

ORAL HISTORY RELEASE FORM

DATE: March 23, 2000

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Signature of Interviewee:

Carolyn Wells

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Lance Williams, Tricia Ramsey

Special Restrictions:

None

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

INTERVIEWEE: Dr. Carolyn Wells

ADDRESS: 204 Fayette St
Farmville, VA 23901

DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 23, 2000

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Dr. Well's office, Stevens 104

INTERVIEWERS: Lance Williams, Tricia Ramsey

TOPICS COVERED: Longwood's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in Prince Edward County

NUMBER OF TAPES: 1

Interviewers: Lance Williams

Interviewee: Dr. Carolyn Wells, Division Chair for Science Department Longwood College

Date: March 23, 2000, 8:00 pm

- Dr. Wells, when and where were you born?

-- Atlanta, GA. July 23, 1933

- What led you to apply for a position at Longwood College?

-- I was working at Oakridge National Lab at the time and one of the professors who taught here (Longwood) came there in the summer to do some research. And my post-op there was running out and I didn't have a job, so he said we (Longwood) need somebody, so I came.

- And how long have you been teaching?

-- I have been at Longwood 40 years. I came in 1960.

- Can you tell us about the interview process that experienced for the job?

-- Well, in those days there was no such thing. Somebody liked you. They said come and teach, and you came. There was no application process back then, it was that simple.

- We ask because we had heard from Mrs. Bagby that you thought you were hired because you were single and didn't have children.

-- I don't know where she got that.

- That is the gist that we got.

- Were most of the teachers female back in those days, or mostly male?

-- It was about half and half.

- OK, let's get into the meat of the subject now.

- So how long had you been teaching when the schools closed?

--The schools had already been closed when I began teaching. They closed the year before I came.

- Can you tell us about the mood on campus when you came in regards to the closing?

-- It is hard to transport you back to that time. What you have got to understand is that as an outsider, I was pretty much unaware of what was going on. It wasn't talked about much. It was really a town issue that didn't affect the college to any great extent. So that I don't think that I was aware that the schools were closed until they opened back up again.

- Living in the county, you didn't even know that the schools were closed?

-- It just was not a point of discussion among the faculty of Longwood.

- So Longwood was just closed off from everything, kind of like it is today?

-- Well, I wouldn't say that it was closed off from everything. I mean there were some Longwood faculty members who had children in the public schools who were very involved in the issue, but for those of us who had no contact with the public schools whatsoever. It is just like, I am sure that there are issues in town right now that you are unaware of. Unless you are personally involved in an issue, most of the time you aren't even aware that it is going on.

- Can you tell us about the geography of Longwood, in regards to the campus and how, because we had been told that the city was kind of built into the campus, do you understand what I am saying.

-- Keep going...

- Well, some of the street of the town came right into campus.

-- Well, the campus wasn't as big.

- But did the geography not affect (cut off)

-- Well this building (Stevens) was here. Jarman was here, the Cunningham's were here. Cox and Wheeler were brand new. The back part of Stevens was not here. Stubbs did not exist. The Student Union didn't exist. Iler didn't exist. Winn and Lancer and Wygal were not here. Bedford was not here. None of that was here. So in that context, yes that was town.

- Did any of the town's people ever come onto the campus?

-- Oh sure, just like they do now.

- With the expanding of the campus, were there any fights about that. You know, were the people of the town or the black residents saying, "You are trying to take away my land."

-- I think that there has been a little bit of friction about the college wanting to purchase land that belonged to some of the black people. Just like any other home owner, if you don't want to sell your property...and I don't think that anybody ever forced anyone to sell their property...for example, you would say we would like to buy your property. They say yes, no or whatever. I'm not really sure whether the college has exercised what is called eminent domain, where you can displace people. I know certainly, in recent years that has not happened. I suspect there was more friction out there than ever touched me. Now the faculty members that were out there and were more concerned like we said, were the ones that had children in public school. And some of those came down on the side of establishing a private school, and some came down on the side of re-opening the public school. And so I think among the older, more established faculty there was a bit of friction over that issue, with people establishing camps and so forth. And when the public schools reopened, I know those faculty members that chose to send their children to the public schools had a rough time of it for a while. Because the private school was where most of the whites at that time had congregated around the school and sent their children there. All of this sounds really strange to us now because we don't have those kinds of deep seeded feelings, but it was quite different then.

-- Ummm, perhaps the thing about being single came about because as a single person, not having any children in the school I was not touched either way by the issue.

- Because I think that the reason we were told that was because we were speaking about how Farmville had trouble bringing people in from outside because of all the issues going on and they didn't want to bring in people with children to teach at Longwood even because the children would be affected.

-- There may have been some of that. When I was hired in 1960, which the whole thing was new back then. I think there were 4 or 5 of us hired back then, I'm not sure exactly how many.

