

ORAL HISTORY RELEASE FORM

DATE: 4-3-00

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Signature of Interviewee: Odessa M. Branch

Name: Odessa M. Branch

Address:

Name of Interviewer: Stephanie Stevens / Jacyntha Charlton

Special Restrictions: None

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

INTERVIEWEE: Odessa Branch

ADDRESS:

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 4-3-2000

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Home of Ms. Branch

INTERVIEWER/S: Stephanie Stevens

TOPICS COVERED: Friends Organization, School Closings

NUMBER OF TAPES: 1

Interview with Ms. Odessa Branch
Stephanie Stevens
Jacyntha Charlton
Jennifer Black (Transcription)
Conducted Spring 2000

Stephanie Stevens: How long have you lived in Farmville?

Odessa Branch: Since August of 1949.

SS: Were you in Farmville when the students had the walkout?

OB: Yes.

SS: Would you like to talk to us a little bit about how you were involved in it or how you felt when they were doing it or what you knew about it?

OB: Well, when the schools were closed, I had three children eligible for school, one with first grade, one went seventh, and the one in the eighth grade. And of course, I went to my superintendent of school and got permission to move my family to the adjoining county, which is Buckingham, so that they could go to school. We felt if we could make some type of arrangements for our children, there would be space for those who could not make any arrangements. So, it was hard but we managed, having two homes, my husband was here and I was in the adjoining county.

SS: How were you affected by the events in Prince Edward, by either the walkout or the school closing?

OB: Well, it meant expense, extra expense for us having to operate two homes at the same time and having to get a second car so that my husband could come to visit us. Also, um, well, I didn't have the problem or problems that many of those had because I had worked in the county since 1948 and I knew a lot of the teachers and school personnel having been a native for about nineteen years.

SS: How did you participate or what role did you play in the walkout and closing?

OB: We came home every weekend and my children participated in the boycott.

SS: The walkout?

OB: Uh huh (yes)

SS: Can you elaborate on that?

OB: Well, uh, I have a clipping concerning the walk out or boycott, the boycott really was Reverend Lee's, Reverend Sammy Lee's. My children was not in this group

because it was on a Sunday and we were in church but they did march on the Saturday's. And, uh, and, uh, we kept some of the students who came in with some Friend's Society at our house on weekends, we had kept students. Of course, I had to go back on Monday mornings because the students usually left on Monday. They came for the weekend. And of course we did that free of charge to help the situation. Our church, which is Beulah AME church, was very instrumental in helping out in the situation. We had a Reverend A.I. Dunlap, pastor at that time when the schools were closed and he assisted Reverend Griffin in organizing the PECCA, I believe it's PECCA, the Prince Edward County Christian Association. I think that's it. And also my church, which is Beulah AME Church, through the bishop of the AME church sent part of the seniors to Kitchel College to graduate. And I can't remember whether it was twenty-six or I don't remember the number. But those seniors who could not have, could not have graduated were sent to Kitchel College.

SS: How was the treatment... you were a nurse during this time?

OB: A public nurse.

SS: How was the treatment of black nurses or black professionals before or after the strike or around that time?

OB: Well, there wasn't any difference for us because I was in the adjoining county. We know it was a lot of attention over here but I wasn't, it didn't bother me because I wasn't involved on a daily basis.

SS: So the people that you housed from the Friend's Organization, were these the actual workers in the organization or were they students?

OB: These were students coming to help out in the situation.

SS: So, they didn't go to Prince Edward Schools?

OB: No, no, they, this was before, after the schools closed and before the free schools came.

SS: What exactly did they do?

OB: Well, I guess they were helping with the instruction and I guess cuz they stayed here and they went over to first Baptist church. This is where a lot of the meetings were.

SS: So, they were like tutors or something?

OB: Uh huh (yes)

SS: ... unless there is something else that you would like to add...

