

Oral History Internship

Lucy Simms

Interview with Mrs. Ellen Walker. 231 East Johnson Street, Harrisonburg, Va, 22801.

November 2, 2000

Interviewer and Transcriber, Wondwossen Getachew.

Tape 1/Side A

WG: Can you tell me your name and where you're from?

EW: My name is Ellen Walker and I'm originally from Charlottesville Virginia but right now, I'm living on 231 East Johnson Street in Harrisonburg Va.

WG: When were you born in Charlottesville?

EW: I was born December 9, 1951 at University of Virginia hospital. My parents are originally from Charlottesville area.

WG: Where did you go to school, Charlottesville?

EW: Charlottesville, at Jefferson elementary school, which was segregated at the time. And then in my 8th grade I went to Buelferd middle school because that was the time of desegregation at that time. And so...classes were at, I was still taking classes at Jefferson but we were at Lane and Lane high school is where I graduated in 1970.

WG: Was the desegregated school farm from your house?

EW: No. It was a walking distance and at that time there were no buses to take us to school, we walked. And those days when you got snow days and you stay at home, you put on your boots and went to school. For these kids today, they have it really made. [Laugh] It was different with my brother because my oldest brother went to a segregated high school also and he graduated before they desegregated schools. But he was out a lot because the school he went to was a combination between Charlottesville and Almermarle County. Almermarle County extends up until the Nelson County line,

which is a great distance. So those kids who lived in the mountainous areas and that there was anyway that you could get to school so my brother seemed to be out more than we were because of the snow and that whether because the busses could not get to Burleigh. And the sad part about that is the kids who came from the Albmarle county school passed the white high school to get to Charlottesville. And the elementary school for the county was, there was one in Esmont but the other one, the main was also in Charlottesville so those kids had to come all the way to Charlottesville, which was in some cases to half an hour to forty-five minutes ride passed the white elementary school and white high school to come to a segregated schools in Charlottesville?

WG: When you went to the diss..diss[Stutter]

EW: desegregated schools?

WG: Exactly, were there a lot of differences as far as...

EW: Oh yes, the books were different, aaa. The thing about segregated schools were that we had the schools, and I always contend that the 1954 desegregation, aaa, by the supreme court was not a necessary thing to put us together, but to make sure that the segregated black schools had the same amount of funding as the white schools. And so, there was a big difference because in segregation, the teacher would take out of their pockets, they [slur] eager to buy things for kids who did not have something or to fix a piece of equipment. I remember one teacher who was our organist and pianist for Mount Zion saying that her experience with desegregation when she went from segregated to desegregated schools, she was on her out of the building with a piece of equipment that needed to be fixed and the secretary asked her, 'where are you going with this? And she

says, well, I'm going to take to have it fixed, and she said-oh we have maintenance people here at school who fix that and we did not have that at segregated schools.

WG: During the rise of white supremacy in the 1930's, were you or your families effected directly?

EL: I think everybody was effected by it. You have to remember that in the State of Virginia that schools were closed at the 1954 decision, the board of education versus Kansas because they did not want to desegregate schools. Virginia had a strong history resistance to integration, under the Bird, I think, it was Governor Bird at that time. One of the schools that sprung up with Rockhill academy, which was an old white school, it's w no long in existence, I don't think but those were the kinds of things that grew up out of the segregated south and that adimecy of whites to not to go to school with blacks or not eat with blacks, or whatever that was. But the funny part of it is, is just like in slavery they allow these people to come into their homes and fix their meals and take care of their children. I mean if I hated somebody so much, I don't think I let them cook for me because they can poison me and kill me and that happened a lot in slavery and also I would not want them around my children, I mean you gonna hate someone and them allow them around your child, I don't think so. That's just the ludicrousness of the segregated south or the segregated north, wherever segregation was.

WG: Do you remember, during the segregation was there a vision that this was going to stop soon or did it seem permanent during that time?

