

Oral History Interview Transcript

Course Title: Energy in World Civilizations

Institution: University of Chicago

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Interviewer: Rebecca Shaw

Interviewee: Vernee Shaw

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Location: Zoom

Rebecca Shaw 0:39

Okay. Good afternoon What's your name and your relation to me?

Vernee Shaw 0:52

Vernee Shaw. Rebecca Shaw's mother

Rebecca Shaw 0:57

Okay! Where are you and where are you from?

Vernee Shaw 1:02

I'm located in the city of Buffalo and I was born in the city of Buffalo.

Rebecca Shaw 1:09

How old are you and how old were you when you started having conscious thoughts about the energy that you use?

Vernee Shaw 1:19

I'm 50 and I was probably about 10

Rebecca Shaw 1:23

Okay, and what made you start thinking about energy?

Vernee Shaw 1:26

Um, my mother used to tell us to turn the lights off and the TV off because we were just burning electricity and no one was using it.

Rebecca Shaw 1:37

And so did your mom care about energy conservation? Or did you care?

Vernee Shaw 1:41

Um, we both cared about it because she taught us to save on energy to save on the cost of living.

Rebecca Shaw 1:55

So when you were growing up, what were the most visible forms of energy? Like what energy did you see around you?

Vernee Shaw 2:02

Um, the use of the TV, our lights, and our refrigerator I guess. At that young age that's all I cared about.

Rebecca Shaw 2:16

Did you think about any of the electrical appliances that were like in your kitchen? Besides the refrigerator?

Vernee Shaw 2:25

No, because our stove was gas and back then we didn't really use a microwave. We heated our food up with the stove.

Rebecca Shaw 2:40

Your stove was gas or electric?

Vernee Shaw

Gas.

Rebecca Shaw

Do you think that the electrical appliances made your life easier in any way?

Vernee Shaw 2:54

Has what made my life easier?

Rebecca Shaw 2:55

The electrical appliances?

Vernee Shaw 3:00

Yeah, now the electrical appliances do because we have like the microwave we have the InstaPot. Things of that nature make cooking much quicker and easier. The washing machine, dryers, all that stuff is much more helpful because we had the old-fashioned ones that had a little bit of electricity, but they weren't totally electric.

Rebecca Shaw 3:31

So did you see a difference in the way they worked?

Vernee Shaw 3:33

Oh my gosh. Yes. Because my grandmother had a washing machine that washed but it had a ringer where you ring your clothes out once they were washed, and you just rinsed them and you rang them out on this thing and it looked like a giant rolling pin. Two rolling pins together and you squished your clothes in and you rolled a little handle and the clothes went through and that's how they got the water out and then you hung them on a line.

Rebecca Shaw 4:02

So they dried them manually?

Vernee Shaw 4:07

Mostly. Most of the time they dried them manually.

Rebecca Shaw 4:13

Was there another option or was that the best at the time?

Vernee Shaw 4:18

That was the best at the time.

Rebecca Shaw 4:21

Okay I'm curious about your thoughts about owning a dishwasher because I know that you owned one temporarily and then got rid of it. So I'm wondering why you didn't keep that piece of technology.

Vernee Shaw 4:41

Um, I didn't get rid of it. It broke and then your father didn't want to buy another one. He wanted to wash dishes manually because he said they got them cleaner. But I think not having a dishwasher makes it difficult when you do a lot of cooking and you use pots and pans and stuff like that. And it's not really inconvenient to wash all that stuff throughout the day instead of making one load at night and just being done with it.

Rebecca Shaw 5:13

You said he thinks that washing them manually got them cleaner. Do you think that's accurate?

Vernee Shaw

No.

Rebecca Shaw

Okay, so how did it impact your conveniences after you got rid of it?

Vernee Shaw 5:30

I didn't cook as much. I didn't use glass plates as much. I used more paper plates, which was more wasteful but um, as far as my time, it was more convenient. On the environment, it was more wasteful.

Rebecca Shaw 5:59

Do you have any other thoughts about like, dishwashing and convenience in the way that you cooked? Like how did cooking change for you when more energy was introduced?