OB: Oh, I, a lot of the different organizations in the, in various places did things for Prince Edward County and I have a clipping here where, uh. Oh this is a clipping, also, that shows you about what they call crash program. The teachers, a lot of teachers through the county during the summer months when they were no longer teaching and participated in the crash program and this is a write up about the crash program. Those are pictures. And this is a day of recreation. This was the Lynchburg, including association sponsored a trip for some children from Prince Edward County. There was a total of thirty-five in all.

SS: So, these are just a whole lot of programs...

OB: Yes, this was, you know, they were trying to do something for the children who were out of school and, of course, our Methodist Beulah AME church's pastor was the guide for those students. Also, I have a letter here from the superintendent who was Dr. Neal Sullivan, inviting the parents to come and meet Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy on May the eleventh, 1964. Now, I have a picture. I had one by himself but this is the picture showing Robert Kennedy plus the, uh, tents on the ground.

SS: And where was this photographed at?

OB: This is up at the Prince Edward County High School. They call it the Free School. And I have one of him by himself but apparently I have mislaid it somewhere. This is the invitation from the superintendent to the parents.

SS: So, this is just an opportunity because they were in the Free Schools?

OB: Yes, they had many opportunities in the free schools. They went to sit in, in the Senate in Washington. Uh, they went to New York to ball games. They went to plays. They went to the World's Fair. There are some pictures there with the World's Fair. That, oh wait a minute, oh yeah, it's on there with the World's Fair, not on that side, it's on, wait a minute, yeah, this isn't the World's Fair. I have it but its not here. I thought I had taken it out. But, uh, this looks like the World's Fair up there, though, it looks like it up there. I'm not sure. I couldn't say. But, I do have some pictures. And they just; they were housed by people that the superintendent knew. They were treated royally, very good experience and on top of that as an outgrowth of the Free Schools. My oldest son was salutatorian. They sent my son and the next highest rated student, male to Franklin and Marshall, the free college in Richmond program and lets see, I guess that's all I can't think of anything else unless you have some more questions.

SS: Um, I see there were some white people in this in this photo so it was kind of an integrated effort?

OB: Well they had let me see it again. They had now Dr. Gordon Moss's son. Yeah, there were students, these were people who were participating in the program. I'm almost

sure but one thing there were some white students who didn't qualify or didn't have funds for the private school so they were out of school so probably these were the ones here.

SS: Oh, so it was for all the students?

OB: Um hmmm. (yes) They didn't exclude anyone.

SS: Do you have any idea or can you tell us something about how the morale was around Prince Edward around this time? Was it kind of eased a little by all the activities that were going on?

OB: Lets say there were inquiring minds. Very much so inquiring minds to find out what was going on... and also on one of these clippings, oh, where is it? Okay, this says... this is right interesting. Now, this is probably, uh, this was the next year after the Free Schools left and it says, oh where is it? Okay, I can't even see for looking, but it seems to be telling me about the number. Ok, lets see can you cut it off while I look? Ok, it says, uh, the first and second graders have fairly normal school experiences while the third graders were the most attended the free school association classes. Those in the fourth through the seventh grades were without formal education for four years while those in the eighth through the twelfth grades had their schooling interrupted. The public schools were closed five years in the face of integration. And, this is September of '60 and it says "Schools Progress and Problems." And the superintendent says, "in the school system we had quite a challenge to take the children where you found them and take them as far as you can." So, there is plenty of devastating situations for those students who were out of school and uprooted and what not.

SS: We heard about students that did go away and when they... high school seniors and juniors that were able to go away and some of them ended up coming back home because they were homesick and it was too much for them. It was such a change.

OB: Yes, um, some of us were fortunate to be able to take our children and keep them together. Now, for the boycotting they had, uh, students from Prince Edward and Cumberland County participating because for the town of Farmville... I cant recall the number of persons from Farmville, most of them were from out in the county who came.

SS: When you say boycott, this is not the school walk out this is...

OB: No, this is for the merchants, to put pressure on the merchants.

SS: I don't think we covered that.

OB: You haven't heard about that?

