Oral History Interview of Paula Fleming

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Interviewed by: Jekaterina Budsilko, Suffolk University Student from History 364: Oral History.

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Interview Summary

In this interview, Paula Fleming, the children’s librarian at the South Boston Branch Library of the Boston Public Library and a lifelong resident of South Boston, discusses the impact on her neighborhood of the 1974 Garrity decision, which required some students to be bused between Boston neighborhoods with the intention of creating racial balance in the public schools. Ms. Fleming reflects on the reactions of local children and parents to the Garrity decision; the effects that busing had on neighborhood dynamics and library patronage in South Boston; how the neighborhood has changed since the 1970s; and the media portrayals of South Boston.
Subject Headings
Boston Public Schools
Busing for school integration
Fleming, Paula
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South Boston (Boston, Mass.)

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This interview took place on March 27, 2006, at the South Boston Branch
Boston Public Library at 646 East Broadway, South Boston, MA.

Note: In this interview the narrator, Paula Fleming, discusses her own personal experiences; her comments do not represent any official opinions or observations of the Boston Public Library or the South Boston Branch Library.

Interview transcript

JEKATERINA BUDSILKO: Please state your full name.

PAULA FLEMING: Paula Fleming.

BUDSILKO: Where do you live?

FLEMING: Here in South Boston.

BUDSILKO: Where did you grow up?

FLEMING: In South Boston. I was born and raised here. (laughs)

BUDSILKO: What part?

FLEMING: I’m from the Point end, from City Point.¹

BUDSILKO: Tell me about your job.

FLEMING: I’m the children’s librarian at the South Boston Branch Library. I was lucky enough to follow Miss [Martha] Engler, who was the children’s librarian ahead of me, into the position. She was my children’s librarian growing up. And I have been here at this branch since ‘73.

¹ The City Point area of South Boston is located on the neighborhood’s eastern side.
BUDSILKO: What are your responsibilities?

FLEMING: As the children’s librarian, I’m responsible for children’s programming, for collection development and maintenance, visiting schools, interfacing with community groups and so forth on children’s issues.

BUDSILKO: What were you doing in 1974?

FLEMING: In 1974, I had just come back to the South Boston branch as the children’s librarian. I had just spent two years at the Egleston Square Branch Library at the Boston Public Library.²

BUDSILKO: What do you remember about the period of time leading up to the Garrity decision?³

FLEMING: A great deal of local confusion and discussion. A fair amount of anger building over not so much the fact that—as many people have said before and not everybody believes—not as much that black students would be coming into the area, as much as that the local students would have to leave their local schools and be bused elsewhere. That was the bigger bone of contention for most of the early discussions. It built to quite a fever pitch after time though.

BUDSILKO: How were you involved with the Garrity decision?

FLEMING: Only insofar as it affected the children that I would be seeing coming and going from the schools, programs here at the library because we had the school outreach. And of course

² The Egleston Square Branch Library is located in Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood.
³ The Garrity decision refers to the June 21, 1974, opinion filed by Judge Arthur W. Garrity in the case of Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al. (379 F. Supp. 410). Judge Garrity ruled that the Boston School Committee had “intentionally brought about and maintained racial segregation” in the Boston Public Schools. When the school committee did not submit a workable desegregation plan as the opinion had required, the court established a plan that called for some students to be bused from their own neighborhoods to attend schools in other neighborhoods, with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. (See http://www.lib.umb.edu/archives/garrity2.html for more information)
as a local resident, just all of the disruption that you saw going on around you.

**BUDSILKO:** Do you believe Judge Garrity with the right man to make the decision?

**FLEMING:** I don’t know. At that time, I did not know a great deal about him. I knew people who liked him very much. I knew other people who had no faith in him from the beginning. I had had no previous knowledge of him or his work so I don’t know for the original sense whether he was the right person for the job.

**BUDSILKO:** How did you hear about the Garrity decision?

**FLEMING:** Newspaper, television; it was everywhere once it was announced.

**BUDSILKO:** Do you think the media handled it well?

**FLEMING:** No.

**BUDSILKO:** In what ways?

**FLEMING:** I think that most people will say that that is the case, because of all of the previous discussion, because there was the anger and the hurt ahead of time when they had identified which schools would and would not be included in the decision. They had already begun focusing on the groups and the neighborhoods that had locally opposed the decision coming down. And so right from the beginning, they were set, to my mind, to pay very close attention to everything and anything that happened in South Boston and to magnify it to the best of their ability. There were problems, and it’s not to say that things did not happen here, but a lot of what was reported in the media was reported even more sensationally than what you saw when you were standing in the street looking at it.

