



City of Alexandria  
Office of Historic Alexandria  
*Immigrant Alexandria, Past, Present, and Future*  
**Oral History Program**



Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

Title: *Interview with Rhoda Worku*

Date of Interview: *September 10, 2015*

Location of Interview: *Caboose Cafe in Alexandria, Virginia*

Interviewer: *Krystyn Moon*

Transcriber: *Adept Word Management*

Abstract: This is the second interview with Ms. Worku. Rhoda Worku was born in Ethiopia and migrated to Alexandria, Virginia in the early 1980s. She was the first in her family to migrate here. She talks about games she played growing up in Ethiopia, her family's role in Haile Selassie's government. She talks about raising her two sons in Fairfax. She has a restaurant business and talks a little about cooking for the holidays.

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<b>00:00 Introductions</b>	
Krystyn Moon:	We're on? All right. This is Krystyn Moon again, and we're doing a followup interview with Rhoda Worku. We're at Caboose Cafe in Del Ray [neighborhood of Alexandria, Virginia], and it is September 10, 2015. Rhoda, when we met last time, we had a great interview, but we didn't ask all the questions that we needed to ask or talk about. We had a lot of things we wanted to continue talking about. One of the things was your childhood, and particularly some of the games that you played growing up, and a particular game that you really loved, which is rounders. Can you talk a little bit about that?
<b>00:36 Childhood Games</b>	
Rhoda Worku:	Yes. Rounders is—basically, it looks like baseball. You do have four stops, and you hit the ball, run, and then if you don't beat the first stop, then you'll be out. But it's all girls. It's kind of a softball. I believe our school got it from England, something they play in England, because the school was a village school, like the Stanford school. So most of the games we play was from England. So we'd do that. It's all girls. The team was made by days. Like there's Monday house, Tuesday house. And they give us color. So we have red house, green house, blue house, yellow house, something like that. And once a year, there was a carnival, and we'd do match games. We have after school, we practice every Monday. If you're red house, you practice Monday after school. And then we match within the school. It was not a very common thing in Ethiopia, though.
KM:	What house were you?
Rhoda Worku:	I was the Monday house.
KM:	You were in the Monday house?
Rhoda Worku:	I was in the Monday house. I was the red house. And it happens to be all of them.  My siblings all have to be in the Monday house, so that it would be easy for transportations elsewhere.
KM:	For your mom and dad?
Rhoda Worku:	Oh, yeah. That's what the school always does. So we always match the red house with the green house, or the red with yellow, things like that. It was lots of fun.
KM:	So how do you get placed in a particular house initially, or your family gets placed?
Rhoda Worku:	I really don't know. I don't remember that. I guess when our family gets sent to the school. I have an older sister and myself. When we got into the school, they assigned us to Monday house. I really don't know how they do that. I don't remember. But anyway, after that any of my siblings come, then they

	should join the Monday house. And then we just played with the friends there. It was fun.
KM:	Now, were there other sports that you did when you were growing up?
Rhoda Worku:	Yes, there were other sports as well. We do play volleyball. And then running.
KM:	Like long-distance running?
Rhoda Worku:	No, short ones.
KM:	Sprints?
Rhoda Worku:	Sprints, yeah. We do those. We do theatre, like we do some acting.
KM:	Did you put on any plays or musicals?
Rhoda Worku::	No. There were some plays. Like we try to act like—in old-time Ethiopia; you dressed up like, let's say a bride and groom in the suburbs. So we'd do something like that.
KM:	Okay. And did you play a musical instrument?
Rhoda Worku:	I did. I used to do the piano. I used to learn piano.
KM:	Okay. Was that at school or at home?
Rhoda Worku:	No, it was private, at home, in a private place.
<b>03:38 Family in Government</b>	
KM:	That's great. One of the other things that I wanted to follow up was to talk a little bit more about your dad and your uncles. What were their jobs in the government from the 1950s to the 1970s?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah, up to King Haile Selassie's government, they used to work directly with the kings. And then most of them, including my dad, they were the governors, and my uncles as well. They were doing a different province at times. Now it's different. Everything has changed. There were different provinces. So I would say most of them were managing—about four of them.
KM:	Do you remember which provinces they managed?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah, of course I do remember it. My father was in Gore, which is Illubabor. My uncle was in Jimma, and the other one was in Arba Minch, which is a really nice place. And the other one was in Mekelle.
KM:	Okay. And are they all near Addis Ababa?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah, not too far. Not far from Addis. It was not too far from Addis.
KM:	And then one of the other things is you've brought up Haile Selassie. Do you have any family stories about him, or do you

