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DATE: March 24, 2000

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Signature of Interviewee: 

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ORAL HISTORY DATA SHEET (to be turned in with tapes & transcript)

INTERVIEWEE: Ms. Nell Casteen

ADDRESS: 1904 A Moore Street  
Farmville, VA 23901

DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 24, 2000

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Nell Casteen's home

INTERVIEWER/S: Stephanie Layman and Pattie Murray

TOPICS COVERED: the Depression, Race Relations in Prince Edward, Annie Purkey

NUMBER OF TAPES: 1

Stephanie Layman
May 4, 2000

Pattie Murray
May 4, 2000
Ms. Nell P. Casteen  
1904A Moore Street  
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March 24, 2000

With Stephanie Layman and Pattie Murray

Tell us a little about what it was like growing up in Prince Edward county.

Well, at the time that I was growing up was during the Depression, and the Depression hit nearly everybody. And some families were hit much harder than others, and probably because there were so many children. There were eight children in my family, and we lived on a farm, but my father worked in Farmville at one of the tobacco companies. He was the superintendent at one of the factories here. However, the factory, for about three years, the factory did not operate at full speed because of the Depression, because they were not selling. On our farm we had a black couple with their children that helped with the farm work and did most of the farm work. And occasionally, the mother [helped with] the housework. Many times when she came to do the housework, she brought her baby and the baby carriage, and I was about age seven or eight, eight or nine years old. And it just thrilled me to take care of the baby. I would take her up to my mother and help my mother. And I had no inhibitions about taking care of this little baby because she was very cute and her mother had her hair done in little pigtails all over her head.

So my, our relationship with blacks was very friendly. Now, we understood that these relationships stopped at certain points. In other words, we played all day long with the children, played ball with them. My brothers went hunting with them. We went down in the woods with them to play and swing on swings and do things like that. And there never was any real division there, but we always knew that they were going to black schools and black churches and we were going to white schools and white churches. And it never seemed to bother any of us at that time. That was back in the thirties, early thirties. Thirty-one, thirty-two. Right along at that time. The Depression was so heavy here. My father and mother were very strict on us in our attitudes towards blacks. They never let us use the N-word. Shall I explain that?

I think we know what you mean.

We were never allowed to use that. However, my father referred to people of the black race as colored. There's a colored man, a colored woman. And I think that was pretty much all over the county. They were referred to in that way, but not in any slur of ugly way that I knew. However there were, I guess we never really thought about it. We were satisfied with the attitude or the idea that they would go to their school and we would go to ours. And we were not brought up with this, with any antagonism really because we accepted that.
And I think at that time they did. The black children did too. As they grew older, and as times changed. After I went to college and left Farmville, then they had the march from the black school to the courthouse, which you’ve heard about, haven’t you? Ok, we won’t discuss that then. I wasn’t here for that anyway. But there were some things that really let us know that there was a line. I remember once when I was very, very small, my mother. I must have been about six. We had had this young black man work for us on the farm, and all of us liked him as a friend and as a worker and highly respected him. He left Farmville and he came back a couple of years, several years later, and he’d been working up north. And this impressed us too. He’d been up north and learned this. So he came to the front door and knocked, and my mother told him, said “Doc,” his name. We called him Doc. She said, “Doc, you know better than to come to my front door. You’re supposed to go in through the back.” And he did go to the back door. And this was something that was pretty well accepted. Blacks went to the black door, to the back doors. And in later years my mother’s attitude completely changed. We reminded her of that, and she was almost insulted that we remembered it. But we did. Let’s see. What else do you want to know?

Dr. Bagby told us about one time that you were at school and there was a choir there. Can you tell us a little bit about that story?

Well, when I was a senior in high school, the black school had a chorus that was really very good. They had been invited to sing in Richmond over the radio which was quite a thing in that day, to be invited to Richmond to sing, and they had gone to Richmond to sing. And it came the turn of our class, my class, the seniors, to plan a program for assembly. So we went to the principal and asked him could we invite them over to sing for us since they were so famous. He told us why sure. So three or four of us walked over to the black school which was about half a mile, several blocks away, and went in and invited them, talked to the principal and invited them, and he said they could come. And they came that morning, on I guess it was a Friday morning’s when we had assemblies. They came in the back door of the auditorium, and filed in and marched around the sides of the seats and up on stage, and sang. So when they were ready to go, they were going back to their school. So they marched down off the stage after had sung for us. Marched down off the stage, went around the outside of the bleachers and back out the back door. When it came time for our classes to go back to our school and go back to our classes, one of the teachers, very elderly teacher, would not let her class go out the back door. Because she said they weren’t going out the same door that the black children had come in and gone out. So she carried hers out of the side door. And this was very impressive to us. We, I, we just couldn’t believe that this had happened, but it did. I don’t know anything else to tell you about it other than it happened. And this was around 1935. Maybe you need that date. That was one thing I particularly remember. See if there was anything else connected with any of this.
When I was growing up they were just so divided that we weren't too... we didn't realize or didn't think that they were, were pressed to come to, to come to our churches, our schools, or at least there didn't seem to be any of this in their attitude. I think we were aware that their schools probably weren't as, as good as ours. And our school probably wasn't the best. So, that was just the way it was. We knew they were going to their school. We knew we were going to ours. You see now, that was 1935, and the big civil rights movement, what, when did y'all say it started in? Late fifties? Early sixties?

