I was the first Black and the first woman to ever get certified from the University of Pittsburgh to work in cosmetology school. But, guess what: they weren’t hiring Negroes. (If you want to work—you go South or you go out West. Maybe you can work, but you don’t work here.)

I was very ambitious. I worked in small towns: like Beaver Falls, Sewickley...a lot of little towns that I’d go to every weekend [working in people’s homes]. I worked all those weekends.

bc: You started “Your House of Beauty” in 1944.

LA: I got my first operator’s license in 1938. I waited another year-and-a-half before I got my teacher’s license.

bc: Where was your first shop located?

LA: The biggest shop in Pittsburgh for Blacks. On The Hill about a block below what is now The Hill House. (It was Irene Kauffman Settlement at that time.) 1615 Center Avenue.

bc: I was led to you by the folks at the Carnegie Museum of Art who are researching the photographs in the Charles “Teenie” Harris collection. [“Teenie” Harris documented Pittsburgh’s African-American community through his work on *The Pittsburgh Courier*. The Carnegie solicited LA’s help in identifying unidentified images in the collection.] The Carnegie Museum provided me with some background on your life. Then I read about it in your book here: your plan

for the Spa down on Fifth Avenue (just below where LA now lives)—what a vision!

LA: It was marvelous.

bc: Please talk about that.

LA: This is what happened: It was to be right across the street from that advertising company [now Lamar Advertising, which used to be Martin Media]. They were in an old building and the building was owned by the sculptor, Frank Vittor. He and his wife lived there. The children had all grown up and they'd moved out. And then he died. And she decided she wanted to go to California. Well, in the meantime, I had this friend and he told me about the building and that it was available to rent. (The riots had been on The Hill [after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.] and I wanted to get off The Hill.) So, I went and made arrangements to rent it. [An arrangement which eventually fell through.]

The vision for the Spa was based on what Helena Rubinstein did—she had one in New York. Now here I am—Black people on this side, white people on that side—so I could have a combination. [It was a perfect location.] The building had a garage and the garage could have been for the whirlpool and for the exercise equipment. The next room to it was going to be for the actual Spa—where people could have their beds, be massaged.... On the other end would be the beauty shop. [So, this was the intended layout:] the beauty shop here; the Spa here; and the whirlpool and the exercise equipment here.

There was a hill in the back. The building had a flat roof. There would be a canopy. The area outside could be used for lunches. There was a walkway between the two buildings. [This area between the two buildings] could be used as a playground for the kids, an outdoor restaurant.... The original building had 28 windows! In the downstairs was to be the kitchen. We planned on eat-in and take-out.

The second floor was going to be bedrooms and baths. This part of the Spa was for people with weight problems. Right around the corner was a doctor.

Everything was there! Everything was ready!

[bc compares LA's vision to Duke University's at-one-time famous "rice diet."]

[LA discusses the obstacles she encountered in getting funding for her project.] So, I said, Maybe God knew what He was doing because I'd have worked myself to death. I was very ambitious.

bc: I would say so. This operation was everything one would need: you could get your hair done; pedicures; you would take care of your customers' health issues; exercise.... You mention in your autobiography about President Kennedy and "physical fitness" and how you were hoping to get in on that, but you didn't.

LA: I was unable to purchase the property on Fifth Avenue because the asking price from me was \$35,000. I could not get funding. (Money was being given out, at the time, to Minorities who wanted to go into business. I was not even considered. Mrs. Vittor sold the property to Pittsburgh Outdoor Advertising for \$12,000. I could have managed that—without the government's help.

They couldn't take me: I was Black! So I had to [concentrate on] the hair.... That wasn't what I wanted. I wanted "bodies." I was always crazy about beautiful bodies. [LA talks about a famous photograph of Hedy Lamar posed on the cover of the magazine *Body Beautiful*.] And I said, I can look like that—in just a different color! "Teenie" Harris—I was 35-years-old when he wanted to put me in a bathing-beauty contest! I said, I can't do that!

bc: In your long lifetime how has this city changed—particularly for the Black community?

LA: Not that much.

[In her book, her autobiography, Your House of Beauty: The Long Hard Struggle, LA talks about all the people, many local Pittsburgh celebrities, who have read her book and praised her book, and have even tried to assist her in getting it "officially" published.] There are plans to put the "Autobiography" on the Internet this April [2008] by Dr. Laurence Glasco at the University of Pittsburgh to gain it "a wider circulation." [She notes,] I don't want a book for a coffee table. I want a book that you can put in your pocket and read when you're on the bus. [She believes that her life can serve as an inspiration for others. LA's book includes photographs of her with August Wilson and with Bill Clinton.]

[With no exaggeration LA is a world traveler: she has been to Alaska, India, Rome, St. Thomas, Jamaica, Hawaii, China, Egypt, Haiti, Jerusalem, Hong Kong, Mexico, Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia, Bermuda, Nepal, Russia. Her autobiography is a treasury of photos of these adventures. Likewise her home is a treasury of the exotic mementos she has brought back from her travels.]

bc: What made you want to travel?