- Where did you live?

-- Right across the street. There was some college housing right across the street from Jarman. Ummmm, I can't remember but three other people that came when I did, and they were all single people, so that could have been the policy in that year. Now, in subsequent years there were plenty of family people. But it did make recruiting faculty rather difficult, until the private school was established. At the time the schooling system was just in chaos, it was extremely difficult to attract anybody here.

- By the private school are you talking about the Academy...(Cut off)

-- Fuqua, what we now call Fuqua, but then it was called Prince Edward Academy.

- Did you have an opinion, I know said the faculty was kind of split. Were you indifferent towards that because it didn't affect you, or did you have an opinion.

-- What you've got to understand is that from my perspective, I didn't even know anything was going on. I was here to teach, I was very active in research, and I was learning how to teach. I had very little knowledge of any townspeople in those days. Because another thing that happened in those days, and still happens to a certain extent but not as bad was that if you moved into town from outside, you were an outsider. For a long time. And it is not that the town's people were unkind to you, it is just that they didn't have anything to do with you and you didn't have anything to do with them because there is no need to. No social functions at all.

- So out of this debate, do you think that that was the main reason for them building, was it called the Round school?

-- Winn?

-- It was called the Round school.

-Do you think that mainly that some faculty didn't want to put their kids in the Academy and they didn't want them going to public school at the same time, do you think that was the reason for the birth of that school.

-- No, I don't think that had anything to do with it.

- Really?

- Being a teacher preparation institution and in those days 90% of all the students who came here were preparing to teach, the mode of teacher preparation at that time was for colleges to have what is called a practice school. The Hiner building used to be the practice school. And colleges, this is very standard throughout the United States, colleges would establish as part of their campuses, a place where children could come and

the college students could learn how to teach by teaching in those practice school. And Winn was just an extension of that. Hiner, I'm not sure when Hiner closed down as a practice school. It became, it is a very antiquated building, and of course now it is renovated. And so the construction of Winn became a place where teachers could go and do their practice teaching. Now another thing that I think was a stimulus for Winn was that as the college population was growing in size....You had in 1969 and 70 the high rises were built, you had an enormous jump in the college population. The number of placements for 90% of that expanding student body that you could get out in the public schools in Richmond and Lynchburg and so forth became fewer and fewer, so you had to have an additional practice for students to observe and for students to get their preparation for student teaching. So that was the principle push I think for Winn. Ummm, I'm trying to remember when Winn was built, late 60's I think.

- Who was the president of the college when you first came?

-- When I first came, it was Dr. Lankford

- And the Dean was who?

-- A chap named Earl Boggs I believe

- So when did Dean Moss come in?

-- Dean Moss when I came was a history teacher. He became dean somewhere in the 60's. I can look that up for you, but I'm not sure, it was the early part of the 60's.

- Do you know anything about his involvement?

-- Oh yes, he was very pro-public education and he was a delightful gentleman. I really enjoyed Gordon a lot. Ummm, very outspoken, very against the school closing. There were 5 or 6 faculty actually that took very active parts in public schools and of course he had school age children.

- In the book we have read, we understand that publicly he really suffered for his views on this issue. Was the faculty ever aware of that?

-- I think they were. I think that people were pretty ugly to him, Gordon, and the others who were outspoken on it. I mean people really chose sides, who had public school age children. It was really a tremendous. I can't of anything comparable today, where you have an issue that so divides a population.

- Is abortion maybe to the extent?

-- Maybe, maybe, but the abortions issue only touches those of childbearing age. Most of these issues well only touch the lives of people who are personally involved in it, you know.

- Can you think of any instances where they were targeted for their views, the faculty and Dean Moss? By the paper maybe or editorials?

-- I would suspect there were editorials, now we're not talking about active violence or anything like that. They didn't do anything like that. Umm, certainly his position at the

college never suffered. He was well respected and even by those who disagreed with him philosophically. The faculty was always fairly civil about it.

- So you would say that Gordon Moss....Basically he was pro-public education?

-- Yes

- Would you feel that maybe that anybody against it (closing the schools), they didn't really turn it into a black versus white problem, they were more concerned with preserving public education rather than the racial issue.

-- Yeah, I think so. Dr. Lankford (LWC President) stepped down as president in 62-63 and took a job at UVA as a matter of fact...Who came after that? I can't remember this evening. But by and large the major concern that I was aware of, but remember again that I was a very junior faculty member, tangential to decision making and that sort of stuff at that time. The premier focus always seemed to me, the growth of the college, maintain the academic integrity of the college. This was a tremendous growth period time for the college. The first year I was here there were about 900 students and you can compare that to our 3,000 today. A lot of that growth occurred in the 60's. A lot of it. We've had ARC go up since then, but Stubbs and the high rises were both built in the late 60's and that just made the population explode.