How did the Depression affect racial relations in Prince Edward county?

Oh, the Depression. It affected everybody, most everybody. Because there were some people that, like I said, if they had smaller families, they had more money to divide among the children they had. I remember in, at one Christmas, my mother filled about 19 stockings because she knew that the black children on our farm and the one next to us would not have much Christmas. And there wasn't a lot of Christmas presents because she didn't buy a lot of presents for her own children. There wasn't that much money. But the stockings were filled with oranges and apples, nuts and candy, and that type of thing, but they were very generously filled and given to the black families for their children. Let's see. What else was I going to say? They, the black children, wore clothes that were given to them. If we didn't wear ours out, we gave them to them if they were smaller. We wore... they had clothes that they wanted. This was usually very much expected: that anytime you had anything you wanted to discard, you could pass it on to some black person. They'd be glad to get it.

Along at that time... there was a black family that didn't live on our farm. They lived right across the road and across a field and then the road. The mother in that family became very ill, and I believe she had cancer, but I'm not sure. But anyway, she was very bed-ridden and very ill, and my mother sent her meals to her. And as a child I remember going across a field and climbing the fence to carry food to her. We called her Aunt Sarah because at that time it was still kind of popular for young children to call older black women Aunt this and Aunt that, you know. And Uncle somebody. We didn't have much of that much. There weren't too many black men that I knew of that we called Uncle, but the women we did. There was an elderly black lady named Aunt Sarah. She lived down in Cumberland where my mother was born and raised. And I believe she tended to my mother's mother when my mother was born. Aunt Sarah was getting very elderly. She could, she told us that she could remember when Lee surrendered and that she and some kids, little black kids, were playing in the, in the branch. And some soldiers came through, and they were Yankees. She said that they told us we were free. She said, "We didn't know what that meant, but they told us we were free." And she was about four years, four or five years old, so she can, she can remember that, but that's all she remembered about it. It didn't impress her that much. But she remained very loyal through her whole life to my mother's family. In the wintertime, when it got too cold at her house, she'd come up lots of times and spend two or three weeks at our house. And help my
mother keep house and everything like that. And in 1938, my little sister who was twelve years old died. And Aunt Sarah, this colored woman, took the bus from Cumberland and came up to our house to be with my mother through her sorrow. She got there right as we came home from the funeral, and she just took my mother over, and she said, "Miss Annie, you've got to go to bed, and I'm here to take care of you." And she did for about two weeks. She really took good care of her. And that was the kind of person that she was. She still felt very loyal to her white people, as she called them.

One time she came to my momma's house, and there was a big butter crock back in the pantry. And Aunt Sarah said, "Mrs. Annie, I am going to take this to Ms. Bessie." That was my mother's sister down in Cumberland. "I broke hers the last time I was there and you're not using it so I am going to take it to her." And the next time we went to go see my Aunt Bessie she said, "Annie," (That was my mother.) Said, "Where did...did Aunt Sarah, Aunt Sarah... Aunt Sarah brought me this crock, but I told her she shouldn't have made you give it to her, but if you want it back, you can have it. But Mama said, "No, Aunt Sarah said you had to have it."

So, that was the relationship with many of the older ones. And...I don't know much else to say except that I remember this too: we had a servant's room in our house in town and...and I will tell you about this place in town in a few minutes when we are not recording. But this black girl, young black girl, that had lived on our farm. My mother took her in and she lived in this servants quarters at our house and went to the high school, and she would help get breakfast and maybe help do some night dishes and cooking, whatever my mother needed done. But she wasn't there actually to wait on anybody. She was more there to help her go to school. Anyway, one day it was noticed that every afternoon when she got home from school, she came running into the house just as hard as she could go. And she went straight to her own room where there was a bath, and somebody asked her why she came in so fast. She said, "Because I had to go to the bathroom and I couldn't go in that old school." She said, "I couldn't go out there where we were supposed to go. So I wanted to wait till I got home so I could go to a clean bathroom." That's just something of the situation that they were in that, that, that I knew about. But the Depression did affect everybody. Like I told you, that Christmas that she fixed our stockings, each one of us, my family, only got maybe one gift. I think mine was a fountain pen. My brother's might have been a pocketknife or something, but very small gifts. But we did, they did remember all the other children that lived on our farm. So, I don't know how much more to say about the Depression. It was rough, for everybody. I wore hand me down clothes, and they wore hand me down clothes. Everybody wore hand me down clothes.