Vernee Shaw 6:15

Do you mean like more technology stuff like the Instapot and stuff when it was introduced?

Rebecca Shaw

Yeah. More technology.

Vernee Shaw

Yeah, um, cooking took less time, which made me able to do healthier, better meals because when you do it just in the oven, it takes maybe three hours, and with me working every day I couldn't get home and then take three hours to have dinner done. So the InstaPots and different things of that nature, the convection ovens and stuff, make cooking quicker and easier if you work so you can make healthier meals.

Rebecca Shaw 7:05

I'm gonna switch over to asking questions about your phone and landline. So, what were your thoughts when your house first had a landline and how old were you?

Vernee Shaw 7:32

I don't even remember really using the landline until I was in high school because I really had nobody to call. So we had a landline that connected to the wall and you couldn't really use it that far away from where you were. You had to get like a long cord and just stretch it to sit down or move, you know, move around anywhere. It wasn't really that convenient and they were heavy and you couldn't stay on for too long because when they first started they didn't even have where you put somebody on hold. So it was like one call and then the phone was busy. So you couldn't talk on the phone a long time.

Rebecca Shaw 8:24

So what do you mean by you would get one call and the phone was busy. What do you mean?

Vernee Shaw 8:29

If you're on the phone talking to somebody, or say you call somebody and you're talking— or they called you and you're talking— nobody else could get on that line. There wasn't a hold when they first started the phone. After a while, there was a hold where you could have one person on the line and you could click over to another person and tell them “call me back” or whatever. But then you can click back over to the first person. It wasn't like now you can have me on the phone, you could have Jessica on the phone, you can have Shanee on the phone, your father. All those people can be on the phone having one conversation at the same time. It wasn't like that before.

Rebecca Shaw 9:17

So, since you had to manage your time on the phone, what did usage of the phone look like in your house?

Vernee Shaw 9:25

We had two phones one upstairs and one downstairs and then when you got a phone call, you could only stay on the phone maybe like 30 minutes at the longest. Because you'd be interfering with like your parents' phone calls or somebody having an emergency or even like somebody to pay bills or, you know, anything. You just couldn't stay on the phone a long time.

Rebecca Shaw 9:54

So was the time limit something that you made just for the convenience of everybody else? Or did your parents enforce that?

Vernee Shaw 10:06

No, I was a convenience for everybody else. After a certain time you could talk longer because no one, you know, who was like a business would call after like five or six. So you can stay on the phone a little bit longer at night.

Rebecca Shaw 10:24

Okay, so these people you were calling, your friends, did they have access to better or worse technology?

Vernee Shaw 10:34

Oh, the same? Yeah. Everybody more or less had the same tech. We didn't really have technology starting out. It was like you had TVs and the phone and that was about it. You went to arcades to play games, they had huge arcades. So it wasn't games on nobody's phone or nobody carried around a laptop. Nobody carried around a phone. The closest thing to a phone that people had—because if you left the house, you just weren't getting no phone call or no messages until you got back home. Unless— if somebody was there to answer the phone because we didn't even have an answering machine. So you were just out all day till you got home and got a message. It didn't even bother us that we didn't talk to everybody who wasn't around us because we talked to our friends who were there. So nobody was a slave to their phone or to, you know, trying to get somewhere all the time we were just where we were and having fun.

Rebecca Shaw 11:54

Now since you have greater access to GPS technology and navigation, do you think that you're more or less likely to go outside of the house? Or like how often do you rely on navigating?

Vernee Shaw 12:13

I do all the time now. But before I never did. We just went out, knew where we were going, we knew our bus routes or something. If we got lost we'd ask somebody and they would tell us which way to go, or get a map, or our parents would tell us how to get places or take us places and we just remembered it. We remembered more places to go than now because everybody uses navigation and just blindly drives to wherever it tells you

Rebecca Shaw 12:46

How do you feel about that?

Vernee Shaw 12:49

Sometimes it makes me feel uncomfortable because I'm like you're relying on technology. And how do you know the technology is right? Yeah, people have had accidents and stuff following technology like going down a railroad track or falling down ditches and stuff like that, because it didn't update, it didn't know that something changed, or whatever. So people following technology blindly is a little bit naive I guess.