- Do you think that the reason that Longwood as an institution didn't take a public stand one way or the other had to do with that they wanted to bring in more students and didn't want to offend anyone?

-- I'm not sure that it was they colleges position to take a stand on a political issue. Umm, that would be a no-win situation. Colleges by and large, as institutions don't engage in political side taking for the good of the college because you've got to remember that most of your funding comes from state sources. From legislature and tax money. The minute you take sides, you jeopardize the financial well being of the institution. So just as a matter of practice, colleges in general, as institutions and entities simple stay out of it.

- So you agree in Longwood not being involved. Like the students not....Ummm I know that was before you got here, but do you think the students could've done more to tutor the children that were out of school.

-- Do you have any clues as to how much was done? I don't.

- We have pretty much heard nothing. We've heard Longwood did pretty much nothing and Hampden-Sydney did less than nothing.

-- How do you do less than nothing?

- I don't know how you feel about this, but it seems to me that by being an all-girls school, you know Longwood was separated in one way by segregation and in another way they were segregated by being an all-girls school that they were set up in that mindset, you know in the segregationalist mind set.

-- It is very hard for people of your generation to even understand segregation, I'm sure. And I don't intend to sit her and defend it because I don't believe in it. but if you grow up in a segregated society as a young person and you learn that is the way society is structured. Ummm, it is very hard to get incensed about it because that is what you were taught from infancy on. And the young people attending Longwood at that time, 90% Virginian, almost 100% southern. They all had that background of believing, whether it was true or not, that separate, but equal was the way their world was structured. So that I suppose if there was not involvement, and I have not idea, absolutely no idea about student involvement. But if there was none, I think I can understand why. The ummm, the whole climate of society was quite different then. but I don't know how better to express it than that. it is just a different mindset. I mean you two are the products of whatever experience you've had in your growing up and you know how we talked in Man and the Environment (class) about how everybody is dependent on automobiles and automobiles are wonderful in our society and nobody goes around talking about the dangers of automobile exhaust. And yet we know it an extremely dangerous thing. We've grown up believing that the automobile is ummm, an absolute necessity and I think perhaps that is a good analogy. It was the same thing with the use of pesticides. Everybody thought it was OK, and until you have a few brave souls who come along and make a very compassionate case to change the way an entire society thinks everybody assumes that what is happening is the correct thing to happen. And it takes a lot of courage to stand up and change the direction of a society. A lot of courage. A lot of conviction. My hat is off to people who do that.

- Do you remember when the first black student came to Longwood?

--mmmhmmm.

- Was there a big hoopla about that?

-- Her name was Annette Fisher I think.

- What year was that in?

-- Maybe 70....71. Somewhere along in there. Delightful young lady. Did very well. There was nothing like Birmingham. Nothing like those issues. I think it was very hard on Annette. Every time you are in the absolute minority it is going to be hard and she was the only one of color here. But she had an extraordinary pleasing personality. Made friends very rapidly. Was accepted by the students here. Was a star on the basketball team. So she did not have the type of personality that would turn people off. And therefore she blended in as a human being.

- So you never heard any negative reactions before she came here?

-- I'm sure there were rumblings about it. I was glad to see her come.

- It seems kind of weird to me that finally they came down in 64 we're going to integrate and it took until 71 or 72 like you said for the first black student to come to Longwood. Do you find that odd.

-- I'm not sure that there is a connection between attending Longwood and integration of the public schools. I mean Annette wasn't a local person. She came from some big city like Richmond.

- I just find it strange that people have described the Farmville black community as a strong black community and very intelligent black community that some people didn't try to come here being a major college, well not a major college, but definitely(cut off)
-- To my knowledge now, but remember I wouldn't be in a position to know, we didn't have any Africans who were turned away because of their color, in the 60's and probably before. But you've also got to put yourself in the shoes of the African American during that time. It would take a very courageous African American to go to an all white school and be the first person to do so. It would take an enormous amount of courage. If there were an all black school out there would you want to be the only person there that was white. So that I think it is a change that has to come about gradually, but I wouldn't peg it, Lance, in any way to re-opening the schools. If you were going to try and study that phenomenon further, you would have to look at the pattern of black integration into traditionally white college across the nation. You've got to remember that there were many very fine all black institutions, Virginia State, Norfolk State, Morehouse, here and in Atlanta and on and on and on. Where most of the African Americans would feel more comfortable. And the idea, remember they grew up in their public school setting in a segregated mode also and go back to that notion of what you learned when you're growing up is what you regard as the reality of the world out. Now, I not saying that would be the case if something violent occurred, but if you know you had a roof over your head and plenty to eat and nice clothes to wear and a loving family and that sort of stuff, human beings tend to want to, not just human beings but animals in general, tend to want to flock together by whatever criteria becomes the selective factor and of course for some strange reason, skin color does, I've never really understood why. So you had a lack of black students even wanting to attend a black school, I think as the major pressure there. And gradually and gradually as you had more and more black students wanting to attend white schools the numbers gradually expand over time, but you still see a lot of natural segregation behavior, separation behavior. The fact that you have such a thing as a fraternity or sorority for black students that they organized says that they are a little bit uncomfortable being integrated into white fraternities and white fraternities and so forth, but some are not. I'm not sure that all of the complex human feelings that lead to segregation are over yet in our society by any means.