There were times when a number of the other high schools—for example, Hyde Park had them throwing chairs out the window. They closed the school. That did not happen at South Boston
High, but South Boston is the one you hear about. Once Michael Faith was stabbed, of course, that was an entirely different kettle of fish.\textsuperscript{4} It changed the mood even more drastically. But in the beginning, the very first day, there was the confrontation at the school, and that was really unfortunate. Most residents were really heartsick at that. They did not like it. Again, the media was there from the beginning. They were there ahead of time. They planted themselves down right in the middle of it. Most people felt very strongly that they were egging on rather than just observing.

**BUDSILKO:** What do you remember about that first week of school?

**FLEMING:** Actually, we’re only three blocks away from the high school here at the library, and we were not aware of anything going on at the high school until we went home for lunch or for supper, that sort of thing. An awful lot of the activity, the stoning of the buses and so forth, was on the far side of town, basically, because they came up—they did come up I Street which is just a block from the library here, but they up turned on Sixth Street, which led straight up to the high school, and then went down G Street to the beach in their rounds. So it is not as if things spilled over into the rest of the neighborhood. It was pretty much confined to the area right around the high school or along the immediate bus route. So while you heard about it all afterwards—and we had a couple of kids—the younger kids come in saying, “Did you see? Did you see? Did you hear?” But for the most part during the days, if you weren’t directly there, you didn’t see it or hear it.

**BUDSILKO:** Did you get involved?

**FLEMING:** Not in that sense, no. I was not a member of the marshals, I didn’t march with the mothers groups or anything of that sort.

**BUDSILKO:** What was your response when you heard about it?

\textsuperscript{4} Michael Faith, a white student, was stabbed by James White, a black student, during an altercation in a South Boston High School corridor on December 11, 1974. OH-063 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Barbara Faith, Michael’s sister.
FLEMING: About?

BUDSILKO: The Garrity decision.

FLEMING: The decision?

BUDSILKO: Yeah, when you finally knew what was happening.

FLEMING: Very disappointed in it, very disappointed. I mentioned before that the branch librarian who was here at the time, Miss [Marjorie] Gibbons, would give us one of her stories that she told repeatedly, because as branch librarian, she is the one who would be the spokesperson at the time. When people would ask and she would comment, the thing that stuck in her mind most was when one of the black students was getting off the bus at Southie High and basically was extremely disappointed. And they said, “We thought we were coming to a palace. This school is as bad as ours was.” And that was basically the point. For many of the groups that were initially involved, the neighborhoods they chose originally—they weren’t busing to better schools, they were just busing to different schools, and that was not a good thing. That was not a good thing.

I don’t know where else—there weren’t many brand new schools in Boston at that time anyway. Most of the schools were in a bad state, and perhaps it would’ve been better to change the teachers rather than the students—moving the students. That was one of the things that she always spoke about, how this other student thought that—they had been told how bad their schools were and they were going to be going to better schools, and she walked in and said, “Excuse me?” because Southie High at that time was already seventy-five, eighty years old and hadn’t had much upkeep, and pretty much the same state with a lot of the schools around the city.

BUDSILKO: What were some of the reactions that kids had?

FLEMING: A lot of them were frightened. They really were. They were frightened because
they kept hearing stories about of all the terrible things that were going to happen. They heard that the next year, the younger ones were the ones that were going to be going to all of these different places, and that they would not be close to home. There was a good deal of confusion. Most of the parochial school students were upset to see their friends in those sorts of circumstances, but they weren’t particularly concerned because they weren’t going to be going.

So it was a mix of reactions to it, but the ones who were reacting—I didn’t have as many who were the rabid fighters up at this end. Perhaps down at Washington Village, the branch actually in the project, they might have had a stronger, immediate reaction. But at that time, the branch had just had a fire and wasn’t open. And we didn’t have as many of those children traveling up to the City Point end, so there weren’t as many of our children directly involved. More of the children up at this end—not all, by any means—but more of them were already in parochial schools, and had been all along.

So it was curiosity, it was anxiety for the ones who were going to be involved. We didn’t see many of the teenagers at that time; the ones who came in were the ones who always came in. They would sit down, do their studies, leave, not do a whole lot of commenting while they were here. Maybe because the library was supposed to be neutral territory, maybe it was the one place they could go where it wasn’t around them all the time.

