Interviewee: Terry Williams (TW)
Interviewer: Mary Cerulli (MC)
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Transcribed by: Mary Cerulli
Portrait by: Mary Cerulli

MC: Alright, so just to introduce myself so I have it on the audio record, it is July 11th, we're here at the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge. My name is Mary Cerulli, I am here with the Eastwick Oral History Project and the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities interviewing Terry Williams. And for the record could you say and spell your full name.

TW: Terry Williams. That's T-E-R-R-Y W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S.

MC: Thank you. And so to start off could you tell me where you grew up, and what that neighborhood was like.

TW: Ok. I grew up here in Eastwick on 86th Street. I guess, I think it was 410 86th exactly. I am one of eight children. I guess I am number 5 in my family of four boys and four girls. Eastwick as I recall was very very interesting neighborhood to grow up in. It was a fully integrated neighborhood. We had, I was exposed as a child to just about every ethnicity imaginable somewhat. We had was it European Jews, had mom and pop stores in Eastwick. We had Italian cleaners that worked in the neighborhood. And we had Romas, we used to call them Gypsies who had camps in Eastwick. Eastwick was a very unique neighborhood because even though it was in the city of Philadelphia it was very rural. So it has been like farmland and a lot of trees, a lot of tributaries and creeks. And it was really kind of like a Huckleberry Finn experience for me and my friends as we grew up. My parents were from the South. They came up during the African-American migration, and settled here in Eastwick. So growing up here, again, was a great place for a kid. The environment was pristine through the eyes of a child. Even this area, we explored where the Heinz is, where we are right now, me and my friends we used to come exploring and fishing and just kind of wandering throughout, you know, the wooded lands in Eastwick. And all in all it was a very harmonious neighborhood. The adults got along with everybody you know. There was just a, I guess, a homogeneity here among the different ethnic groups, which is in stark contrast to some of the neighborhoods you see today. Most of the folk were from agricultural backgrounds. The African-Americans were from the farms in the South, I think the Romas they were agricultural, and it seems like the Italians and Jews they all from farming, you know very connected to the land. And that was a beautiful thing to me, it really was. And I'll tell a lot of folk that if Norman Rockwell could have come to Eastwick I think he would have been very inspired just by the color and the ambience of the neighborhood growing up. So for me, personally, it was quite a place to grow up.

MC: Can you tell me a little bit about how people were using the land? Like what kind of farming was going on?

TW: Yeah, basically they were doing small backyard gardens, some people had larger gardens. Some folks raised chickens, you know, some you know they farmed corn, watermelon, and you know greens and vegetables. Some people were very adept at even you know picking greens that were growing wild. You know some folks were very adept at getting herbs that were medicinal out here. So a lot of, a lot of farming. Most folk had backyard gardens. There were fruit trees everywhere. So the women did a lot of canning in the Fall, apples, peaches, you know things you can can. You know, all sorts of stuff, blackberries, strawberries. It was amazing how sustained, how the land sustained people's diets out here.

MC: And was that important to your family too? Working in the garden?

TW: Oh, absolutely. My mother canned apples and peaches, blackberries. And it was almost like you know the backyard was a supermarket in a lot of ways. So it was a very serious part of the culture. And people, and it was a part of, I guess it even impacted folks' income because everybody was poor [laughs]. You know it wasn't like you had any divide, you know class-wise. Everybody was working-class. So, you know, you had kids they know where the apple trees were, or you know where the blackberries were, or whatever. We were sent out on missions to do that, and our parents made best use of it. So farming is very much a part of the culture.

MC: And were there places in Eastwick, like, what were some of your favorite places? Or the places that were most important to you growing up here?