Rebecca Shaw 13:27

I can say I don't know how to get around buffalo that well.

Vernee Shaw 13:31

See, I know how to get around Buffalo because we used to do it without any technology. We used to get on a bus and people used to tell us about landmarks and stuff. We didn't know the names of streets. You'd be like, "Oh, okay by the big Tops grocery store, then you walk down three blocks and then you get to a little bodega or something, then you turn to the right and go down," whatever and then we, I mean, we would just find it. We would just, you know follow directions like that and we would just find it or pay attention when we were in cars and stuff. When we were in our parents' cars,

we'd have to pay attention to where we were to know how to get back. So people paid more attention to like, outside, the streets, the sidewalk, the names of streets and stuff. Now people get in the car and they don't even look up, they're on their phones. They could drive around all day and they couldn't tell you how they got there or what street they passed. Nothing. We had to look out the window and make sure we knew where we were going and which direction we were going. So that's how I learned Buffalo just by looking out the car as we were driving around.

Rebecca Shaw 15:00

Okay, did having technology accessible make you feel safer when you're out? Or how does it make you feel regarding safety and comfortability?

Vernee Shaw 15:12

Um, safety more or less that we have like cameras on the house and stuff to make sure nobody has broken into the house or when you get to the house your alarm beeps and lets you know nobody's in the house. So that makes you feel safe but any other thing is like, kind of invasive because when Siri— Siri is always listening to you and stuff, and sometimes she'll start talking and nobody's even talking to her. So you know, she's listening to your entire conversation and nobody said "Hey Siri", and all of a sudden she just starts talking or playing music or whatever. So it's kind of invasive that it's listening to everything you say, or sending commercials to your phone. When you talk about something, maybe like 10 or 15 minutes later, whatever you were talking about is coming on your phone as an advertisement. It seems kind of creepy.

Rebecca Shaw 16:18

Does that work on you? Have you bought things from those advertisements before? No,

Vernee Shaw 16:25

I always just look at it, I mean, because I don't trust a lot of technology. As far as purchasing stuff from them. I have to know that it's a reputable dealer and just because it popped up on my phone does not mean it's safe, I don't think.

Rebecca Shaw 16:45

So it doesn't work on you? You're more conscious of the tailored ads that they send?

Vernee Shaw 16:57

Yeah, and I'm a bargain shopper anyway, so they're not gonna get me unless it's a really good bargain. And then I get it from a reputable place.

Rebecca Shaw 17:12

Okay, well, those are all of my energy questions.

Vernee Shaw 17:16

Okay, well did I do good as far as my answers?

Rebecca Shaw 17:21

There is no good or bad, but I think you answered them well.

Vernee Shaw 17:26

Oh, and one funny thing I wanted to tell you about is that when Ada was growing up, they had party lines. So, when you picked up your phone— Did she tell you about that?

Rebecca Shaw

She told me about that before.

Vernee Shaw

Yeah, somebody down the street would be on the line, and you could listen to their conversation and they wouldn't even know you're on the phone but you couldn't make a phone call out until they hung up.

Rebecca Shaw 17:55

Who would you share with?

Vernee Shaw 17:57

You would share with like four or five houses? They called it a party line. It might've even been like a half a block of people. And all those people would be on one line because it wasn't individual phone lines at that time. So you could listen to somebody's conversation like down the street from you and they'd be talking to their kids or their mother or father, whatever, and people could pick up the phone and listen and be nosy and get all in everybody else's business.

Rebecca Shaw

Ugh.

Vernee Shaw

Trish was talking about that, she remembers the party lines. See, I was too young. I wasn't on the phone back then. But she said she was back then and she said she used to listen to the neighbors down the street's conversation.

Vernee Shaw 18:54

So technology has come a long way. A long, long way.

Rebecca Shaw 19:03

Do you think that knowing that somebody else can hear what you're saying on the phone changed what you would be able to tell people?