EL: Wait, I was born in 1951 so I didn't really realize what segregation was until we went to desegregation. Because I've always been in segregated areas, you know the black area of the town or when we went to the store in our neighborhood, we did not

necessarily go away from our community to get our shoes done or our hair done or whatever we had, all of these people were in our neighborhood. And so, when Dr. King and SCLC and all of that group came along, it was during a time where desegregation was very prominent to me. Because I could see, you know, I could see this glaring difference, aaa, and you know the people being hose down was all over the TV, I mean, you know, and even though those kinds of things happen in Charlottesville itself, we still had a segregated university of Virginia and at that time, they did not allow women but in their graduate programs, and that was the only time that they allowed blacks was in their graduate programs. They were few in far between. I think my principle at Jefferson elementary, Booker T. Reese graduated with his masters from UVA during the fifties or that time. So, we, it was an area, if you went to the hospital it was segregated. My mother tells a story me being born in the basement where the morgue is now at the university Virginia hospital and that was just how it was. You know you did not know any difference and so when people started gearing up about this desegregation in Charlottesville, I don't know if I was much aware as much as my parents were aware of it.

WG: Did your parents think it was permanent or do you remember them talking about change?

EL: I don't remember them talking about change so much because my parents were kind of quiet people. They did not seem to be rebel rousers kind of thing you know but off course their daughter came along and changed both of them [laugh]. I don't know whether they thought that it would be permanent, but there was always that thing of change and whether it's subtle or blatant, there is always something, there is this hope

that you know. I'm not so sure that the African-American kids who went to Burleigh who was then congregated into Laine high school because they closed Burleigh. Because they did not need it anymore. I don't know whether, they were served and I'm so sure that I would have done better at a segregated high school. And I always contend and I will always contend that the Supreme Court that we were fighting for was money not to sit next to that white child, to me, it was a money thing. They were not anywhere near paying the teachers in the segregated south what they were paying the whites, and off course women made less than men did and still do in the year 2000. I think that there was a disservice there because it was not planned out well. And saying this, the first few weeks were very turbulent when they closed Burleigh and the kids complained, very turbulent. I had already been in the systems years or so, so it was not as blaten for me as it was for them, they lost their identity, they lost the ability to elect their classroom president, their home coming queen, the football players off course as in today were used well, they were on the football field. But when it came to politics and cheerleading and stuff like that, the kids from Burleigh were really pushed aside and they were not integrated into the system, in fact there was no place for them at all. They were just to come there and get their education and leave. There was no, I did not see any structure for them and it was a very turbulent time. They walked out of school and there were fights, I don't think the schools never closed because of it but it was a very turbulent times in Charlottesville in this transition.

WG: When did you leave Charlottesville?

EL: Well, I left out four years ago so it was nine...nineteen-ninety-six.

WG: So you were in Charlottesville all that time?

EL: Oh yeah I've always lived in Charlottesville all my life.

WG: Until you came to Harrisonburg?

EL: Until I came to Harrisonburg, well, I lived in Richmond a year and, after that year, I was back home, back in Charlottesville and I've lived there all my life except for coming here.

WG: So coming back to Harrisonburg, for years ago, how did you end up purchasing this house?

EL: I didn't even realize that this house existed. I have a friend, Naomi Curie how's father, Mister Billy Curie, worked for the school system for years and years and years. And one day, she and I were talking about a home for grandmothers, where they can live together, work together, and uuu, have somewhere to stay and then we will be counselors, house mothers or something like that. And her idea was to turn this home into that. Well she had approached Hope Community Builders about it and so, she and Asarat, who is the executive director of Hope Community Builders, and my self journeyed to Maryland to see Saint Ann's which is a catholic organization that she was, I guess planning her project after. So we went to see what they did, you know, how they dealt with mothers and their babies and how they lived and especially the part, because they also have a part for before pregnancy. But we were interested in the program that dealt with women who were working who are single mothers, so they can go back and get their education, they're working and even their parenting skills, so we went up and we so the program and we came back. And I still did not know that this house existed and she kept saying, it's the big yellow house on the right hand side of Johnson Street, I had no idea, I did not see the house. So finally she said it's a house sitting almost in the