- What do you see in the classroom? Do you see any grouping there or sitting together?
-- Sometimes, in some classes. I tend to relatively color blind, so I have to stop and think if I had any black students. Did we have any in our class? This class I've got two and one sits over here and one sits over here. So that is not a group. And they probably don't know each other, but I think it is a highly individualized thing probably related to how they grew up and what public school experiences they had. Did they go to a school that was mostly black? And we still have some that are 80% black, 20% white, whatever. Or did they go to a school that was 50/50. And I think all of those things would account for their behavior to a certain extent. And the behaviors of white people too. Your experiences growing up are very powerful shapers of your perception of what is correct and incorrect.

- Did you grow up in Atlanta?
--mmmmhmmmmmm

-How was that? How do you think that shaped your opinions? Was there a large black population in Atlanta at the time?

-- Hmmmm, well I was raised by a black lady

- So it is all the same to you?

-- It is all the same to me. Yeah, my mother worked all the time, so my second mother was a wonderful, wonderful African American lady. And we used to sit on her front porch and watch the baseball games. Which probably is what makes me color blind today. Because we didn't have any segregationist feelings in my family at home.

- So basically the general feeling is on campus that unless you have a kid, it doesn't matter because it doesn't affect us.

-- It is beyond that. It just doesn't exist as a problem.

- Where you ever aware of any of the marches in town or anything like that, any of the civil rights marches.

-- See I think by the time I got here, those sort of really violent feeling were sort of over, that led to the closing of the schools and everyone has kind of sorted out what they were going to do. And the poor black people weren't getting any education, white people were out scattered at the churches and so forth

- So the by you go here it was kind of old news?

-- By the time I got here it was kind of old news and by the time that I woke up to what was happening it was over. But I am sure it would have been quite different if I would've had school-aged children.

- How do you think you would've reacted? I know it is kind of hard to put yourself in that place.

-- It is virtually impossible, Lance, I don't think I would've come here. With that timely situation going on. If I had children of school age I would want to go and take a job where they could go to school.

- You probably wouldn't have been hired even?

-- Maybe not, you know, I dunno.

- It would've changed your whole life.

-- Yeah.

-- I think it is neat that you all are looking back on all of this and trying to preserve it. You've got to remember that looking back over a period of 40 years the memory may be very faulty, but these are the memories that I have with me at any rate.

- One more question, do you feel that maybe still in town today there is some ambiguous feelings towards Longwood about not doing more in the black community. I've heard some students say that.

-- I think that there are members of the black community who carry a pretty big chip on their shoulders about the whole thing. I think that there are members of the white community who do the same and that is going to continue until you have a generation

change. Until every person who carries in their memories the details of the late 50's and early 60's is dead. It is really that simple. Ummm, even though there is not anybody alive now who fought in the Civil War for example, ummm you still have pockets of people who want to re-fight the Civil War. That has been handed down generationally, but it certainly isn't as severe as it was in 1870 and 1880. And I personally don't think that you are going to smooth out issues of race until every last person that experienced segregation is gone, basically.

- Moving back to Dr. Moss, did any of the stuff that he ever did, we know he was very outspoken in his belief...Did anything he ever did make you uncomfortable. Did you ever think, God what is he doing?

-- No, no he was a very good friend. I have always believed that people should have the right to speak their minds. Ummm, regardless of whether I believed in them or not or didn't care. And I had friends on both sides of that issue and probably because I didn't take sides I remained friends with them. But no, it didn't make me uncomfortable. I felt like he was doing what he felt like he had to do and I admire people who do that. At least he was making a stand on something. There is an old saying that everyone has the right to make a fool of themselves if they want to. Now I am not saying that Gordon did. And I've got a right to think that they are fools. But ummm, all joking aside I think that anybody who makes a rational argument for a particular issue, particularly an issue where there is not clear cut version of right and wrong, such as the abortion issue has a perfect right to their opinion. That is what democracy is all about. That is what free speech is all about. And you should never, never turn against anybody for stating their true beliefs, even if you are just on the opposite side. Cuz then you don't believe in democracy.

- OK, did you have anything else that you wanted to add?

-- No, I appreciate you all coming.

- Well, thank you for the interview, it was really good.

-- I hope it didn't shock you too much, but that was the way it was.

End of interview.

Tricia Ramsey
Lance Williams