*Did you notice that World War II made any difference in the relationships or just in the relationships between blacks and whites or...*

Now I wasn't in Prince Edward county then.
You weren't?  Ok.

One of the young black men that worked on our farm went into service. He was sent to France. He was on a troop train and he was a cook. My mother had taught him to cook, so when he got into service, I guess they put him where he was capable of working. So, he worked through that. When he came home. An interesting thing about that was my mother became very, very concerned about the war. It really affected her. She was probably the most patriotic person I ever knew during that time. She even tried to join the Coast Guard, and she was too old too, but she tried. If you had a service person or a boy in service or a son in service, they put a star on the window, and my mother had six stars on the window. She had five of her own children, and this one black boy had lived on the farm, so she put a star on the window for Lee too. So, I think now I am not talking about Prince Edward 'cause I wasn't here. But I think the war affected everybody's attitude toward blacks because there were black troops that performed so well and they were drafted and when they came back they expected much better treatment than they got. And you've read about that and I don't need to go over that too much with you now. But they still could go into a store and buy food, but they had to walk out and eat it on the curb. In some places they still had to do that. They had had to do it before but they still had to do it then.

And now, going back to the early days, let's say in the '30s, '35 and '40s. if it was a maid looking after a child, a white child, then they could go to church and sit with them. They could go to the movies and sit with them because they were nurse maids. But they, they were not allowed in our movies, in our movie house. There was a balcony for the black people and white people sat downstairs, down in the first floor and that was true. I don't know when it was changed because I wasn't here, but that was true when I was growing up. It was like I told you, we expected division and they seemed to expect it too. If there was any friction over this I was not too aware over it. I think I realized some of it was not right. And I think the war particularly brought that home to my mother, but that this was not right. That they shouldn't have to stand on the curb and eat, and they shouldn't have to sit in the back of the bus and that kind of thing. All of us became very much aware that this was not right. I expect the war has as much to do with it as anything, and probably because of the young black men that had gone to war and served their country and then came back home. In France, in places like that, they were received really well. And they came home to this country and they weren't; they were still black. So, I think you were right about the war. It probably started or encouraged black people to realize they were entitled to a better life than they were having or more out of life then.

When were you at Longwood College?

I graduated in 1939. And I left Farmville that year. Left Farmville. I was gone. I was gone from Farmville for sixty years.
What was Longwood like when you were at school?

Well, it was just a quiet little town with a college...with two colleges: Hampden-Sydney and Longwood. Well, let's...At that time it was called STC, State Teachers College. We'd say we went to STC. You knew that too, didn't you? And we took our teacher training. And Farmville at that time had two theatres, had several, quite, quite a lot of churches, several good department stores, good for that time. And one of the things about groceries were that if you called on the phone and gave your order at the grocery store, they delivered the groceries to your home. They did. You haven't heard of that, had you?

Oh, I have heard of it before, just never experienced it.

Would have send you the bill at the end of the month just like you get any other bill now. Well, I don't think Farmville has any store that does that now. Now they might possibly do it to someone who is ill or something, but seems like to me my mother died twelve years ago and she left Farmville about five years before that. Let's see, what year did she leave? 1979 she went to Richmond to a home, and for about a year before that there was one store that knew her and liked her, and if she called them and asked them to send something to her, they would, but they didn't do it regularly.

How separate was Longwood from the rest of Farmville? If you lived on campus with the school did you associate yourself much with the town or was it more of its own community?

Well, at that time I think that girls at Longwood did right much in the town in that many of them went to churches, took part in student activities. There wasn't any student unions like there was the last year I was in college. But, and there were two or three drugstores, or drug, eating places place right there in town, right there on Main Street. But the college girls would go in the afternoons and get cakes and sandwiches and things, and eat together with Hampden-Sydney boys. I don't think they have places like that down there anymore, do they? Well, we did. And they were hang-outs where the college people did. The college itself did not have any lunch counters. They do now, right?

We have the dining hall.

But don't you have a place where you can go and get a hamburger or something?