middle of the street, and so I did, and this house was just covered in growth. It had not been cared for about ten to fifteen years. And so, what we were asking the hope community builders to do was renovate it because the city owned it so we were asking them to renovate it and so we can do this project. So, hope community builders and the City, well the City had a mixed idea because they would really would not have a lot of control over the people they had and they did not think that it was a good idea. And I don't think that some of the people in the community thought it was a good idea because they saw it as young women bringing in their boyfriends and stuff. And you see we already had discussed this, not the residence but with the community builders and that was not going to be an issue. But the issue was that the city of Harrisonburg and the Housing authority was more into single family dwellings instead of multiple dwellings. They did not want anymore apartments; they did not want anymore people living in a house that were not related, because they were revitalizing this community. This community is rich in history but after, just like in most black cities in the south and probably in the north, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies was what they did was, they went through and tore down a lot of the black businesses and did a whole lot of things like that, they did it in Charlottesville, had a whole lot of empty lot. Eventually in the eighties and nineties, especially in the nineties, they became drug havens. So, they were looking for opportunities to do something else to do with the lands and empty lots and things around here. So one day Asarat happen to be at Felecia and or in fact I approached him..

WG: Did you say Asarat?

EL: Yes Asarat Goubrie, and I said, ya, well you know because I was familiar with Habitat for Humanity and habitat for humanity builds home for low middle-income people who are families, they don't build for single people unless there is a disability or something like that. So I happen to throw out to him, why don't ya build for single people like me, I mean you know I fit that category. So he said, we'll think about it. Soon after that, he called me and he said I want you to see what we build because I've been thinking about you. So he showed me a property that was not occupied yet and I liked it, it was next door to Namoi's parents. I thought that the house did not feel comfortable to me, so Asarat said, let me show you something else. So we walked down the street and walked to this house. So finally I realized there is a house behind all of these weeds and all of this stuff. We could not get into the front because of the weeds and stuff; we could not walk on the porch. So we climbed into the back and when I mean climb, I mean climb. There was a back porch on the house but it was dilapidated stage, there were old car seats out there, the door had fallen in, it was open, so we literally climbed into the house and I loved it.

WG: When you walked in...

EW: When I walked into it, it stings, it was dirty, the windows were broken, the doors were rotten down, there were weed everywhere and I loved it. I loved this house. It was just something about this house I just loved.

WG: Did you know at that point whose house this was?

EL: No. When we walked in, he said this is Lucy Simms' house. And I said, this is the house Naomi has been telling me about and I have not yet to see, and he said yeah. So, he gives me a history of who she was and so he goes on and tells me that this

community wants this house saved but the people already have their property, they already, the people who wanted saved, lived and they were married, they had their own property or they live out of town or out of state or whatever. So that's why the city was reluctant to tear it down, because it had been condemned to be torn down, not condemned structurally but condemned because it has become a haven to drug users and transients. People would put plastic on the windows and living in here without heat and water and anything else. So the city was going to tear it down, well, there was pressure on the city not to tear it down but at that point there was no takers for the house either because of couple of problems. One was the house was built in eighteen hundreds and they did not know what the structure was going to be like, they figure that once they started digging the structure was not going to be stable, that the house was rotten and so forth and so on. And second thing was although they had this outcry to save the house, there was nobody coming forward to buy it. So I walked upstairs and I felt like I've been in this house all my life. I love old house to begin with but there was a comfort level in this house and when I came downstairs, I told Asarat, I want this house. So, he said, you sure. He started naming all of this stuff and I said, I know but this house can be renovated. So he says alright and we put in a bid to the city for fifteen thousand dollars for the house and the land because the city owned it so the city had a say, we won't take the bid or because there is so much work to be done and so forth and so on. But the city sold to me for ten thousand dollars, and then they keep in the five thousand dollars for..

WG: The city?

EW: The housing authority keeps, I don't know how that works but somehow or the other they put five thousand dollars on the book and that part was to tear it out and to

get someone to come in and look at the structure and stuff. Because even after we tore all of it out, and I mean all the walls and everything else, if the architect had come here, the architect for this project was Jim Her, and if he ain't come here and said the structure is not good then we would of torn the house down. This house has been germinated to stay where it is because now, you have to build so many feet away from the street. And as you noticed as you walked in here, this house is almost sitting in the street. I mean, I guess that's why Naomi could not phantom why I did not see this house sitting here. So we came, the habitat for humanity, the JMU chapter, volunteers, I was here, I mean in the cold. I'm talking about twenty degrees pulling down the wall so that the architect would come in and say, no we can not save this house or we can not yet save this house.

WG: When did you start working on the house?

