

Lucy Simms

Interview with Mr. Elon Rhodes. 366 Effinger Street, Harrisonburg, Va, 22801.

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Interviewer and Transcriber, Wondwossen Getachew

Tape 1/Side A

WG: Can you tell me your name please?

ER: My name?

WG: Yes.

ER: Elon Rhodes.

WG: Where were you born?

ER: Harrisonburg.

WG: When were you born?

ER: 1922, July of 22.

WG: So you went to school at Effinger?

ER: Effinger Street school or Effinger high, they call it Effinger street school.

You see in those days, you had grade school and high school in one building.

WG: So from first grade to eleventh grade was at Effinger school?

ER: mmmhmm

WG: I thought that they transferred after 5th grade or 4th grade, they transferred to Simms. No, Simms was built...

ER: Simms was not open until 1939 and it was a matter of moving the entire operation from the old building of Effinger to the new building Simms.

WG: Was Simms much bigger?

ER: Oh yes.

WG: How big was Effinger or how was the...

ER: You mean classrooms?

WG: Yes

ER: I believe that it was four, four on the down and four, there were eight classrooms, good size classrooms and then one of them was used as an auditorium on the second floor.

WG: Who taught you your first grade?

ER: Ms. Simms.

WG: I can not believe this picture, do you recognize all the other students in this picture. (1)

ER: No.

WG: I thought most of them would be in Harrisonburg

ER: They are but back in those small pictures I don't have, the boy next to me on my right was a close friend. That was Red Bundy.

WG: So what do you remember about Ms. Simms, about her teaching technics or...

ER: Mrs. Lucy was very stern individual, she expected you to be obedient, do your work. She did not mind correct you, of course back in those days the teachers would correct you and they did. We always felt that we had a great quality of education at Effinger and of course again I can not say about Simms as far as my personal experiences because I was never in class there.

WG: How come you did not go to Simms?

ER: I graduated from Effinger, we just held exercise in the Simms building.

WG: When did you graduate?

ER: thirty-nine. The year Simms opened. We had our ceremony in lthat building and their were only five in my class.

WG: Five graduates?

ER: That's all, from all those kids on there on the bottom row, only five of us.

WG: How come it was only five?

ER: Well kids dropped out of school, they had to work, some of them their families moved away and some straight out did not go to school.

WG: Was it required to go to school?

ER: No, they did not enforce that back in those days like they do now, like they're suppose to do now.

WG: Was Mrs. Simms there for your graduation?

ER: Oh yes, all the teachers that we had, they had us in their classes they attend the graduation march.

WG: So where did you live when you were in first grade?

ER: Across the street. [Laugh]

WG: From the school?

ER: Yeah

WG: On this street right here where we're on right now?

ER: Down below, but you see our community extended all the way down to, as I said, to Main street. That was every part of the black or Afro-American or whatever you want to call us, we've had so many names but it extended all the way down to Main

street. You see back in those days you were called colored people, you were called colored people, you weren't called black, Afro-American and all of that.

WG: Was down town area black populated?

ER: It was a heavier black population then than it is now. At one time though about 2000 blacks lived in this community and after the World War Two, they began to move away or during world war two a lot of people moved to Washington, Pennsylvania, and Ohio because of the opportunities. A lot of the soldiers have returned home, they moved elsewhere.

WG: When you were at Effinger school, did you see Ms. Simms on the regular basis even though you finished your first grade?

ER: No usually she stayed mostly in her classroom unless there was something outdoor exercise that she was in charge of, you know we use to have like mayday and things like that and other plays, classroom plays but usually she use to be close to her class room as far as I can remember.

WG: Do you remember your regular daily activities as a student?

ER: As a student it was as simple as report to whatever class I belong to and then I worked after school and you know when I got up to nine or ten years of age I worked after school and sometimes even before school. [Silent] The picture seems to intrigue you.

WG: Yeah it does, it does, it's amazing I have only seen two pictures of her because she was in, she came to Harrisonburg well some say that she was born here.

ER: Well I expect she was, I expect she was born on, where Ellen Walker lives, somewhere in that area there but back in those days, I lived, we lived where we call down town and new town.

WG: Downtown is where?

ER: Oh, it could be from Gay street over to Elizabeth street but down below Broad street. Anywhere down below Broad street was considered what we called downtown and new town is from Broad street back up in that area there.

WG: New town?

ER: New town.

WG: So was there an old town?

ER: No, no old town. Up in that area in that hill up there, near Spotswood school that was know as Red hill and a lot of blacks lived up in there, owned property that occupied businesses and public housing.

WG: So when you were growing up was this, all this was a black community?