TW: I would say the woods. I'm kind of a, on the Henry David Thoreau side philosophically. And so was my dad, my dad was kind of like a born naturalist. He really had a connection to the land, and you know he was the one that told us that this was all flooded at one point, just by his observations of the rocks, that kind of thing. I kind of took after him in that regard. A lot of my favorite places were the creeks, Darby Creek, you know the rivers when we could get them. And you know the trees. So actually for Eastwick, I guess, for who I am, the whole neighborhood to me was kind of fascinating. I have to admit I was very much attached to the green environment.

MC: Yeah, ok. So did you learn anything about the history of the land? Either from your dad or other people in the neighborhood? Because you talked about your dad sort of noticing -

TW: Well yeah, my dad was very very informed. Because he was just about born, actually he was born in the South and they brought him up here when he was about 1 years old. So he spent a large part of his life in Eastwick, and he experienced the flooding out here. And pretty much converse on what the weather patterns were, you know, for all four seasons. And he was, you know, a gardener, so he had his almanacs. I think the first

time I was exposed to an almanac, you know I saw my dad studying it one time, and so you know he translated a lot of information about what weather patterns. You know, as a lay person, you know. And I was fascinated by it, and all the kids were. Because we look forward to the seasons. One thing I loved about the neighborhood was that you experienced all four seasons. That you know and it was a special, I guess frame of mind, during the summer of course. And then in Spring, I mean Fall, Winter, you look forward to the snow and the Spring you look forward to whole rejuvenation kind of thing.

MC: And have you lived in Eastwick your whole life? Or did you move away at any point?

TW: Yeah, well I did move away. We moved during the redevelopment of Eastwick. And actually within that development process and a number of families, we moved three times within Eastwick.

MC: Ok.

TW: Because the development started near the Heinz when it started to, ah, you know I think the imminent domain, they started pushing over properties at this end, around 86th St, 87th, and 89th. And they started moving upwards towards 82nd St. So we moved from 86th ah, no we moved twice to 86th and then we moved to 82nd St. We left Eastwick in the 60's. And the neighborhood by that time was completely mowed over, or devastated actually. It was really really a kind of dramatic point, me and my friends we were going, coming into our adolescence. And seeing the neighborhood all pushed over, you know, for acres, it was kind of like being in a war zone, in a way. You know, I'm sure you've seen pictures of Europe after World War II, it looked like that out here. You know, and it was really really dramatic. So, yeah we left during the, I think early sixties, we were out.

MC: Ok, yeah. And can you tell me what it felt like to move? What were thinking about?

TW: Oh it was very, it was a sad time. You know with this - it was traumatic for the kids. And you know, the parents, the adults navigated it the best they could. You could feel the anxiety, at least my parents, a lot of anxiety. Because we didn't want to leave, as simple as that. And, but after the redevelopment there was no place to go here. So. plus the imminent domain, so you couldn't go either. And there were some that actually owned their home that refused to leave, but that was very few. I think somewhere in the area of 7, 8 thousand families were moved out.

MC: Wow.

TW: So it was very sad.

MC: And where did you move to? What was that like?

TW: We moved to West Philly, to Cedar Avenue.

MC: And is that where you went to school? How long were you living there?

TW: Oh, I guess, how long were we there? I would imagine, I was in middle school when we got to Cedar Avenue. And I would say six years, six seven years. I graduated in '69 from John Bartram. And we, and then I went on and got married and did that thing, and we moved different places around the city once I left, you nkow, my parents. And then I came back to Eastwick because my grandparents owned property here and the family decided to keep the property in the family. So when my dad passed then I moved back.

MC: And when, when did you move back?

TW: That was, fifteen years ago. I guess it was in the nineties, the late eighties. Let's see, yeah, late nineties I came back. But we had always had that connection because my parents still had this property.

MC: And so when you were living in West Philly and other parts of the city, what were some of the most important differences between that part of the city and Eastwick? What were things that you noticed?