EL: We started working on the house in the winter and in fact when we closed on the house on January, we had been planning and stuff for fourteen months, so it took us over a year to do all of this.

WG: So when did you start, nineteen-ninety four?

EL: No, nineteen ninety seven but the thing that happen was, we started in the fall and we worked, the kids came during the fall and things and we tore it down. And then that was Christmas break so we did not work on it. And we could not do anything physical to the house until we tore all the floors so we were running into things like [coughed] the joists for the wall, we would pull on them to bring them down and it would not move. And we said what's going on you know, so the more we pulled the more we realized that we were pulling wires, chicken wires and we pulled it and it did not come down like the wood structure did. You pulled it and we would have to keep pulling and

all of a sudden you figured out that you had a hand full of chicken wire that was nailed to the joists. Now we are in the dining room now, this is the original part of the house, the dining room and the kitchen and the stair way are the original part of the house.

WG: So where we are at right now by the entrance...

EL: The entrance and the stairway are the original part of the house.

WG: And the kitchen right there?

EL: And the kitchen is the original part of the house.

WG: What about that room in there? (Pointing to the room next to the stair way)

EL: That room, the living room we're talking about was added on some time later. Because when we tore apart that room in there, we realized that the wall that it was built on to was an outside wall so we have no idea when that part was put on, except that it had to be in the late eighteen hundreds or nineteen hundreds because it has always been remembered as being there. And one other thing that you have to realize that is, in this community people made a way for people who came to visit or to work here at the school or where ever to live in this community. So apparently because that room has another room upstairs apparently this was someone's living room and they had a bedroom upstairs and they came out of into the hall. Because when we originally did the house, the opening to the living room had a door on it and I just decided not to paint the door.

WG: Can you go upstairs from...

EL: You can go upstairs from that, you have to come back into the foyer and go up the stairs and the room above it is the bedroom. And the other reason we think that is because where my entertainment cabinet sits, when we pulled the wall, there was a door there that had been covered up by the aluminum siding that is on the house now. So

apparently that was put there, you know it was their entrance because the door here that we're looking at was to the dining room, to the outside, there was a door also, so..

WG: So it's two doors here?

EW: Two doors two front doors there and a porch was added on to that part.

WG: Is the porch new?

EW: The porch floor is new but everything else was original. The porch floor was new.

WG: So the porch was here when the house was built?

EW: Oh yeah, oh yes, the porch is here, the original plaques you see in the ceiling of the porch are original. This porch has always been here. So we had to tear up the floor because it was rotten because someone later put on this green carpet stuff and it rotten through the floor so we placed the floor. But the rails, not the handrails but the post that goes from the floor of the porch to the ceiling of the porch are original, they came with the house.

WG: What about the back door?

EW: The back door was not there, we added the back door that was a window. Where you see the beams going from the front of the house to the back that was a partition wall, and this room that we're sitting in and the kitchen, they were two separate rooms. There was a double door there, because as you can see each room or these rooms where the china cabinet is. The flue you see was a fire place, each one of these rooms had a fire place in them even where my kitchen is sitting there was a fire place and we just took all of that out. But there was a fireplace originally in each room of this house.

WG: What about where that bathroom is?

EW: Where the bathroom is, that was room that was where the cellar came into the house. Now there is a five foot cellar underneath this house, and what I obtained from Mrs. Carlotta Harris, who you will interview later, is that they cooked in the cellar and they brought it up the stair way into the house and that's where we closed the stairwell off and made it into what they call a three quarters bathroom. The problem being with keeping this cellar steps and stuff is because..

[End of Tape 1/ Side A]

[Tape 1/Side B]

...the house had become a drug haven and had become a place of transients in the last ten to fifteen years and that was because the family who bought it from the Simms estate had left. They had left, they had all grown up and they had married and so forth and so the city owned. And so when we did go through the cellar and thing, we did find drug paraphernalia, we saw where people had used cups and all kinds of things for drug habits and stuff like that. The windows had plastic over it, you know they would put plastic, there wasn't any heat so they put plastic over the windows and you could tell people have been living in here. The reason we took that off of there was so people could not come in through the cellar because the cellar is still open, so they could not come in through the house. And one day, I walk in here and there were people here, and you know we do not want that, so we took it apart; we took that flooring apart, that stair well part, but the stairs are still down there. We just put a wall in there and put the bathroom in front of the door.