	remember ever meeting him?
Rhoda Worku:	I would say, probably I met him once or twice as a little girl. When you say family stories, like about him?
KM:	Yeah, like stories that maybe your dad or your uncles or maybe your mom told you about him, or even stories that you would hear growing up about him.
Rhoda Worku:	I was a little girl, so I don't hear much about it. But I remember one Christmastime, we used to go and get ourselves a present at Christmastime. Until you get eighteen. When you get eighteen, you will be disqualified. Because around him, we used to do that.
KM:	Do you remember what the little presents were?
Rhoda Worku:	I don't remember. It's just random toys.
KM:	Okay, toys. And maybe candy?
Rhoda Worku:	No, I don't remember candy. Just little toys.
<b>05:48 Move from Alexandria to Fairfax County</b>	
KM:	Also, I wanted to talk to you a little bit about—you mentioned in the first interview that you first lived in Alexandria when you came to this area, and then you decided to move out to Fairfax County. What were the reasons why you decided to move to Fairfax County?
Rhoda Worku:	The first thing I decided was because at that time—in fact close to Del Ray, I used to live there. And I don't think it was a safer place.
KM:	About what time or year—?
Rhoda Worku:	That was in 1980, '82 or something. And I was thinking on having a child, so I was thinking Fairfax would be a better place for me, for school purposes.
KM:	Right. And so then you bought a house in Fairfax.
Rhoda Worku:	Yes, we bought a—yeah, Springfield, Fairfax. We moved to— a little bit out of things. So we moved out.
KM:	Okay. And then were you commuting into Alexandria for work?
Rhoda Worku:	Yes, I was. In fact, I ended up—my kids went to Saint Stephen's, so I was driving them to school.
M:	Oh, that's so funny. One of our other interviewees actually went to Saint Stephens.
Rhoda Worku:	Oh, okay.
KM:	Yeah. That's really funny. Speaking of your kids, one of the other questions I wanted to follow up on is how did you make sure that your boys stayed connected to their Ethiopian heritage,

	particularly speaking Amharic at home, certain foods you made sure you made at home, movies or TV, or traveling back to Ethiopia with them—did you do any of those sorts of activities when they were younger?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah, I would say—I came from a big family. I have lots of siblings. As well as my husband. He has about eleven. I have about six.
KM:	Wow.
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah, we tried. And then we were just bringing our culture and hospitality. Honestly, Ethiopians have the best hospitality. And then my mom was around. She used to come back and forth. So that really helps me too.
KM:	Would you send the boys to Ethiopia to stay with your mom?
Rhoda Worku:	No. I never sent them back home. But we did go for vacation, for about four weeks to five weeks. That was a big thing. The first time, they were very excited. They were nine and eleven. So they were very happy.
KM:	Yeah. Did they enjoy themselves?
Rhoda Worku:	They did enjoy. At first I didn't think they would be enjoying. To be honest with you, my kids—they're not fluent in Amharic, but they will understand.
KM:	Right. That's classic, that oftentimes they're—.
Rhoda Worku:	And we do go to church elsewhere. We used to go to church. I'm still going to church, but you know.
KM:	Were the services in Amharic?
Rhoda Worku:	Amharic? No. The service is not in Amharic. Our church and our service— some used a translation. No, it's not in Amharic.
KM:	So is it in?
Rhoda Worku:	Ge'ez.
KM:	It's in Ge'ez? Is that another dialect?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah. It's way back, before Amharic.
KM:	Oh, okay. In your first interview, you mentioned the idea of an American dream. And I wanted to also follow up on that. What does that mean to you? As somebody who came as an asylum seeker, it wasn't your plan to come here, but there was a need to come. But now this is your home.
Rhoda Worku:	This is home, yeah. This is home. What I called the American dream is—I really wanted to come, but that was a hard time, that time, in the late [19]70s, early years. So I was lucky enough— I was the first one to get out from my family. So I came here, and then I settled with nothing. And then I worked