SS: No, can you elaborate because we don't know anything about that?

OB: Well, it started I can't tell you who can probably tell you exactly when it started. I don't have any notes on those starting dates and my children could probably tell you but I would think it probably started in, I guess, in probably '62 or something like that. I'm guessing. And Reverend Griffin was a very brave man he walked the streets and held his head up. He wasn't afraid of anything.

SS: So you had an older son and 2 other children and they all went through the Free Schools, they came from...

OB: The adjoining county, for the last year of Free School.

SS: And they all graduated from here you said your son graduated from the free school and then your other two...?

OB: My second one finished the next year and the youngest one finished I guess it was three years later, I guess, by skipping grades but uh they skipped him from the fifth to the eighth grade but he still finished as valedictorian. So, in that respect they made it.

SS: Do they ever come back to visit? Are they ever...?

OB: They aren't that far away. They are in Northern Virginia and Chesterfield.

SS: So, they don't have any ill feelings towards the whole thing?

OB: No, no they have, we knew it was wrong. But, you just put it aside and go on that's the only thing to do. We have to remember that Jesus Christ was mistreated too but he still went on and so this is what we have to do. So I'm blessed because I do have children and uh they did make it.

Jacynta Charlton: But were you born in Buckingham?

OB: Yes.

JC: And that's where you stayed?

OB: Oh, no. I left after I was seventeen.

JC: Was that in '48? Sorry, I got confused.

OB: No. I left there when I went away to school in ... I left there and came to Farmville then I went to school in 1940 but I stayed in Farmville about fifteen months waiting until I was old enough to go to nursing school.

JC: And then you all came back here when the school strike happened or...

OB: No. We lived in Richmond I got married in December of '44 and we stayed in Richmond until November of '48. And that's when we came to Buckingham, stayed out there about six months and then got this house in Prince Edward.

JC: And you kept both residences?

OB: Well, no, that was when the schools closed that we went back and...

SS: Oh, I was confused too. So you had your house here and when the schools closed you went back to Buckingham?

OB: To rent another house.

JC: But your husband stayed here?

OB: Yes, he used to drive back and forth but he stayed here.

SS: What was his employment, if you don't mind me asking?

OB: He was working as an electrician then but he's actually a tailor by trade.

SS: Did he ever, was he ever effected by the, with the racial tension was his business ever effected like...?

OB: Not his business. No.

JC: Because we've been hearing different things in our classroom where the black professionals were treated differently and then with the school closing people were pinpointed and pulled out and made examples of by losing their jobs and...

OB: Well, uh, all I know is that after the walkout in '51, my mother-in-law was working at the college and they told her she wasn't any longer needed. But, they didn't give her a reason... but, uh, oh the counties. Now, some of the counties were displeased with Prince Edward for closing schools so they were very strict about the children coming from Prince Edward to their counties and they saw that they didn't come. Because some of them were coming from Cumberland and they went over and caught the bus over there and they stopped every bit of that.

JC: So, they didn't allow them to the their schools?

OB: No, you are supposed to have one parent as a resident. That is the Virginia law, and see they were going across the bridge and catching the bus, and they stopped that so you had to have a parent or guardian. In other words if you were in another county your grandmother or grandfather could be made the legal guardians and you could stay there and go to school. Now that's the law.

SS: Is that what a lot of people chose to do if they had no other choice?

OB: Uh, well if they had anybody to stay with you know or some of them went away and some didn't go to school at all. See they sent a number of students away, the Friend's Society. And I think other organizations too. And these teachers who came back and taught, I was talking to somebody today now I guess they are all deceased, mostly I guess, except Mrs. Fischer.

SS and JC: She spoke in our class.

OB: She was one of those who came back and taught during the summer with the crash program.

SS: Do you want to read some of these letters?