WG: So the kitchen was down stairs?

EW: Kitchen was down stairs.

WG: What was this then?

EW: This was just a room, like I said these two rooms, the dining room and the kitchen were divided by a double door, a fridge double door, heavy doors.

WG: Where?

EW: Right where my island sits now, so I imagine that that was a dining room at that point in time. And at that time, not only did she live there but apparently there was a sister and her mother who lived here.

WG: What about upstairs, how many rooms?

EW: There were two big bedrooms and a small bedroom upstairs. Then of course with the construction they putting the living room, they added another bedroom on top so now there are three bedrooms upstairs and a full bath because I took one of the smaller bedrooms and turned it into a bathroom.

WG: So where was the bathroom back then?

EW: There wasn't. There was no inside bathroom at that time, it looks like the inside bathroom was put in when the Washington family moved in after death in nineteen-thirty-four.

WG: So when you renovated the house, did you get a lot information about Lucy Simms' then or was it after the house was built?

EW: Well I started researching here while we were doing it from people who knew here. The daily news record ran an article about this house being renovated so people started talking to me and coming by and giving me some information like that. So what I did was, I researched some at the public library here and I sent to Hampton from

the information that I had. There is still a huge blank of information that I don't know and it's not being written about her from the time she was born which is Wayland puts it at 1855 and another author puts it at 1859. Which over way, she was still born a slave, she was born in slave times because emancipation did not happen until 1864-1865. So there is a huge amount of information that I don't have, and which I'm hoping to investigate one of these days, in fact it's not going to be too far in the near future. Where the thing that's holding us up is they did not keep slave records until 1854-1855, the old slave records were who the plantation belong to and how many boys or how many girls and their age, it did not give a name. So that's the part that I have, so those first eighteen years of her life, I would like to investigate and that's my next project. So I have the end of her life and I have the middle of her life but I don't have the beginning of her life.

WG: Did you find pictures or documents here while you guys were working on the house?

EW: I found documents. The problem was that here brother Johnson lived in Washington D.C., and the letters she had were to him from someone else so apparently he was married or had a girlfriend or whatever and when he died she collected those things and so she brought them back here and they were in the attic. When we pulled out the attic, this box fell [laugh] and stuff but we did find a grade book and she had used. I also found a letter to Johnson, to her brother from D.C., from the principle of Hampton at that time that she owed thirty-four dollars and some odd cents that she was in debt so I'm assuming that's how much it cost for her to go to school there. So her brother, apparently must have been a factor for her to go to school and that's also Hampton's record are, they

list her as being born around 1859 but they also list her as graduating with Booker T. Washington so I don't know. That just seems a little bit to young.

WG: To go to college?

EW: And see you use the word college now, we need to clarify that. In that time what we consider a university now or Hampton university now was not so in 1800's. In the 1800's, those kinds of schools were trade schools or they were to finish your high school education. My mother says that when she was coming along, and my mother was born in 1921, that if you had gone to school and repeated the eighth grade twice what you could in Virginia, then you could teach in the State of Virginia. You did not need a college, quote on quote college degree to teach you could not teach whites but you could teach college.

WG: Did white teachers had to attend anything higher...

EW: No. They only time whites were involved were the money aspects of it apparently. This area, Harrisonburg Virginia was settled by Methodists so I don't know how much slavery was here but according to Wayland, at the turn of the century, or in 1865, there were approximately two hundred blacks here. Now, whether he's counting children, I don't know, he just gives the blank numbers.

WG: Who is Wayland?

EW: Wayland is an Historian, Harrisonburg historian, you can find his books in the library, and I think his first name is John. He also states that Lucy Simms was born in Harrisonburg in 1855 on Grey plantation at as ironic because where the school that bears her name was considered the Grey plantation so actually the school that bears her name is on the plantation she was born.

WG: It would be interesting to check their records.

EW: Yes and you, that's why I say, there is a book called Freedom's Child that I've got some information out of, whose author Keri Allen Maccraig was the daughter of a Keri Rice, who was taught by Lucy Simms, and her mother this Kerry Rice, the Rice family was apparently from Singervlin or somewhere in Harrisonburg and since I've mentioned the name to other people, they've said that there was a Rice family who lived on Broad street which is right around the corner from here. And that this lady, actually her mother knew Ms. Simms and so she has documentation where Lucy Simms was her mother's teacher and this was at Effinger Street school. She never taught in the Simms school because the school was not built until 1939 and she died in July 1934.

