

Oral History Internship

Lucy Simms

Interview with Mrs Carlotta Harris. 192 Kelly Street, Harrisonburg, Va, 22801.

November 2, 2000

Interviewer and Transcriber, Wondwossen Getachew

Tape 1/Side A

WG: Can you tell me your first and last name please?

CH: My name is Carlotta Newman Harris.

WG: Where were you born?

CH: I was born in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in this very house.

WG: What year?

CH: 1911

WG: Is this the house your parents were born in as well?

CH: No, they owned this house. They were not born in this house.

WG: Did you have sisters and brothers here?

CH: We, I had uh, fourteen, it was fourteen of us all together, my father was married twice.

WG: Is this the house everyone stayed in?

CH: His first wife, I'm not sure that they lived here but my mother and ten children were born here. She raised all except one, one little boy.

WG: Has this house changed a lot?

CH: Yeah, we have an extra room up there where a smaller room added on with a bathroom.

WG: Where did you go to school?

CH: I went to school at Effinger School at first and I finished high school there. I was one of the, well three of us finished the first four year high school at the Effinger street school.

WG: When did you graduate?

CH: From high school?

WG: Yes.

CH: In 1929.

WG: Did Effinger school turn into a high school?

CH: They had elementary school and high school on the second floor. At first they had two year and then in latter years they, it became a four year institution.

WG: Did you have a lot of friends in this neighborhood, in this community?

CH: Yes. We all went to school together, sure.

WG: When did you first meet Mrs. Lucy Simms?

CH: I can't remember exactly because she was our neighbor and she would often come by and talk with my mother. But I remember before I was almost six years old and she knew I would be coming to school in September and she came by and brought me a little glass of jelly that she had made.

WG: A glass of jelly?

CH: Yes, that she had made. You see she lived right where Ellen is living and she came by and she left this glass of jelly. That's the first time that I

remember coming in contact with her. I mean, your earliest recollection doesn't go back too far. I was about five, at most six because I was six in September and she knew I was coming to school and she would be my teacher.

WG: That's why she brought you the jelly?

CH: Yes, she knew that I was going to be a student.

WG: Did she do that with other new students?

CH: I'm not sure, I often wonder.

WG: She was a friend with your mother?

CH: She and my mother sang together in the choir. They sat side by side in our choir.

WG: Which church was this?

CH: This was John Wesley Methodist church.

WG: It's located where?

CH: It's located now here but it used to be downtown on Liberty street.

We had an old church there. It was a beautiful church

WG: Where on Liberty street.

CH: Do you know where Calhoun's is?

WG: Yes.

CH: The next street over, that building that you're in at Calhoun's, our church faced that street, Liberty.

WG: Lucy Simms sang choir and was she also involved with the church other wise?

CH: Oh yes, I'm sure she was an active member but as I said, I don't remember too much but her activities. But she was a regular figure.

WG: After she brought you the jelly, did you go to school the next day or the next week?

CH: I'm not sure.

WG: What grade did she teach?

CH: The first grade

WG: Do you remember your first day?

CH: No, I don't remember that but I remember being in her class and this big abbacies set over on the side and we started knowing our number and to count.

WG: I know we talked about abbacies but can you tell me again what it is.

CH: It was a big frame like two wooden posts on each side and the wires had big balls on it that you can slide over and it had about six or eight of those wires that you can slide over. For instance, if she would say add two and two, you would slide two balls over two balls and we will tell her the results. That's how I remember that. It always intrigued me that big thing sitting there (laughed). It was huge, it was not small, and it was a big piece of furniture.

WG: How many students do you think were in the classroom?

CH: Well, in the room, we were about twenty, I'm sure. About twenty, she just had that one grade, the 1st grade. She also taught reading, writing, and arithmetic.

WG: How long did these classes last?

CH: Well, we went to school from nine until twelve. We had lunch from twelve to one and from one to three we had another class.

WG: What were your favorite subjects?