Vernee Shaw 19:11

Oh, absolutely. Because if you're just talking on the phone, anybody could hear— well back in the day with a party line anybody could hear. And then I don't trust, you know, how they gave all those free phones it was like free phones on all the corners and everything. Oh, "food stamp phone", "Medicaid phone" and stuff like that. So, that is like a form of tracking people and being able to listen to their conversations because you gave them the phone, so how do you know they're not listening? So I don't trust any of that. A phone conversation is not private, a private conversation in front of somebody— that's the only conversation I would trust.

Rebecca Shaw 19:57

How did you feel about getting your own phone? your first mobile phone?

Vernee Shaw 20:01

My gosh, I got it so long ago. I think it was like a Blackberry or something way way back then. I was always up on the new technology. That's why we kept up with everything. Yeah, like when other people would have like black and white little fat-back TVs we had the fat-back TV that was color and with a record player and a radio where one side looks a big piece of furniture. It's at grandma's house. That's the furniture we had and that was the top-shelf type of furniture. So we always had the top technology but looking back on it now, it's so funny. It's like oh my god, it was so old and so, you know, heavy and big and like furniture but that's what the new technology was, and to see the new technology now, it's like worlds apart

Vernee Shaw

You see that fat back TV at Ada's house, that big piece of furniture bottom that was the high price classy stuff. You got it from Sears and Roebuck they was like the fancy store back then like the Macy's.

Rebecca Shaw 21:32

What other conveniences could you see technology incorporating itself into potentially?

Vernee Shaw 21:34

Technology is everything now they even have— they want to do smart houses where your doors and stuff open and close and lock all by technology, and your lights and stuff turn off and on with technology. They even have where you can like change a room and make it smaller with technology, like put the bed in the wall, pull the chairs out, you know, almost like the Jetsons. Like what the Jetsons little cartoon was where people were flying around in cars and not driving on the ground anymore. So it's getting to that point. So technology's just gonna take off like crazy, especially with the AI. It's gonna be weird. It's gonna be so different from when you were growing up, when you were younger. All that stuff that you have now is gonna be like a brick. Our phone right now is gonna be like a brick like they might have where you just wave your hand and then there's the phone and you see everything right there and then you wave your hand more and then you have the whole, like, a Zoom call with people just everywhere without even a screen or anything attached to it, almost like a hologram. It's coming. Technology is moving. Yeah, yeah. By the time your kids are older, they'll have it on their wrist or something like just pop their wrist and the phone pops up. Yeah, it's exciting.

Rebecca Shaw 23:26

Big things coming.

Vernee Shaw 23:28

As long it doesn't get out of hand. People just go crazy with too much technology. Sometimes too much knowledge and power is not always a good thing.

Rebecca Shaw 23:43

I believe that.

Vernee Shaw 23:49

All right, baby.

Vernee Shaw 24:06

Oh, and you also can talk about, um, electric cars.

Rebecca Shaw 24:13

Yeah, we don't have electric cars yet though in our house.

Vernee Shaw 24:16

No, but my boss got an electric car.

Vernee Shaw

Oh my god. Did I tell you I saw a car the other day when I was walking and coming to work. This lady got out of her car, took her— she was driving— and got out of her car, took out her bags and stuff and she must have told the car to go park. The car took off, went around the corner. and went into the parking ramp. I was like “You go girl”. I did not get to see what kind of car that was because I was halfway down the block. But it wasn't nobody in that car and it went to the parking ramp and parked. Itself. I was like, “I want a car like that.”

Rebecca Shaw 25:05

I've never seen anything like that before.

Vernee Shaw 25:07

I haven't either. I haven't either, but I made sure I looked because wasn't nobody in the car. She got her bags out of the car because she was driving, closed the door, and did something, the car took off, went to the corner, turned to the left, then turned to the right and went into the parking ramp. I was like “I'll be danged” I don't know how much she paid for that car but it had to have been a lot but that car was— I was like wowww. So I wonder if she could text the car or say something and be like “come pick me up” and the car come to pick her up. It drove off without her, so it should be able to pick her back up. Okay, I gotta get out of here.

Rebecca Shaw 26:04

Okay. All right.

Rebecca Shaw 26:31

I'll talk to you later or call you later.

Vernee Shaw 26:33

Alright, Bye I love you.

Rebecca Shaw 26:35

I love you too.