	hard, and I got my sisters back here. And then I got married, got children, I bought a house, I got a small business, and I love comfortably. So that makes it the American dream. And I've been a citizen for the last twenty-five years, maybe. At least—it's over twenty-two.
KM:	So you've naturalized.
Rhoda Worku:	I've naturalized, yeah. All those fun things that we have to do.
<b>10:21 Food Customs</b>	
KM:	Also, I wanted to talk to you a little bit about food, because we talked a lot about your menu here at Caboose. But are there different things that you eat at home, when you're cooking at home, versus what you serve in the restaurant? And also, are there special dishes for holidays like Easter that you like to make, or you have somebody else make and you bring home?
Rhoda Worku:	I would say most of the time, when you have a restaurant, you don't eat at all, let me tell you. Especially now, when my boys are out. It's just me and my husband. So we usually eat here. If not, we go out.
KM:	Okay. The last thing you want to do is cook.
Rhoda Worku:	The last thing I want to do is cook. And of course when there's holidays we cook, and then the doro wats are very traditional. Especially Easter is a big holiday for us. Christmas is a big holiday. Christmas. And my family, more than Easter we celebrate Christmas.
KM:	December seventh— or January seventh.
Rhoda Worku:	January seventh. However, I celebrate December twenty-fifth. But it's a big one for us. And then I cook the doro wat and lamb. Lamb roast.
KM:	So for the lamb roast, is it just a roast that you—?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah, I don't usually do the lamb roast. I get a lamb leg and then marinate it for a day, probably. And then we make it. So that's a very common one, the lamb roast.
KM:	Okay. And is it like, you rub it with herbs and spices?
Rhoda Worku:	Yes, herbs and spices.
KM:	So it's like a dry, or is it more like a wet?
Rhoda Worku:	It can be a little wet as well. And then we put garlic on the side. We don't cut it. And then put a little bit horseradish, rosemary, and salt and pepper, and put it away, just for a day.
KM:	And then what's the other dish again, that you like for the holidays?
Rhoda Worku:	The doro wat?

Rhoda Worku:	Doro wat. That's a very kind of spicy— it's a chicken leg. In fact, it's a whole chicken. You take about twelve pieces out of it. There's a way you have to do it properly when you take it out, the legs and things.
KM:	So you're talking about when you cut it up?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah, when you cut it up. You've got to put up about twelve pieces. And then you cook it. The onions should be cooked for a long time. If you do it the right way, it can be about eight hours. Really cook the onions, to be caramelized. And then you put the berbere, the spices, and some butter. And then you put egg on it. A boiled egg.
KM:	A boiled egg. Okay.
Rhoda Worku:	When you serve it, it's going to be with boiled egg.
KM:	Okay. Is there a reason why it's twelve pieces? Is it from the calendar?
Rhoda Worku:	No, I don't think so. I don't know why. I'm not sure.
KM:	I didn't know if it was symbolic or—?
Rhoda Worku:	No, I don't know. There's a way you've got to take them out. I haven't done this for a while, though.
KM:	Yeah, it sounds labor-intensive.
Rhoda Worku:	Yes, it is. It's very labor-intensive. Unless it's a big holiday and make sure that everybody showed up, it's not something you want to do.
KM:	Does it take a day just to make it?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah. It takes at least eight hours, and things like that.
<b>13:50 Reasons for Emigration</b>	
KM:	Okay. Wow. When Ethiopians started coming in the early 1980s to the U.S., do you know if most of them were asylum seekers like yourself, or were some of them coming on other types of visas, like student visas? Or do you remember, amongst your family and friends, how they came?
Rhoda Worku:	Even though if they have a student visa, I think they were asylum. Most cases were asylum. I would say people coming before the '70s, before the '80s, before the revolution, they had a mission. They come and learn and study and go back. But around the '80s, I don't think anyone was planning to go back. It was seeking asylum. They have a certain visa, and then they want to change their status. Asylum. Or either they come through like, Djibouti—you know what I'm saying? Or Nairobi or whatever, they're coming through. And why were so many people coming out of Ethiopia after the revolution? What were they fearful of? Well, it was not safe anymore. I mean, it was