ER: We had a lot of white neighbors too. It was a mixed community, always was. They got along fine.

WG: Even in the 1920's?

ER: Yes they got along allright.

WG: Because I have not heard a lot of racial tension in Harrisonburg...

ER: You said you haven't heard?

WG: no.

ER: I don't even remember being, however when we just caught in some incidents, it was more or less between the two individuals than it was a racial thing. It's a

good community. (Hands me a picture of a high school band from Simms school). That's up in Simms school.

WG: Bundy's Boys Band?

ER: Have you ever seen that before?

WG: No, when was this?

ER: That was during world war two.

WG: You're in this picture?

ER: No, no, I was not here.

WG: Were you at war, were you...

ER: Well I was here when they first formed but I was never musically inclined at all and this boy that was next to me on the other picture (1), this is his father who started up that band and he plays the trumpet even now, off course he does not play now but he can.

WG: When did you leave Harrisonburg?

ER: Well the only time I left was to go in the service, the military. That was in 1943.

WG: Did you go abroad?

ER: Yes, yeah.

WG: In the military, were there a lot of, in the military were you with a lot of other black soldiers or other military men?

ER: Well you see the races have not been mixed in the military at that time. It was only at the end of world war two that Truman ordered that soldiers mix, so the companies that I was in were all black and white officers.

WG: Did you see Ms. Simms outside the school environment, like churches and...

ER: See what?

WG: Ms. Simms. Did you see her in church or when she would come to see your house to see your parents, to talk to your parents...

ER: I did not do anything to bring her (Laugh).

WG: So it's usually how it works? Other people had told me that she has gone to their houses, now I know why she went to their houses.

ER: If she could not control you, she would, she did not hesitate to go. But I don't ever recall her in my home or have I ever heard my parents say anything about her.

WG: What kind of influence do you think that she had over her students?

ER: Well she had a good influence on the children but respectfully. They listened to her, she always had a good control over her classes?

WG: So you walked to school, right there?

ER: Across the street. Well we moved, that was when I first started I was living right there. We moved different locations but all of them would be two or three blocks within the school.

WG: How was the school funded for Effinger?

ER: Well it was funded through the Harrisonburg school just like the other schools. They controlled it, the superintendent was white, he visited the school quite often, the nurse at school, she was white.

WG: So while this school was here, there was a, where was the white school in Harrisonburg?

ER: Well the one school was the, where the city office building is, the city manager's office is one of the original schools, they called it the Main street school. Then Water Man is where it is now, on the hill.

WG: Have you ever, did you ever see the other white schools while you were at Effinger?

ER: I don't recall ever visiting the schools.

WG: Did Effinger had sport teams?

ER: The only team that we had and even at Simms, the only thing we had was basket ball, did not have foot-ball.

WG: Did your parents work in town?

ER: Everybody worked.

WG: Everybody worked downtown?

ER: Well most of them worked in town yes. And usually it was hotel maids, private homes, cooks and things like that.

WG: You must have seen a lot of changes in this town?

ER: I've seen awful lot of changes, some of them pretty good and recently not too good.

WG: What's not so good?

ER: The city government is not so good , it's just my opinion.

WG: Do you, I know that you were young, most people who had Ms. Simms her as a teacher were young even then so their recollection is not very clear.

ER: Not really because you just did not see Ms. Lucy out. She was somewhat a private individual but she had a lot of influence on the children. The strangest thing is

they, not strange but they speak of Ms. Lucy quite often because the building is named for her, but they never mention the principle of the school.

WG: Was in it her brother?

ER: No.

WG: Her brother in law?

ER: To my knowledge there is no relation.

WG: I thought that he had a relation with her, no. Are you talking about Ulysses or Mr. Wilson, what's the principal's name?

ER: Mr. Wilson was not in education. The principle of school is named Harris. He was the principle of Effinger School and the first at Lucy Simms School.

WG: Was he a teacher too, as well?

ER: He taught, he taught some classes, he taught language.

WG: They taught language in high school...

ER: He would teach some Latin. He would speak Latin fluently. He graduated from Lincoln University. He was another stern individual.

WG: It seems that you had to be.

ER: They controlled their children. But the children at same time were taught to respect teachers like they were police.

WG: Did you ever get tapped by Ms. Simms?

ER: Oh yes she gave me my first spanking on my hand with a ruler. Just once.

WG: What did you do?

ER: I don't even remember what it was for.

WG: So in the, every day you guys would go to the playground? Or after classes or was there usually a break?