**BUDSILKO:** What about parents? What was their reaction?

**FLEMING:** Well, the parents who were involved were very much concerned, as I say, not as much—for most of the parents who spoke out who came through the library, they were more concerned with their children going elsewhere rather than with the children coming in. They didn’t want their children half a city away in neighborhoods that they didn’t know, that they had terrible opinions of that had terrible statistics. At that time, for good or ill, South Boston had some of the lowest crime statistics in the city and we were matched for the most part, with Roxbury and Dorchester, which were very high crime areas, in many sections, and that was the more basic concern. The mothers who weren’t directly up on the hill shouting and screaming and

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5 The Washington Village Branch Library is located near several housing projects in South Boston.
hollering—and there were mothers and fathers who were up there—there were also the mothers who marched in the street saying the rosary along the bus route and that sort of thing. That was their way of protesting and doing it. So again, a fair mix. And then there were a lot of families that just decided after seeing the turmoil of the first year, they weren’t going to send their kids and they picked up and they moved. We lost a lot of families out of South Boston in those years.

**BUDSILKO:** Did kids spend more or less time at the library?

**FLEMING:** Again, we’ve got sort of the dichotomy of the kids who were still in school here in the local parochial and the local public schools came in pretty much as often. What happened with busing is that their time schedules changed, and so that not only might they be bused across town to another school, they might also be bused, for example, to a later school so that where normally school would be out by 2:30 and they would be in by three o’clock, the schools had to go on a dual system and they shared the buses so that one set of schools would be from 8:30 to 2:30, and the others would be from 9:30 to 3:30. Well, by the time you get back from across town at 3:30, it’s four o’clock, five o’clock; you don’t have much time to do other things, so you didn’t come to the library as often. The kids who were still here, from the local schools, would be here.

We changed, for example, the time for story hour on Friday afternoons. It had been a tradition here; still is. It used to be at three o’clock because the schools got out at 2:30. After the first year, we went from averaging forty, forty-five at a story hour to twenty-five or thirty, and part of it was because the kids weren’t back in time, so we moved it to 3:30. But then of course you have the kids that did get out at 2:30, but didn’t necessarily want to stick around for a whole extra hour, and so it was those sorts of things that affected how they used to the library. They still came, we still visited all the schools, both the parochial and the public schools, every year, and we would invite the classes to come back for programs at the library. It’s something that we’ve done ever since this building opened.

And through all that time, all of the parochial schools continued to come, but not all of the public schools. Some of them did. The [Joseph P.] Tynan School is right across the street from the
library; they continued to come even when some of the teachers would be afraid and worried a little bit about having the kids out in the street. Most of them were willing to take the chance to bring them across the street, basically a block. Other schools—like the [Oliver H.] Perry Elementary School] is much more distant; it’s closer to a half a mile away from us. We still don’t have them coming back on a regular basis. We still visit them, but not all of their classes come back up. Now it’s more of a question of having lost the thread of it, but originally they didn’t want to walk the children up that far, they didn’t want them on the street for a half a mile type of thing. And they couldn’t get the buses to transport them except on special occasions, and so those sorts of things really did put a lot of the children’s school work, and programs, and after school activities out of whack.

BUDSILKO: What were some of the short-term effects?

FLEMING: A lot of upheaval, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of not knowing who was going where or if they were going. We had a lot of kids who stayed out of school—this would be the high school—the first year. A lot of kids who stayed out; some studied on their own. The South Boston Heights Academy was established as a sort of, I suppose, white freedom school, if you will. The parents got together and said, We’re not sending them there; they still have to go to school. So they started the academy, and that lasted for twelve, fifteen years. I’m trying to remember when they finally closed. But the parents spent a great deal of time and effort putting that together and making sure the kids were getting to school even if they weren’t going to be going to the public school. So those sorts of changes came about, and then as it continued on, as I say, we lost a lot of families over the next five or six years.

BUDSILKO: Did you know people from other cities that were affected by this?

FLEMING: Other cities or other neighborhoods?

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6 South Boston Heights Academy was a school that was established by a group of South Boston residents in the fall of 1975. It was created as an alternative to the Boston Public Schools so that children in South Boston could have the option of attending a school in their neighborhood rather than be bused to another neighborhood.

7 “Freedom Schools” were temporary, alternative schools created in the 1960s by Civil Rights activists in protest to the educational inequalities experienced by African-American students in the nation’s public schools. In 1963 a group of African-American parents boycotted the Boston Public Schools and sent their children to Freedom Schools set up in local community centers and churches.
BUDSILKO: Well, other neighborhoods.