	not safe. It was not safe anymore. Especially a young age, between sixteen to thirty, under thirty, it was not safe at all.
KM:	Were they being recruited into the military?
Rhoda Worku:	No, no, they were not because of the military, but political things. Or they would tell you to get out of the city, and it's not even safe to teach. It's good to teach the suburb. You got out of the city. But it was not safe at all. You see kids who are dying on the street. I had a really bad experience, to be honest with you. I don't want to even think about it. Because you see bodies laid down on the street.
KM:	From the military or gangs or—?
Rhoda Worku:	No, not from the military, military things. From just those times. It was really dangerous. You can't even know if you can get back home safe. So that's the main reason, between the ages of those, they come seeking asylum.
KM:	And then why did so many people end up in this area? What do you think was the draw to Northern Virginia, but also the Washington [D.C.] area?
Rhoda Worku:	The Washington area, yes. It's to the Washington and the Los Angeles areas, for the most part, for Ethiopians. One thing is I think when somebody comes—for example, when I came to this country first—I don't know if I mentioned in the first one. For a year, I was with an American family somewhere in Oakland [California.]
KM:	Oh. Oakland?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah. In fact, it was entirely there, Fremont area.
KM:	Oh, okay. Jack.
Rhoda Worku:	Jack Smith, yeah. Did I mention that?
KM:	Mr. Jack.
Rhoda Worku:	Jack Smith, yeah. Do you know him?
KM:	I don't know him, but you mentioned him in the first interview.
Rhoda Worku:	Yes. Mr. Jack. And I was with him for about a year. And then there was really nothing you can do somewhere there, especially at that time. So most of the things—immigration was easier here, to change your status and to look for a job, to go back to school. There, it was kind of hard.
KM:	Out in California.
Rhoda Worku:	Yes. I was in a little city in Fremont, which is—.
KM:	South of Oakland.
Rhoda Worku:	Yes. So I had to come here. And then when my sister came, she came here. So she stayed here with me. I'm sure everybody has

	those kind of—.
KM:	Did you have a friend just tell you, come to Northern Virginia, there are jobs here? Or how did you—?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah, yeah. I have some friends that were here before me. They said it much easier here to find an apartment. It's not that expensive to settle. I think that's the main reason.
KM:	And did they have jobs already here?
Rhoda Worku:	Yeah. At that time, everybody—they're going to school, working as a waitress. It's not really a job, that time. I mean, it's a job. But everybody was trying to leave and go back to school. That's the way you do it.
<b>18:11 Running a Small Business</b>	
KM:	Okay. Perfect. One last question. I want to talk about your business again. Do you want to talk a little bit more about some of the hard things, running your business here in Del Ray?
Rhoda Worku:	Yes, the hardest thing is—I enjoy my coffee shop, my daily job, but it's very hard. A small business is really, really hard. You have to be there most of the time. It requires long hours. And the biggest thing is employees. I was lucky enough, I have most of my employees—they've been here at least nine, eight years. They almost started with me. We work as a family. I never act as an owner in here. I work with them. But if you miss one person for any reason, let's say if they move from the area, then it's very hard to find an employee, really hard, especially in Alexandria. Alexandria's getting very expensive. I don't blame them.
KM:	You're talking about in terms of housing and—?
Rhoda Worku:	Housing and things like that. So people are moving out. When they move out from the area, I usually try to hire somebody in walking distance. And then of course, the city was encouraging us to get somebody from the neighborhood, because of the parking situation and things like that. But it's getting difficult and difficult.
KM:	Yeah. All right. Do you have anything else you want to add? Because we actually asked all our questions.
Rhoda Worku:	Well, I wanted to thank you for the time, and I would like to thank the Del Ray neighborhood. They were always a big supporter of myself and my family. They were always encouraging me. And I never think I would have stayed eleven years in the business. First time, I didn't think I was going to make it. The first year probably was the hardest. Yes, the first year was the hardest. And then they were always encouraging me. They were telling me positive things about my family. And really, they're really nice people in Alexandria. Very nice

	neighborhood.
KM:	Great. Yeah. And thank you for your time.
Rhoda Worku:	I can thank you too.
KM:	No problem. Thank you. Does that work? Yeah, excellent. Okay. Yeah? All right. Thanks, now. Oh, that's great.
<b>20:30 End</b>	