WG: Do you know when, when Lucy Simms purchased this house, do you know what the bill of sale was?

EW: I have no idea. When they traced the deed of sale, which an attorney does who researches it to make sure that there is no liens or anything against it. He only went back a few years, he only went back about twenty-thirty, forty to fifty years, I'm sure the information is probably in the hall records down town. I do have a letter, I think I have a letter and if I can put my hands on it I will qualify this to you. But she mentions to someone from Hampton at the school that she has saved eighteen hundred dollars and that she intends to buy some property and I guess this could have been the property but the thing of it is, that this area has gone through a lot of change so the housing numbers are different then because this one is, my address is different by several numbers than either one of the ones on beside me. Whereas in most neighborhoods, you start with two sixty one, two sixty two, two sixty three, two sixty four, this house is, I forgot my

address, two thirty one but the house next to me is two fifty something and then the friends of, Naomi's parents, their house number was originally two seventy five and now it's two sixty five because they bought a new house and the house they bought the lot between their old house and their new house. So as you can see, the numbers don't correspond like most neighborhoods. I think that because when they did tear down houses and stuff that this property apparently, this is a quarter acre that this house sits on. Apparently, a quarter more acre was attached to this house and there was only one house there plus this house so when the city redesigned, rezoned it, they cut the property line differently so the house that this property sits on to the next house apparently was all one parcel or it was two parcels divided in half. And so, when the city rezoned it and did that because my property line and my neighbors line on my right hand side, her property line comes almost against my house and then my house property line is further the other way but it's against the alley so the city has a lot to do with the way the numbers run now so I don't know whether you could pin point if this was the property, if she bought the whole property. But as of 1900's, everyone who lived here remembers her living here, excuse me, remembers her mother being here and she also died in this property in 1934.

WG: Did she have siblings?

EW: Apparently, she had one sister and two brothers. One brother was Ulicies Wilson which meant that her mother had been married at least twice. He was, it's funny because a principle of Effinger Street school when she was a teacher there, he also taught choir at the school and he was also minister of music who we would call minister of music at John Wesley united Methodist Church, when it was on Liberty street and that was the church that she attended and taught Sunday school and that's the church that I

attend. So there is a, then her sister, I can't find anything really about her, although that she had a sister. And then her mother died in the early 1900's in this house and her brother died the one in Washington, died soon after the mother died. In her obituary, the only person that was mentioned was Mister Wilson.

WG: Is this the same brother that helped her pay for school?

EW: No sir. John Simms was the gentleman who helped her pay for her education and he died in Washington D.C. in the early 1900's, I guess about 1910 he was dead.

WG: Do you know if her mother...

EW: Her mother died before that. Her mother died, it looks like her mother died somewhere between 1900 and 1902. It does not look like she died later than 1905.

WG: Has she been with Ms. Simms all this time?

EW: Yes because, I'm sure Mrs. Carlotta probably told you that she remembers her sister and her mother being in this house in the early 1900's. So apparently they lived here with her or they all lived here. (Tape not clear)...Is that the Virginia Humanity, Virginia foundation for humanities has put the school on the list of African-American contribution and it will be listed with, it's called the African-American heritage trail of Virginia and this is celebrated and commemorate people of African-American descendant who contributed to the commonwealth of Virginia. So this is, this has come up recently that and so we're in the process of trying to get a plaque for that school. So that's something, I don't know what else I can tell you about her.

WG: Well have you heard anything from members of the community about her death, how she passed away?

EW: Yeah I know how she passed away, she passed away in her house and the kids say that the house is haunted, they think she walks around here (laugh). What happen was, she apparently had been in ill heath for sometime and she came down the steps and apparently had a heart attack and she died leaning over the banister, trying to get to the front door I guess to get outside to summon help for herself. But she died in the house, they found her in the house dead.

WG: Her mother had already died in 1901?

EW: Every body had died by then except for her brother, Ucilies Wilson.

WG: Well Mrs. Ellen, thank you so much for your time.

EW: Oh you welcome.

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