FLEMING: Well, within Boston, yes. Being in the library, of course you talk to some of the other children’s librarians and you hear about it. I had just been sent back, as I said, from the Egleston Square Branch Library. And it was funny—I came back in November of ’73, which is right before the decision, officially, was going to be taking place, and when I told the children there—I had been there for two years at that time—that I was going to be leaving, they were very upset, and that was very nice. But then when I told them I was going to the South Boston branch, they were horrified. “Oh, Miss Fleming, you can’t go there, those people are terrible!” and all of this, and of course I remember saying—to especially Kim, was one, and Keisha, and several of her sisters and so forth—saying, “I’m from South Boston,” and they couldn’t believe that, and I said, “When I came here, everybody was telling me, ‘You can’t go to Eggleston, to Roxbury, do you know what it’s like? Oh, it’s terrible, and the people are horrible,’” and I said, “Is that true?” and they said, No, of course it isn’t, and I said, "Well, it’s not the other way either. It depends who you’re meeting.”

So that sort of thing, I think, was all over the city, and a lot of it did depend on, I think, where you got sent and the reception you got when you got there. Obviously, the students who arrived at Southie High on the first buses did not get a particularly warm reception up there, and the whole—first several years were very disruptive to their educations. A lot of kids dropped out and just did not continue, and that was around the city, not just here, and that’s one of the great shames of it.

BUDSILKO: What was your opinion on the school committee?

FLEMING: Before or after? How they responded?

BUDSILKO: Their response basically, that’s what I meant.

FLEMING: I don’t know. It’s funny, I probably should have reviewed materials in some way,
but actually, I don’t remember a whole lot of response one way or the other. I just remember them basically kind of abdicating—“This is what they said we have to do, so this is what we have to do, and we’ll go from here.”

**BUDSILKO:** How do you think people feel now?

**FLEMING:** I think people are still very upset over all the trauma and the hurt and the lost lives in a lot of cases, of busing itself. That was a very bad time. As I said, the kids who dropped out of school and didn’t go back, the kids who were hurt, the kids who had very bad experiences with other races on both sides—that did a lot of damage, and there are a lot of people today who still carry those scars and those opinions. There are others who went through the system and actually [could say], “Joe down in South Boston is my best friend. Maria over in Hyde Park is my best friend. Juan from Egleston Square is my best friend.” A lot of it came down to what the individual families and children made of it. People are still upset about it, and if they could reverse busing tomorrow, they would.

But I think what’s changed is that there are more and more—outside of South Boston, it’s a more homogenous group—sorry, not homogenous. It is a more—how should I say this? There are far more parents in the city today, in all corners of the city, of all ethnic groups, who would probably be glad to see it go, insofar as that they want good schools for their children. They need good schools for their children. You have to have them. But if it meant that Johnny could have a good school down the street and not have to go across town, I think many, many parents would be in favor of that.

And people in the neighborhoods too—the whole idea of walking to your neighborhood school, forming friendships with your neighborhood, that’s another big thing that fell by the wayside with busing—the kids who didn’t get to know their own neighborhood because it was too late when they came back. And the better way probably would have been, rather than doing it in one fell swoop of schools, is to work on housing, and the integration of housing. Not in a forced way or whatever, but even just having more of the facilities available, integrating the [housing] projects a little sooner than they did. Paying more attention to some of those probably would
have been more effective.

**BUDSILKO**: Do you feel the same way today like you did back then?

**FLEMING**: I do, insofar as I think it was a bad decision, that they didn’t handle it properly. I’m trying to think. I was not—I would have to say I was—would put myself down among the ones who couldn’t care less who was coming into the neighborhood as much as worrying about the kids that were leaving the neighborhood and everything that that entailed for them, because those were the kids that lost out on so much of what was neighborhood and growing up—

**BUDSILKO**: In a community.

**FLEMING**: —in a community and so forth. The school community is great, and you can form friendships in a school; you always can. But when you have to say goodbye to them at three o’clock or 3:30 or four o’clock, and when you’re smaller—when you’re a high schooler, you can travel the city and neighborhood, but if you’re not going to see them over weekends, vacations, that sort of thing, it’s not the same sort of friendships that you formed, and that’s something that unfortunately, I think kids miss out on, or have missed out on.