This one is a memorandum. It says, "To the parents of Free School children. From: Neal D. Sullivan, Superintendent. Subject: Come and meet Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. Date: May 7, 1964. You are all invited to come to a special reception for the Attorney General of the United States to be held at 11:40 am on Monday morning May 11, 1964 directly in front of the Moton School. Refreshments will be served and Robert Kennedy will speak to you. Please do not ask to attend the special assembly programs to be held in each school. These programs are for the children. Your opportunity will come at 11:40 am. Please tell all of your neighbors and all of your friends to come to the Moton School at that hour on the eleventh of May to meet the Attorney General of the United States. In case it rains, the program will be held for you in the Moton gymnasium at the same hour."

OB: I have the graduation exercises for the free schools and there is an article about the budget, if you want to look at that... I have the pages clipped.... Uh, she's got a lot of information, her students did off of the Internet for black history month.

JC: So, your sister in law was in the 1951 class that walked out?

OB: Um hmmm (yes) the senior class.

JC: Your husband's sister?

OB: Yes.

JC: In the senior class.

SS: And she's a teacher now?

OB: Yes, she's in Cincinnati. See this, this is the second Supreme Court ruling in May of 55 and they have another Supreme Court ruling of Davis against the board of, the school board and that was September of 64.

JC: So, there were cases repeatedly.

OB: Um Hmm (yes)

JC: So, it is not unusual that this one came out. Is this the Farmville Herald?

OB: Yeah. Oh, probably the Norfolk General and Guide.

JC: Actually, the Richmond African American.

OB: Oh, ok, cause my son sold the General and Guide so I wasn't sure.

JC: And its August 4th, 1962 where they're just discovering this policy that would enable this child to go to, or these children to go to a white school. And this article is encouraging all the parents in the area to send their children to white schools to keep the progress of desegregation.

OB: Yeah, so the other places were in compliance but see Prince Edward had no schools... cause they closed the schools here and one other place. I can't remember the other place now where the schools closed rather than integrate.

JC: So, but this article is from Richmond.

OB: Um hmmm (yes)

JC: And they're so apparently everyone didn't, I don't know, I guess when I read about it in history class I thought as soon as the ruling was made for the Brown vs. Topeka Board that everybody was like, "Hey, open the doors".

OB: No, no it didn't.

JC: And I guess even Richmond is a little late on the uptake because its '62.

OB: Yeah, because you have to have someone to enforce. It wasn't enforced until later and of course Prince Edward had no school so...

SS: This is about the budget for the Free School?

JC: Is there anyway we can Xerox any of this material?

OB: Uh, you may have that because I have some more and you can have that too.

JC: This?

OB: Oh no, no, I'll be glad to make you a copy, but I haven't gone out today and that's why, uh, I just haven't gone out today. I had planned to make you a copy of that... I can make you a copy about the crash program.

JC: And the article encouraging parents to send their children to white schools?

OB: Um hmm (yes)

JC: And the home page is what, just www.moton.org?

OB: This isn't what my sister-in-law sent me. She sent it to me and I looked for it to give you all and I can't find it. But, I don't think you'll have any trouble. Oh, here it is you have that don't you? I guess you have the same thing.

JC: Yes ma'am. Oh, we can put a bomb report together.

OB: I want you all to put a good report together, doing my best to help you.

JC: Would you like us to come back and show you our progress before we turn it in so you can see it?

OB: Yes that would be interesting.

SS: Do you know of anybody we've talked to about this? Did you go to the programs at Hamden Sydney when they were there?

OB: Woo, I'm not a night person. I'm home at night. I'm very private. When I venture out that door, I'm going somewhere but since I live by myself, you have to be careful and being an old lady too.

SS: You're very brave living on a college campus.

OB: I know it, I know, and I don't mean to be anti-social, but I don't know who I'm getting friendly with so I just go on my merry way. Okay, is there anything else that I have that you want a copy of?

SS: This is unbelievable.

JC: People show a few things here and there and recollect to the best of their ability, but very few people came in with actual documentation.

Jacqueline L. Charlton 5-4-2000
Junif M Black 5-4-2000
Stephanie A. Sturms 5-4-2000