TW: Density. It was, you know the, just the congestion, the way because again Eastwick was pretty much rural. West Philadelphia, you had row homes, very dense. It was somewhat socially challenging, you know, because when you come from a rural situation into the inner city, there are challenges, you know. So it was a challenging situation for me, you know, as an adolescent, as a teenager, because you had a lot of social problems that we didn't have out here.

MC: Can you tell me a little bit about what those problems were? And what you -

TW: Well of course they had the gang problems, you know gangs throughout West Philly. And that was a challenging. You know some of the guys were pretty tough, you know. And a lot of the folk, guys that came out of Eastwick, we didn't have that type of orientation. You know, it was survival of hte fittest, you know type thing, in the inner city. And it got pretty violent, you know, in schools, neighborhoods. So, you know there was the drugs, and police abuse, you know, which is kind of crazy, you know. Because being a African American male, that was very pressurous sometimes. The gangs were one thing and then the police were another thing, and then the drugs and other things. So it was very very challenging in the city. Now, but then again, it had its upside too, because of this attitude, at least in my understanding, what this society is really like.

MC: And then so what did it feel like to move back to Eastwick?

TW: It was fantastic for me, because it brought back a lot of memories, a lot of good memories. And I, when I came back, I became involved with community organization.

And the corporation, the, well actually the Korman Corporation which was fundamentally responsible for the redevelopment of Eastwick when I was a kid, they were still operating. I think they had options on the land here in Eastwick. So when I came back, some of my neighbors were involved in an issue with the Korman Corporation wanting to, well Korman wanted to build apartments near, not far from the Heinz here. The neighborhood homeowners didn't want that to happen. The land was zoned for single family housing, and the Korman Corporation wanted to change the zoning to multi-family. And we took a position against that. And so when I came back, you know, I kind of got actively involved. I served as president of the Eastwick Friends & Neighbors Coalition for about five years. And I'm still on the board of that group, so we are the group that pretty much stopped that type of development. And primarily because we understood that this is a flood zone, and putting an apartment with 720 units and over a thousand units of parking right next to the Heinz, we felt that would be devastating to the habitat and it would exacerbate flooding. So we took a position against that. So I got involved, so.

MC: So what was that community organizing, what was some of the work that went into that?

TW: A lot of work.

MC: A lot of work, I'm sure.

TW: [laughs] A lot of work. But you know, I have great neighbors out here. Everybody was pretty much activated to keep the neighborhood as safe, environmentally, as possible. So we formed a coalition, along with Eastwick residents, and we got some help from different environmental groups. We were able to make the case that, you know, you have to be very particular with what you do in a flood zone, and what types of development you know, so. And we went through that process. We as residents undertook a study of residents where we got the content of over almost 300 residents in Eastwick and we got like a 97% response.

MC: Oh wow.

TW: On that. And, so, the residents said that they didn't want that type of development.

MC: So was the study focused on what kinds of development that people would be ok with?

TW: Oh absolutely.

MC: Because that, those were the kinds of questions you were asking?

TW: Absolutely.

MC: 97% response rate is amazing.

TW: Yeah, we did a lot of work with that. It's called the Eastwick Survey, I can't remember the full name, it was a while ago but anyway it's online. It's on the EF&NC website. But yeah, it was very very, we're still very active but now coming back to your question to what it's like coming back - for me it's kind of like a full circle having been born out here. I didn't know that I would come back; however, in coming back it is kind of a unique I would imagine. You know, to try to preserve the place that I grew up in, figure it's very exciting.

MC: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about Heinz? And how Heinz has changed since when you were growing up here to now?