Oh, we have the Lancer Café which is...We have a little Pizza Hut and a Chick-Fil-A.

Well, yeah. See, they didn't have those. They have them now. I think they had a tea room, but it only ran for lunch and maybe breakfast and dinner. It
did not run all day. I'm not sure about that. But I think there was right much communication between the college and the town.

When you... Well, this is not really much to do with...

Well, I lived at home and went to college.

Oh, you did?

I didn't live on campus.

So, this is kind of off the subject, but I know that they used to have the ladies, when Hampden-Sydney boys would come, the, the president would have to come down and meet, meet the, the young gentlemen before they could go out on an excursion. Was that occurring when you were here?

Oh yes. They didn't have to meet them, but the girls had to check out and check back in. Even to go downtown. But they could go in the daytime. They had to check out to go. We went to the movies. The movies was a great thing then because there were no televisions and radios and all that. Well, there were some radios. But the movies started at four o'clock in the afternoon. They were usually pretty busy. At what they called the Echo Theatre. And there was a place called Shannon's right next door to the movie theatre where everybody could get a drink or something to take to the movies with them. And meet, like I said, it was a hang-out.

What was the attitude of Longwood students about segregation? Did they think much about it?

I don't think we gave it much thought. I took one class on race relations under Miss Stubbs. And that was in 19... 1938. And she taught us about relations, race relations and how they were, how they were, laws were not fair and that type thing. I guess she was the first person really who brought that home to us, the ones who took her class. She had a president from the University of, Virginia Theological, no, Union...

Union Theological Seminary?

Is it Union? What is it? Wait a minute.

In Richmond?

It's mostly black. It was then. Wait a minute. What is Virginia Union? Virginia Union University. It's still there. I think. She had the president of that college come up and talk to our class. And I think that was one of the first times that I really remember shaking hands with a black person on a friendly, equal
basis. And how much we were impressed with that because he stood at the door and shook hands with each one of us as we left. And that was my first experience with that.

We heard stories about...I don't know if you remember this, but if a black man was to walk across Longwood's campus, they would be arrested. Or I guess if you walked down the street and you were a lady, and there was a black man walking, he had to step off the sidewalk. Do you remember anything like that?

I don't know anything about that. But see I wasn't, I didn't live on campus, so I don't know about that.

Yeah, she lived off campus.

Ok, well, Ms. Bagby told us a little bit about your mother. Apparently she was a very influential woman in Prince Edward County. What can you tell us about her, and her activism I guess?

Well, like I said, I was not here. I visited, but I wasn't living here at that time. She was very interested, especially, she was just humiliated I guess you might say, and just shocked completely when they closed the schools. I think that was one thing. It just brought home all the problem, of race problems with, to her. And she was one of the people that thought they certainly should not close the schools, and I think she even stood up and said so in the class. I'm pretty sure of that. I wasn't here, but I'm pretty sure she did that. The SCOPE house over here on...she was very instrumental in helping raise funds to build that through the, I believe it was through the AARP, but I'm not sure of that either. But anyway, she was influential in getting that building, and for the black people to have a place that they can come and work together.

Back during the Depression, she, in order to provide for her own family, she had a job with the government through the WPA program, one of those you know, that Roosevelt started. Because people were just so poor, and they were, they were really suffering. So, they started these programs and she was, she was a rehabilitation agent from the government, paid by the government. And she went around to...met with groups of white people, groups of black people, to teach them how to use more of the products that they were raising on their farms. And how to prepare them and how to cook them. And worked with their health. How to start their gardens, and that kind of thing. Cause a lot of them didn't, didn't have gardens.

(Flip Tape Over)

She helped, through the government, helped the government make loans to these people and maybe no interest or low interest loans so they could get back on their feet. Maybe to buy a horse or cow or whatever they needed to help with their home. She worked in that program I think for about six years. Through
that she saw some of the inequalities too. Later on when she wasn’t on that
program anymore, when that folded up, and then the war came, and all the
programs folded up. Later on she was selling insurance and that type of thing,
but she was very much interested when the schools closed in trying to see that
these black children had a chance to get some education along with the white
children cause that’s when Fuqua…what is now called Fuqua, was Prince
Edward Academy. That’s when that was started as a school for white children,
and I don’t know the whole thing. There was many white people up here that say
that black people were offered more than they were willing to accept because
they wanted to keep the schools separate. So I don’t know about that. I wasn’t
here. But out of that came Fuqua and out of that came prince Edward High
School which is for the whole county. I understand it is a very good high school.
That’s my understanding.