LA: My mother died when I was young and I started to live with my aunt when I was six on the North Side, Hemlock Street. I was a little girl alone so I did a lot of reading. And I read about all these foreign countries. During the Second World War, I said, Please, God, don't let them tear it up before I get a chance to see it! That's what I was thinking. I wanted to go to all these countries. I read this book called The Well of Loneliness [by Radclyffe Hall], but it was the most beautifully-written book. When I was living in Cleveland with my husband's sister, there was a library close by. One summer I read 500 books!

bc: Where does your energy and your spirit come from?

LA: Now that I don't know, but I'm thinking it came from my grandfather. My grandson tells me, Grandma, I know where I got my love of education from. I got it from you. But where did you get it from? My grandfather was brought up in slavery times. His owner had a son. And this son wanted my grandfather to be with him all the time as his playmate. My grandfather had to study with him. My grandfather—Grandpa Tom-- was the first teacher to be hired by the county to teach Blacks the four months that they were allowed to go to school.

bc: The folks at the Carnegie Museum said that during the '36 Flood you had to bring candles down from one of the upper floors of Kaufmann's.

LA: It was a very bad flood. I stood in Kaufmann's window and watched the water rise. Of course there were no electric lights. The candles were all on one of the upper floors of the store. There weren't a lot of people who could get to work, but the ones who could get to work, they were all on the first floor, selling necessities. Well, I was very young and I could walk up all those flights of stairs. (And everybody's praising me for being able to walk up those flights of stairs.) Escalators weren't running; the elevators weren't running. They had the gas lights on. I got a lot of praise—no money—but a lot of praise. I walked to work. I walked from Center Avenue. I lived between Francis and Junilla. I walked every morning Downtown. I didn't always walk because I had to. When the flood came, of course, everybody had to walk. But I'd walk Downtown to save streetcar fare. (It was all downhill.) Fare then was seven cents. But, when you're only making six dollars a week, you don't waste it.

[LA graciously provided the following statement which serves as "Preface" to her forthcoming autobiography.]

LGA was born on April 20, 1909, on a farm near Auburn, Alabama. At six years old she was taken to live with her father's sister who had migrated to Pittsburgh during World War I.

At 13, she was sent back to the segregated South. To escape, she married at 16 to leave the segregated South because she knew her young husband was going to work with his brothers in a factory in Cleveland, Ohio.

A year later, she was back in Pittsburgh without the husband. There were some years of domestic work, before Teressa Moon, a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, got the position of employing Negroes for janitorial jobs, at the State Employment Bureau. She was hired as a maid at Kaufmann's department store. The job lasted until the Union came in. She had not joined. 16 girls were terminated. One of the 16 was hired as a waitress at the Evangeline Hotel, a residence for women, a division of the Salvation Army. She told LGA of the job. Although she was considered too dark, the Captain hired her. She was told because she had a pleasing personality.

The waitress job was split shift, working from six until ten a.m. Off until three p.m. LGA took that time to attend beauty school.

The school term was six months to become an operator. She passed the State Examination. The newly-formed Board was so hard that only three people passed in the city of Pittsburgh. LGA was one of them. The Examinations were changed that year.

Because she was afraid to quit her job, she continued for a thousand hours to obtain a Teacher's License.

In 1940, the Government allowed all licensed teachers to attend the University of Pittsburgh to be certified to teach in the newly-opened vocational schools. LGA

was the first Negro to receive a certificate in cosmetology. Two white girls were hired immediately, without degrees. She was told to forget teaching. Later she was hired as a substitute. She had to refuse a permanent position because she would have taken the job from Evelyn Meade.

“Your House of Beauty” was opened in 1944, employing six operators. It was the first of that caliber for Pittsburgh.

There were many firsts in her long career. First to advertise on radio, first in hair relaxing, first in hair weaving in Pittsburgh, and the first Negro state examiner. Going to the Territory of Alaska for six months, she opened the first Negro salon in Fairbanks.

Her life wasn't all work and no play! She was married three times. She had her moments of romance and heartbreak. Her second husband was a gentle handsome man that had attended Howard University, with whom she had a daughter. He was also a womanizer. He became involved with a woman who practiced voodoo. She cherished her body and feared disease. Reluctantly, she put him out of her life, and then discovered he was also a bigamist.

The riots on The Hill forced her to move; she chose Fifth Avenue, where she hoped to open a spa, but was unable to get funding. That is when she started traveling. Her daughter, Carolyn, works for an airline. She has traveled many places in the world. Her biography is full of incidents that happened in her shop. About the lives of prostitutes, customers who entered her salon and her own trials with her third husband who was a Tuskegee Airman, who publicly belittled her for her lack of a college education.

When people say she looks well for her age, she tells them a joke:
“A man took over an abandoned farm. It flourished under his care. His minister paid him a visit, and kept repeating how well God and the farmer had done. Finally the man said, ‘No offense, sir! But you should have seen this damn place when God had it all by Himself!’”

She gives God credit, but she also gives God a lot of help by taking care of herself.

[Bob Batz, Jr. of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* did an in-depth interview with LA in March 1997.]