TW: Yeah, well early on this land where the Heinz is now situated was just forrest land. You know, with the tributaries, the Darby Creek, Cobbs Creek, and you know the Delaware. So it was all wooded and you know people used to come fish here, whatever. And I think in the early in fifties the city of Philadelphia took some options on this land and, unfortunately, they had some contractors that used to dump on this land here in the Heinz. So there's a superfund site on this location, unfortunately. As there is another superfund site in Eastwick up near Clearview. But, I don't really recall a lot of the dumping. I think my brothers, my older brothers knew about the dumping, but when I was exploring this area it was fairly pristine. And after the city took ownership then you know the federal government took responsibility for this acreage. And they're doing a great job with though, I am so impressed that they were able to preserve the habitat for all the species that you know that come through here and migrate, you know. So, but like a said it was like a Huckleberry Finn experience for me, coming through the Heinz. Like me and my friends we tried to build rafts, you know try to find Indian artifacts and all that stuff. Some people they even had trappers out here, guys that were trapping. I think it was gophers or muskrat or something like that. People were fishing. So the Heinz was always played a very important part for this whole entire area. Now I'm sure the folks even from Delaware County were engaged with using this land.

MC: Ok, and, so over time how do you feel like the environment has changed? Both in terms of the green environment, but then also the physical development and the development here.

TW: I learned a lot about neighborhood development and kind of juxtaposed that to my understanding of what this was like when I grew up. The neighborhood I grew up in was much better [laughs].

MC: In short.

TW: In short [laughs] yeah. And that's not to disparage what the Korman Corporation tried to do because as much as we're combative with them, they built homes you know. People have homes, I mean home is sacred. They are moot circumstances in my view.

However, when I think about the beauty of the neighborhood prior to the whole idea of New Eastwick, I think they really missed the boat. And I think to think back, the powers that be, I mean when you think in terms of, you had a fully integrated neighborhood. Some people say that it was the most integrated neighborhood in Philadelphia. You know, you had businesses, you know mom and pop stores, hardware stores, cleaners, you know you name it, community centers. Folks were really had a working class, a beautiful working class life here. And I look at it now, the contrast. I think that sociologically the neighborhood was much more fluid when I was a child. I mean, you could really appreciate the other cultures. Now you know you just, it's not like that. And that's not to say that it's bad, because I love my neighborhood, I love my neighbors you know today. But when I think about the richness of life, just the whole quality of living with human beings, the neighborhood I grew up with, far superior to what it is now. I mean it was absolutely profound in a lot of ways. And like I said I have wonderful neighbors now, but growing up here you know, being able to walk out and leave your doors unlocked, know that your children are safe, be able to go into the forest and pick apples and cherries, peaches and stuff like that, it's not here any more. Being able to enjoy all cultures, because we used hang out with Gypsies. They used to teach us how to belts and different crafts, it was amazing to me. And even to my friends, you know we all enjoy you know the Klein, the mom and pop store the Jewish one, the smell of kosher pickles, smoked fish, you know. It was amazing. It was. So, in contrast the neighborhood I grew up with, far far better human experience than what we have now.

MC: I really like what you said about home being sacred, that something that home is sort of a sacred concept. Are there are places in the community today that feel important to making this place a home? Like what are some of the places in the community that feel like that -

TW: My neighbors, like I said I have fantastic neighbors, and they are all very good home-makers. And very engaging folks you know. And that's sacred to me, this day. Actually you have a kind of dichotomy, you have New Eastwick and Old Eastwick. I'm essentially from Old Eastwick, however, I have engaged New Eastwick because of my community activism. So I both, both situations. To get to your question about the sacredness of home, Old Eastwick is still sacred because you have folk that have been here for generations, and New Eastwick is sacred because they have folks who have raised families in the new homes. And so there is always a sacredness to home. However, you know in terms of it being as fluid as neighbors, it's different. It was a very fluid when we grew up. You know we could go to a neighbors house and have dinner when they had a enough food for a kid [laughs]. You know, or we could travel with our neighbors, they would take us to different places or whatever. But the kids today they don't have that experience and, I think, at a loss. At a loss because when you grow up with people, you tend to, I think in a way it makes you more human. You know, it just, you know, the different languages, different foods, it was amazing. Absolutely amazing to experience that.

MC: What kinds of information have been important to your community organizing? What are some of the things you're talking to people about and what kinds of information are you sharing or looking to gather?

