

Oral History Internship

Lucy Simms

Interview with Mr. Edgar Johnson and his wife Mrs. Wilhelmina Johnson, and friend Louise Winston. 424 Myrtle Street, Harrisonburg, Va, 22801.

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Interviewer and Transcriber, Wondwossen Getachew

Tape 1/Side A

WG: Were you born in Harrisonburg?

EJ: Oh yes!

WG: When were you born?

EJ: Well, I'm seventy-five years old now so, uh, I was born in 1925, October 8, 1925.

WG: Were your parents from here too?

EJ: Oh yes, Oh yes, Oh yes. My aunt, my grandmother, and my mother, and my dad. They were all from here.

WG: Were they in this neighborhood?

EJ: Oh yes, oh yes. We lived, uh, we lived on Effinger street. We lived on Effinger street, well Effinger street is cut off now but it use to run down and goes on down to the, to the...

WJ: To the main street.

EJ: ...to the main street. Once upon a time Effinger street went all the way down to Main Street. You see they cut it all down when they tore all that stuff down.

WJ: That was when the redevelopment took place Wond.

WG: Yes, around 1940's?

WJ: Right.

EJ: Yeah. Effinger went all the way down, all the down to main street, all the way down.

WG: So when you were at Effinger school you could walk straight to main street?

EJ: Yes, yes, yes. We could walk all the way down to Main Street. There was a creek down there on Effinger Street. We had to, when the water would get up, well you had to cross the creek, well we had a bridge there, so we had to cross the bridge.

WG: Is this before the school was built?

EJ: No, no. after school, after school. The school was built, I can't remember what year the school was built, uh, let's see, 1920, all right I was born in twenty-five and the school was there then.

WJ: 1939.

EJ: No, no that was Simms school

WJ: Oh, you're talking about when Effinger was built.

EJ: I'm talking about when Effinger was built, uh, let me see, I was born in 1925 and, I can't remember what year that school was built but it was, uh, I can't remember...

WG: But that's the school that you attended right?

EJ: Yes, Effinger, Effinger, Effinger Street School.

WG: So did you graduate from there?

EJ: Well yes but we did not graduate from there. We left there and went to Simms see? Because at Simms, they built a new school well you know the school right above from us right there. They built that in 1940 what, 4,5, 46?

WJ: It opened in 1939.

EJ: 1939 so they built that school in the late thirties, you right. But it took them a lot time to build, back in them days, everything was done by hand and you know the fellas had to use wheel bars and irons and all that stuff to do the construction work you know. And when they built that school we use to go up there and play around in the, in the school when it was building you know. And they had a cement, had an old cement mixer, and they had a, had a, uh, a wooden scuffle, way out so the fellas push the wheel bar and push up that ramp. Yes, Yes.

WG: So Simms was your teacher?

EJ: Simms?

WG: Yes, Lucy Simms, first grade and...

EJ: No well she never went there. She never went to Simms school, she taught at Effinger School and she died, I can't remember what year she died but when she died here on Johnson Street. She did not go up to Simms school.

WG: Did you see here outside the school environment?

EJ: Uh, yes, oh yes when she was a teacher school, oh yes, she visited our homes and go around and visit, you know, she walked, she walked to school, walked with the school, walked, she knew everybody. I use to have a picture here with kids at the old Effinger Street School but I don't know where it is now. But she went around the neighborhood you know visit the people. She was well known because she was the only teacher here. Back in them years, see them days, she was the only teacher here, and when you went to her, we went to, uh, she taught the first grade and the second grade, I believe she taught the first and second grade, I believe. I know that it was the first grade

but I can't remember whether it's second or third grade. Because there is another lady here, no, no.

WG: Was that Mrs. Fairfax that you were telling me about?

EJ: Mrs. Fairfax

WJ: No, she did not teach at Effinger, she taught at Simms.

WG: She was a Simms teacher.

WJ: Because when I came here in 1945, Mrs. Fairfax was the second grade teacher at the Simms school.

EJ: Right, right.

WG: She was the only first grade teacher at Effinger?

EJ: Yes at Effinger, you right, right, she was the only teacher.

WG: Do you remember the classes?

WJ: That's one of the reasons why I would like for you to talk to Mr. Rhodes because he is really, his mind is very, very descriptive, he has kept up with...

EJ: Yeah he would probably remembers a little bit more than I do about this stuff.

WG: Mister who?

WJ/EJ: Elon Rhodes.

WJ: He knows, there is a Simms reunion every three years, did Ellen tell you that?

WG: Yes Ma'am.

WJ: Okay because Elon, both of us have served on a committee you know, he's very knowledgeable about the school system.

WG: Okay, I will definitely try to get in touch with him.

WJ: And Mrs. Fairfax is probably a wonderful person that you could talk to...

EJ: She would be the best of anybody to talk to because she was in the school system years, you know years. She's from here, her whole family lived here

WJ: She's originally from the Harrisonburg area.