**What was your Mother’s relationship to Reverend Griffin?**

Well, she worked with him some. She, I think she felt like he was practical
in his views, that he wasn’t extreme. He didn’t want a big upheaval, he didn’t
want any….he was sort of like Martin Luther King. He didn’t want a rebellion. He
wanted a peaceful change and he wanted to bring about peaceful changes. As
far as I know, that was their attitude. She encouraged him and worked with him
some. I don’t know how much. I’m not sure, but I know that when he died she
was invited by his church to come and make a, say anything she wanted to say,
and she did make a little speech about him and about how hard he tried to work
for his people and for peace.

**Do you remember any specific projects that she worked on with Reverend
Griffin?**

Not with him. I don’t know of any in particular, unless he worked with
SCOPE. He may have worked on that project with her. That I am not sure of.
Now there are people in town that can tell you more about that. Do you want to
cut that off so I can talk to you about it?

**We wanted to know a little bit more about what exactly SCOPE is and exactly or
how it came about. We had never heard of it before Ms. Bagby talked about it.**

You know I am not exactly sure either. I know it is very active right now.
Still is active and they, my mother was active in getting it built. She got people to
make donations to it and she got, let’s see. A grandson-in-law drew the plans.
He was an architect, and he drew the plans for that building free because she
asked him to. She got that, and they honored her at SCOPE about a year or two
before she died. Her picture hangs at SCOPE. So they recognized that she was
helpful to them. I think but I am not sure about this. I think that they have some
free meals there for people who need free food. Or they have meals for people
that can not prepare their own, are not able to or not well enough to. I think there
are meals delivered form there for one thing. And I don’t know what else they do at SCOPE. There may be some crafts and that kind of thing, but I’m not sure. But I remember that she was active in getting it started. Like I said, you might be better asking someone who was here during that time.

What do you think motivated your mother to become active?

Well, I think the war for one thing encouraged her because she saw these young black boys go away and come back. I think she probably...I don’t know exactly. She probably...It might have been a religious thing. Part of her religion. It may have been just that she wanted to see justice and fair play to cause her to take that much interest and step out. And I think really one of the things that really affected her the most was closing the schools. I think that showed her a lot about what was fair and what was just.

How did the white community receive your mother? Like, I mean if she was stepping out and speaking out about what she thought was wrong? Did the white community receive that well?

I don’t think she ever realized any problems, but I think she had some friends that were critical of her. She may have lost a few friends. I don’t know that she did. My mother was never a real social...now that’s not a good word, but she wasn’t the kind of person that depended on social relationships like bridge clubs and parties and that kind of thing. She never, she was very business-like. She was always working in business and so I don’t think she missed or realized how much maybe her friends did not appreciate always her lack of careful manner or her feelings. But I don’t think she let it bother her too much.

Why did you return to Prince Edward County after 60 years?

I don’t know if we need to put that on there. Do you want it on there?

Yeah, well, if it’s decent.

Well, I was a widow for twelve years living in a kind of big old house by myself. And actually I had no close relatives in that community. Now I had lots of friends because I taught there for 29 years. I was very active in my church and in senior citizen groups and in the widowed persons group. And I had retired teachers groups And so I was very happy with what I was doing. And then I had a lot of health problems and it just seemed like that it was time to give up my house, this house that I was trying to take care of. And, I wasn’t driving at night anymore, and I had a daughter who lived in Farmville, and she said she thought it would be nice if I came back up here because then she could help look after me. So that’s how I ended up here. I never thought I would. I had never thought
of coming back to Farmville, but I am glad I did now, and I miss my friends and all down there, but I think I, I think I can adjust most anywhere if I need to.

Have you noticed any changes about the community since you returned from when you were growing up here?

Well, from, compared to when I was growing up here, yes. I noticed that you have black clerks in all the stores. We didn't have them then. You might have had a black person that was cleaning up the store, but not a person that was waiting on people. That's one of the big things. Well, of course over the years that I have visited here, I have seen these changes take place. So I wasn't surprised when we had them down back then in our locality too. And, I think in general the attitude between the two races is better, much, much better than it was when I was growing up. However, like I said, you just accepted the fact that there wasn't going to be any problem. Then all of a sudden it was there, and we knew it was. Does that answer?

Do you believe racism is still a big problem in Prince Edward? Or...

I haven't been here long enough to know for one thing. But I do think this. I think basically, an underlying problem will be there for a long time. Not just here, but in our whole country. I think it's just something we always need to work on.

Well, that's all. Unless you have anything to add.

Well I am sorry I wasn't here during the time you were interested in, but I hope I did enlighten you about how it was when I was growing up.

\[Signature\]  
May 4, 2000

\[Signature\]  
May 4, 2000