TW: Well we've been very thorough with the situation with development. You know we've very very aggressively trying to keep development in Eastwick sustainable, in a way that will be beneficial not only to us but to subsequent generations. So we exchange a lot of information about you know the hydrology, you know, climate change, and zoning issues. You know we are engaged, we have engaged several city agencies - the redevelopment authority, that's one very important one, Water Department, EPA, and even the Heinz organization, Friends of Heinz, and the administrative staff here. Across the board. NOAH, involved with seminars and that kind of thing. So we are exchanging a lot of information, we are very very engaged with our elected officials out here so that we can work with them to keep them up to speed about the interests of the homeowners and the stakeholders are out here. So we are exchanging a lot of information online and in person. One of the very unique things about Eastwick is that we are a door-to-door neighborhood. I have seven of neighbors, I call them the Magnificent Seven, after this five, we've been in this struggle for about five or six years now, and there's about seven of us residents who are very engaged. And we are folk that talk to people. And I personally get a kick out of that, you know going up to my neighbors, sharing information with them, you know, about these issues and doing that on as regular a basis as possible. And the Magnificent Seven, that's what we do. We share this information. And then we have supports, you know, we have some folk that are very adept online, and god bless those folks too because they are involved, you know providing information, reaching areas that we may not reach door-to-door, so.

MC: Is there any research that you would want to be happening in Eastwick? Are there kinds of information that you would want people to be gathering and helping you share or publicize?

TW: Yeah, well yeah.

MC: Anything that's missing?

TW: We feel very strongly that Eastwick can play a role in helping the entire city. If it's developed correctly, and ethically. We understand, particularly myself, even as a kid, all the trauma with you know the redevelopment of Eastwick.

MC: [Timer goes off] That's 10:45 time.

TW: Ok. Even with the trauma of that development, we find that it's very important that community, that the residents, the human beings, come first. In all development. That their interests are respected. We are in the process of doing a study of the entire neighborhood and the information that's being gathered through that process will in fact enable residents to make intelligent decisions about what kind of community they want

Eastwick to become. This community has, like I said, has a lot of potential to benefit the entire city, if development is done correctly, if it's done ethically. And you know it, we have the potential the create green jobs in Eastwick, potential to provide services to families and seniors, a lot of potential in this area. And Eastwick has always kind of been like that, because even when I was a kid there was light industry and somewhat and somewhat heavy industry. A lot of our parents were able to walk to work, right out the house, without taking public transportation or driving because the community had that mix of light industry and residents and it was still kind of rural in some way. I think that's kind of a good model in a way, so the information that we're gathering through the planning effort, planning process that Eastwick is going through will provide information that we will be able to make some decisions based on that.

MC: And then you're hoping that Eastwick can then be a model, that that process can be a model for other parts of the city?

TW: Oh absolutely, absolutely. Across the country, you know. Because the climate is changing. I'm not a scientist but I believe it is, you know. And I think that there are certain considerations now that we have to be very serious about, particularly in a neighborhood like Eastwick. You have a history of flooding, and you have a history of weather phenomenon, really in a way, climate change, we've been experiencing climate change in Eastwick for a long time in some way or another because of being in a flood zone. So we, you know, this information is very invaluable and like I said we are engaged with the government as well as our residents, our neighbors to look at all the possibilities for a good development.

MC: Alright, well that's all of my questions.

TW: Great

MC: Is there anything that you would want to add, or anything that you think is important that we didn't get a chance to talk about?

TW: Ah, well just that it's great that you guys are doing this type of research because I think it's valuable for folk, you know future generations, for scholars, and planners, you know, human service people. You know if they're gonna do it, they should do it right. And I think that you guys are approaching this in a very good way, talking to the people that experienced the trauma, and some of the benefit. Alright?

MC: Alright, well thank you so much.

TW: You're very welcome.