**BUDSILKO**: What is the neighborhood like now?

**FLEMING**: Extremely different. Extremely different. South Boston was one of the most stable neighborhoods in the city, families who had been here for generations. And after busing started, it coincided with the first rush of the condo crazes, and as the families moved out and the condos went in, it attracted a different group. They weren’t families necessarily. And then when the condo bust came, and the next round of developers came in, they weren’t looking for families particularly, and so, as you probably have heard, all around the city, housing prices have shot up incredibly. South Boston was one of those places, and so now—there was an article in the [Boston] Globe about two, maybe three years ago, saying that less than half of the residents of South Boston at that time had been here for more than ten years. That’s an incredible change in thirty-year’s time, incredible. And it has changed the character of the neighborhood, some for the
good, some for the worse, and things always do change, but it’s really a shame that there aren’t the families here that there used to be. There are some families that are good families that have stayed all the time and new families coming in, but not to the same extent. Not to the same extent. We have a much more transient population. We’re beginning to turn into another Brighton/Allston.8 We’re having a lot more college students who are in the housing, which is perfectly fine, but again they’re only here for a certain length of time—

BUDSILKO: Right, and then they leave.

FLEMING: —and they’re not intending to stay, and so it gives a whole different character to the neighborhood.

When I was growing up and at the start of busing, we probably had two restaurants—full-service restaurants in all of South Boston. Now you go up and down the street and there’s quite a few.

BUDSILKO: Yeah, there’s a lot of stuff on this street.

FLEMING: Yes, there’s quite a bit. And it’s because the new population—you didn’t go to a restaurant, you went home for supper or dinner or whatever, and if you were going out for the night, you’d probably go downtown for a good time. And now it’s much more for the convenience of the changing population and so forth, and the changing times in general; families are not staying home for supper as much anymore. So, lots of changes like that that you see in the neighborhood over the years.

BUDSILKO: Would you like to add anything else that we haven’t covered? Anything that you would like to say that will be on record?

FLEMING: Nothing in particular that I can think of. I do think that South Boston, in general, got a very bad rap. I should probably comment on—because we did have a group that came from

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8 The Allston and Brighton neighborhoods of Boston are popular areas for off-campus housing for local college students.
Our Town. Are you familiar with the Our Town group?

BUDSILKO: No.

FLEMING: I believe that’s their proper name. They started in the South End and they have gathered groups of teenagers to do local histories, basically. And what they have done is, they take their neighborhood and they explore its history, its current events and so forth, and then they devise walking tours and during the summer, they give people walking tours of the neighborhood. So a few years ago, as a matter of fact, Professor Allison, from Suffolk, had the Our Town people—they came to the branch here looking for information and also talking about things. And at that time All Souls, MacDonald’s book, was very big, and the kids were asking about that and about busing and how people approached it. And I think they were very surprised to hear that the schools here weren’t any better and that there had been African Americans and Asian Americans and other groups in the schools before busing started and that sort of thing.

But All Souls was one book they had read and affected them very deeply, and it is a very affecting story, but one of the things that really bothered longtime South Boston residents was that this was not, to their mind, a South Boston story. It was, in some ways, more of a [housing] project story; it could’ve happened anywhere. And MacDonald wrote a very poignant story, something that was very personal to him. But he was, at that point, the seventh of what were going to be nine children. He was already eight years old before they moved here to South Boston so that means all of his older brothers and sisters who were getting in trouble were already teenagers before they even came here. And they moved into the project in the fall of ‘73 I think it was, just before busing started, and yet, if you read his book it’s, “We and Southie weren’t going to take this.” And most of the South Bostonians were saying, “Who is this ‘we’?” (laughter) He was not one of the people who was originally involved, or his family were not true Southie-ites, and that sort of thing, which was a big thing.

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9 The organization to which Ms. Fleming is referring is called Mytown. According to its website, “Mytown’s (Multicultural Youth Tour of What’s Now) mission is to use the process of sharing local history to empower young people and build appreciation of urban neighborhoods. (See http://www.mytownnine.org/ for more information.)

10 Robert Allison is the chair of Suffolk University’s History Department.

11 The book All Souls, written by Michael Patrick MacDonald about growing up in the projects in South Boston during the 1970s, was published in 1999.
So those sorts of things had gotten much more press than the average South Boston family that just stayed here and kept on going to school and kept on doing things and got all the slings and arrows. We got an incredible amount of bad press and to this day you have people who look down on you if you say you’re from South Boston, and it’s really a shame because the reason we’re so popular now with the new groups are the fact that they’re discovering what we knew all along: we have the beaches, we have easy access to town. This is a great place to live, it always was, and I wish more people were aware of that side of South Boston.

**BUDDILKO:** Well thank you so much. Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**