ER: Well we would have, of course we got out during the recess and the cafeteria, we had a cafeteria down there on the second floor and also it was the home economics department. We would have our lunch there and we would go out for an hour, we would go out to the playground and speaking of sports our basket ball the only thing we had to practice on was the clay court, didn't have an inside, we would play them over in another building, several blocks away, they had games in what we called a colonnade building...

WG: collin?

ER: colonnade

WG: aid?

ER: colonnade (spelling)

WG: Okay. After you graduated in 1939, did you go to school somewhere else?

ER: No, I wasn't, we were not financially able to make it to go to school.

WG: Is that when you went to the military?

ER: Well not right off, I did not go off until 1943. I worked around odd jobs in the community.

WG: You had any brothers and sisters?

ER: Oh yes.

WG: big family?

ER: Well originally there was ten of us and but it was three, three of them died in childhood, babies. Back in those days they had a lots of deaths in children.

WG: Yes, I noticed that, a lot of people tell you that they had 7 children but two of them passed away early, you hear that a lot. So were you, you had any younger siblings?

ER: Younger than I, you yeah, I had three brothers and two sisters younger than I am.

WG: So you had to work to help the family?

ER: help out, yeah sure. Not many that did not have to work. It didn't hurt us any.

WG: So when did you get involved in the city school?

ER: After the war. I had a lot of people who encouraged me to take part in it, , different committee works and, then an opening for a school board, I had friends on the council who recommend me to be on the school board, I served two terms which is six years, we could only serve two terms. But I have been active in city government ever since that time up until, well I'm still am a little bit. I'm sorry I can't tell you more about the, Ms. Lucy...

WG: This is great, its which...

ER: I don't know other than fellow teacher that can really, I'm sure they haven't told you a whole lot about her.

WG: No, it's hard.

ER: That why I said she was a very private person, she stayed pretty much to herself.

[End of Tape 1/Side A]

[Start of Tape 1/Side B]

WG: How long were you a Mayor for, Vice-Mayor?

ER: Only two years. The other vice-mayor, before he retired, he had to resign because of his health, and he asked me if I would take it and I thought that I could do the job. He said you're good as anybody else here and that was it. We had a good relationship at my work, with membership of the council.

WG: Was he African...

ER: I was the only one.

WG: So they weren't any other African-Americans in the board or the council.

ER: No.

WG: You never encountered any kind of aggression?

ER: Not that I remember, got along fine, go to anybody and talk about anything. But you know when you get in to those positions you've got to be around for quite a while, get to know the people.

WG: Yeah.

ER: In my work I got the opportunity to know them.

WG: Did a lot of the white people you worked with were, did they have any black friends or did they really understand the black culture, did they use you, not mean

ER: Well most of them on the board were new, the people here, one of them was a medical doctor who waited on blacks as well as whites, the other one was a social, I mean a head of the history department at James Madison University, and another one was

an automobile dealer who had black customers as well as whites, in the city it's just different.

WG: I'm glad to hear that.

ER: I'm not saying that it was perfect by any such because you had new people coming in all the time and they were not used to this type of relationship in between the races. But when we lived, before they had public housing, they move in all of our neighbors, white here, black here, got along fine and again as I said earlier, when they had problems, it was people problem not race problem.

WG: What about during the redevelopment era?

ER: When did they do it?

WG: Yes.

ER: That started in 1950, 57 and 58.

WG: Were you on the board?

ER: I was on one of the boards of that committee, replacement committee, in matter of fact I cheered that board but it made a lot of, the city has never been the same out in this area since redevelopment. I recall telling one time the official that was, we had better relationship before we re-development because black housing was up here and white was up in there and that was something we were not used too.

WG: They got completely divided?

ER: Just about almost, they were no blacks up in there and they were no whites in the housing up here then we had what we called scattered sites, like these up here, these down on Broad street, they called scattered sites.

WG: How come?

ER: I mean they were spread out in the community and not in one group like the main housing as upon the hill there and usually, mainly these were suppose to be for senior citizens down in here, or handicap people or something like that.

WG: You've seen a lot of changes here.

ER: Humm

WG: So do you think that I can copy this picture?

ER: What do you want, both of them?

WG: Well this one, since it's got her and you...

ER: Oh well that would not be of any interest then?

WG: Yes, but this one with you and her would be really excellent to have in the library.

ER: Well help yourself but see that I get it back.

WG: Yes, thank-you.

ER: Where you take that to Kinko's?

WG: I'll take it to school. Do you have any other pictures of you with her or you in the school?

ER: I wouldn't know where they are right now.

WG: Okay, no problem, this is very helpful.

ER: I'll take the band back (picture).

WG: Well thanks a lot for your time and it was really good meeting you.