

Community resurrected

History of 'Bottoms' comes to life

LATOYA THOMPSON
The Enquirer

Wilma Barlow and her sister, Lena, remember how it felt to live on the middle of Washington Avenue — smack dab in the middle of the "Bottoms."

"We were just like a big family down there," Wilma Barlow, 69, said. "Everybody was poor, but the kids, we didn't realize we were poor."

The former Hamblin community, which existed mostly along the Kalamazoo River, is being brought back to life with help from academic historians and community residents.

On Thursday night, Heritage Battle Creek and its partners from the University of Michigan Arts of Citizenship Program gave a sneak peek at the Web site that will document the history of the Hamblin community from the 1940s to the 1970s — called "Memories from Hamblin: The Making and Unmaking of the Bottoms."

"The community, especially the African-American community, is very pleased to see that their contemporary history is being taken seriously," said Mary Butler, Heritage Battle Creek's research center director.

The project is in its second year and is facilitated through the Heritage Battle Creek Field School Program. The program is a collaborative effort between university faculty and students to teach community volunteers — called citizen scholars — how to research and document historical content, such as oral histories.

Michael Evans, director of the Field School, said that up until now, the history of the "Bottoms" has been relatively invisible.

"Battle Creek has its facts on C.W. Post and W.K. Kellogg, but they don't have anything on us," said Velma Adams, a citizen scholar. "We just can't be



Velma Laws-Clay, above, remembers growing up in "The Bottoms" and tells some of her stories Thursday evening at Burnham Brook Center. David Scobey, left, director of the University of Michigan's Arts of Citizenship Program, was the featured speaker at the "Memories from Hamblin" program.

DOUG ALLEN/THE ENQUIRER

GET INVOLVED

Heritage Battle Creek is looking for more items to aid the Hamblin Project, which will document Battle Creek's African-American history from the 1940s to the 1970s. Memorabilia such as trophies, plaques, uniforms, invitations, announcements and flyers can be given to the Hamblin Project to be featured on the Web site and in future exhibits. Also, the project is seeking more Hamblin residents to share their oral history. If you would like to help the project, contact Heritage Battle Creek at 965-2613.

ignored. The story has to be told." finished, she is impressed by what it shows.

Adams, who also grew up in the Hamblin community, said that though the Web site is not The Web site has photographs

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Project brings back the 'Bottoms'

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and audio and written transcripts of interviews with former Hamblin residents. As some of the interviews were shared Thursday night, audience members smiled and chatter filled the room as they reminisced on the Hamblin Community Center and the 1947 flood.

The center provided recreational, social and educational activities for youth and adults in the community.

Lena Barlow said she went to the community center every day.

"We had to sing for the soldiers," the 67-year-old said.

It is hoped that the spirit of Hamblin Community Center can be rekindled through the work of husband-and-wife team Floyd and Winnie Her-

nandez.

The couple purchased the building at 242 Hamblin Ave. about two years ago and have been renovating the building for about six months. They've also been holding community meetings to reopen it as the Hamblin Institute, which would serve as a place for youth to gather for recreational and social activities.

"What's so beautiful about this to us is there's a spark in their eyes and a burst-through of joy with what they can see happening there," said Winnie Hernandez, of Battle Creek.

Though the couple has never lived in the "Bottoms," they want to meet the needs of the community and commemorate the former community center.

"We didn't live in the time the center was there, but we want to do as much as possible

to have it be restored to what it was," Winnie Hernandez said.

She said she does not yet know when the Hamblin Institute will open, but she and her husband are working to gather funds to carry out the project.

Evans is excited about the Hamblin Institute and hopes the project won't stop there, but that the history will be published in textbooks and displayed at exhibits so it can be accessed by younger generations.

Velma Laws-Clay, president of the Heritage Battle Creek board, said, "It's great it's being captured so our grandchildren and their grandchildren will always know what happened in this community."

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