CH: I've always favored math (both laughed). She taught us how to read and write she also taught us what they called then, arithmetic.

WG: So everyone that lived in this community had to attend Simms school?

CH: Oh yeah, at Effinger school.

WG: What would she do if a student does not turn in their assignment?

CH: Well, she had a ruler, twelve inches and by the students being small, she would just tap you on your hands if your work were wrong. That's the only thing she did. You hold out your hand and she will tap you on your hand.

WG: Were you ever tapped?

CH: I was tapped once for copying something from the board wrong, a number, I will never forget. I copied the number wrong and bring in to her. It seems odd having did that but that's what I remember.

WG: Well it seems that it worked.

CH: Yes. We all learned how to read and we learned to write. Now, when I write anything, everybody tells me that I have a nice handwriting but in those days, they took a lot of pains with children learning how to write. And, they had certain books after I got into second and third grade. You had to get these books from the bookstore and you had to write whatever was in this book for handwriting.

WG: What else do you remember about her or your daily school activities?

CH: I don't remember too much about that but I remember that she was very strict and most of us obeyed her on the playground and the classroom. We knew that what she said she meant she was stern.

WG: What did she do on the playground?

CH: She would just be there to see that everything went okay. Then we had to get in line and march in. We had to march in from the playground in to the school.

WG: You had to line up?

CH: And then every morning for devotions at the school, which was the elementary, and high school, we had to go to assembly, every morning at nine o'clock.

WG: How long did it last?

CH: About forty-five minutes.

WG: What did they do?

CH: We had reading from the Bible. The principle would read from the Bible and that's his picture over there. (Pointing towards the wall). He's my father in law.

WG: What is his name?

CH: Professor Dembe Harris, he would read a scripture from the bible. Have you heard Roberta Webb?

WG: No.

CH: They named the nursery after her up on the hill but she was in charge of the music. We had schoolbooks with songs in it and she would tell us which number to sing.

WG: Was everyone required to attend?

CH: Every room in the school was represented in the assembly. Every child was in that assembly. Then the principle would tell us of anything of important that was going that day or you know any activities that we would be involved in and give us a nice talk.

WG: Do you remember of any specific talks that stayed in your mind?

CH: No, I really don't remember of any specifics. He was just the person who addressed the whole assembly.

WG: Where did he live?

CH: He lived right over where Mrs.Walker lives.

WG: So he was a neighbor with Lucy Simms?

CH: Yes.

WG: What kind of teacher do you think Simms was?

CH: Well as I said she was stern but she was very good. She was quiet and she never raised her voice, she was quiet but you knew that she meant what she said, you know. (Laughed).

WG: Do you remember her laughing with students?

CH: Well, I'm sure I can't say specifically but I'm sure she did, I'm sure. She was good; she was a very good person.

WG: After you finished your first grade, you stayed in Effinger school?

CH: Oh sure, I went to the third grade, I skipped the second grade.

WG: How come?

CH: Because I was smart (Laugh).

WG: Well Lucy Simms must have done a good job.

CH: She must have. In the second room, she had second and third and she promoted us to the third grade right away to the third grade.

WG: How did they reward you for good accomplishment?

CH: Well that was a reward enough.

WG: Do you remember Simms after you finished your fourth grade?

CH: Well, I did not see her much then, only on the playground and when we marched up to the assembly, she would see that we were all in order and in line.

WG: Did you see her a lot in the neighborhood?

CH: Well, my mother took me to her home, that's the only time I remember being over there and I met her sister. I can't remember her sisters' name but she had a sister that lived with her.

WG: Was her mother with her?

CH: No, no parents. She was a grown woman; she had finished Hampton Institute.

WG: Why did your mother go to Simms' house?

CH: Just to visit her. They were friends and neighbors. I remember one time; I may have been there before but this one time I remember because I met her sister.

WG: What other thing do you remember in the house when you met her that day?

CH: I remember that we were on the porch and then we out around to the back and her sister came from, where they use the kitchen back then.

WG: Was that done stairs?

CH: Yes and that's the only thing I remember about that.

WG: What did the African-American community think about Lucy Simms's when she was a teacher and now?

CH: Well they had great respect for her, they loved her because she was such a nice person. Everybody as far as I know loved Miss Lucy. I never heard a bad word against Miss Lucy.

WG: How did she influence your life?

CH: Well, I guess she influenced my life by teaching me how to read, write, and add (Laughter). She gave me a good start because a lot of children today can't read. You see back then they did not promote children until they were ready to be promoted.

WG: How does a child get promoted?

CH: Well by doing all the requirements that your teacher asks you to do. I don't remember any tests in the first grade but evidently she had some way of knowing what we did.

WG: Well she got to observe you for a whole year.

CH: Yes.

WG: How many people in the community do you think remember Lucy Simms?

CH: Well I guess a lot of them are deceased now like my mother and father but I dare say, I don't know how many would know her, maybe thirty. Because the community has changed and a lot of people have passed away.

WG: How has the community changed over the years?

CH: We did not have projects, we only had single homes on this street. We had a lot of vacant fields to play on. You see all the new houses on Johnson Street.

WG: Were there a lot of streets?

CH: The same streets are here.

WG: Have you seen the community change positively and negatively throughout out the years?

CH: The only thing I know is that a lot of new people live in this section but I have a paper to show you that one of the women on Broad street

who's helping the woman at Eastern Mennonite to write about when Harrisonburg burned up a lot of the colored, you heard about that?

WG: What burned up?

CH: A lot of the colored homes and businesses.

WG: Who burned them?

CH: The city of Harrisonburg. There is a newspaper you have to read about that, the Red Front had them but I noticed today that they were all gone.

WG: What kind of changes did that do to the community?

CH: A few changes because a lot of people lived down on Mason street, Bethel Street, close to Main street and all those places were done away with.

WG: How close was the community [Speaker friction].

CH: Everybody knew each other. (Laugh).

WG: That must be a nice town. Were the churches a big influence for the black community?

CH: Oh, yes. The Baptist church and the Methodist church. Our two main churches here. One time the community gave a concert at the, they have torn the theater now but it was the Virginia theater, they gave two Apparatus. Jeff the started and the coming of Ruth.

WG: The coming of Ruth?

CH: Ruth, the one that married Boas. Do you remember Naomi and Ruth? Naomi had two sons and they had two wives. And her sons die so Naomi

decided to go back to her native country and the one named Ruth went with her and her daughter. And all these people could sing, every one could play, well not every body but a lot of people were musically inclined but they had a lot of people who could sing. And I have the stories and the books that they gave for the program at the theater.

WG: But the theater is not here anymore right?

CH: Yes, they tore it down.

WG: Was that in the fifties?

CH: No, it was about twenty years ago, it has not been gone too long.

WG: So the changes in the community have....

CH: New people. Old people, off course go on but the older people seem to have a lot of talent about singing and music, it was a musical community.

WG: What did you father do?

CH: My father was a notary public, a local minister for our church and an insurance agent.

WG: For what church?

CH: Methodist church?

WG: So, were your grandparents born here in this community?

CH: They were born on this street. My grandfather was the one who helped build this house. He and the men in the community, and another house over there [pointing towards going north towards Kelly Street], one

was built for one daughter and this one for another daughter. That was the way the fathers did it.

WG: Was that a cultural, was that the way it was done?

CH: Way back then, yes, I guess. He did not build it alone but the people who built the church helped. They knew how to do this stuff. They built these houses, put the roof on and did all of the structural work, painted, they did everything. In that little book I showed you, they tell you how they did the church.

WG: How they built it?

CH: Hummuh, they built the churches maybe six, eight, or ten men. They work on it. I don't know how long it took them but they got the church built. (Laugh).

WG: Well, thank you for your time and...

CH: I hope that I've helped you.

WG: You've helped plenty and if I think of more questions maybe I can come back.

CH: Sure, call me, you have my number.