WG: When Lucy Simms was, you said she visited your house right?

EJ: Oh yes

WG: So do you remember any of the visits?

EJ: Oh well, yes and no, you know. She would always come by and talk to my grandmother about me in school and that's about all I can answer.

WG: What about what your grandparents and your parents said about her?

EJ: Oh she was a good woman. She was an excellent woman, you know, she was the only teacher here.

WG: So she taught everyone that lived here?

EJ: Oh yeah, yes, she taught everybody, you right. Anybody that went to school for the first grade or second grade, she taught.

WG: How did Effinger look like?

EJ: Well it was, it had one, two, three, four

WJ: It had four classes?

EJ: No it was more than that, it had a downstairs and upstairs. It was a two-store building.

WJ: There is a girl who's gonna come to the house who was one of the first graduates out of that high school.

WG: From Simms?

EJ: Louise is coming in here. Well Louise can tell you a whole lot about it too.

WJ: Did your family went to the United Methodist Church?

EJ: Yes, John Wesley Methodist Church.

WG: Did you see her in the church atmosphere too?

EJ: Uh, no, no, I've never seen her in church. When I went to her I was quiet young. I was just a little fella.

WG: The girl coming in here now she remembers her and Mr. Rhodes I know he remembers her and Mrs. Fairfax, she remembers her. Well Mrs. Fairfax is probably ninety, I mean don't go around telling say or ask how old she is but she don't like to tell age but she's just about ninety, I'm sure. I'm sure she's way up in age. She's got good (pointing to his brain) right, right, Yeah. I can remember a lot back in those years, uh, like I said, I remember Effinger street and the bridge down the street and I can remember a young fella who lived right next to me named Edward Harris and Darnel Vickers, he lives in Stanton. Him and I went to school together, him and I went to elementary, we went to beginning in school together, we lived next to, we were neighbors.

WJ: Louise, this is, you got your machine on still...

EJ: Hello Lou came over and sit down.

(Recorder turned off. Mrs. Louise Winston came in the living room and we were introduced). While they were talking about people who lived in the community and their whereabouts, I got permission to turn the tape recorder on.

WG: Did you live near hear? (To Louise)

LW: I lived in another section of the city. Oh no, I lived over on Mason street.

WJ: By, you know where the parking deck is by the social...

EJ: the social services office...

LW: Right in there that's where we lived. It was all residential back to the years until the city government came and changed everything. (While recorder was off they talked about the changes of redevelopment).

WG: How did that change affect you?

WJ/LW: It affected everybody.

EJ: Yes they took everything.

WJ: Took peoples homes.

LW: They would put your property up for sale and they didn't want to give you anything so you could rebuild or not enough. They gave you what they want to give you.

WJ: They just did an article in a magazine paper (eighty-one) not long ago, where they finally admitted that the commissioner stated that he had to go around and put signs in to the peoples homes as being condemned in order for the city to get them.

LW: Just plain old land out here they condemned that, if you would not accept what they wanted to give you, a lot elderly people have gone on because of that.

WJ: It made a difference in the whole community.

EJ: You right.

WJ: That where you see all the projects and all the housing that you see around Wond, that's what all of that came about.

EJ: Redevelopment.

LW: But I know people that have died around here because having to lose some of the properties, they did not live good you know, they passed away, they did not live very long after their properties and homes were taken away from them. We lived through it.

WJ: It was hard but we lived through it.

EJ: Yeah

WG: Was your house affected?

LW: We did not own our house but it affected us all, even the renters.

EJ: Oh yes. It affected all black people, all the black people in this area it affected.

WJ: You see would actually black folks did not live far from Main street at one time...

LW: all you did was walk couple of blocks and you were on Main street, one block really.

EJ: And then you see when the redevelopment came through, they came up in here and good black people all up in here, you know people that owned their homes. Back in them days, a lot of people owned their homes and they came and took 'em. They just, they just took all the homes you know, if it was fifty dollars they would take it for fifty dollars. It was more than fifty dollars but I'm just using that for an example you know. But all in the hill here, up here on top of the hill there, where all them houses up there, a man owned that, two or three fellas owned that, they owned all of it, farm land. One man had a garden, you know a farm, he raised beans and corn and all of that he owned it all. When they came through, they took his land.



WG: Talking about land, what was on the field where Ms. Simms school is at now?

EJ: It was a cornfield. A white man owned that farm, a black man did not own that, a white man owned that.

WG: Have you ever came across the name Grey, the Grey plantation?

EJ: No that farm was Bowman land, it was Bowman who owned that land at one time.

WG: How do you spell Bowman?

EJ: B o w m a n. And then see, right that house that sits right around the corner, right on the corner of Simms avenue and, and, Johnson, you see Mrs. Louie Dunking lived there for all them years...

LW: Right, right.

EJ...and my Uncle Henry lived next door and then Harry and them lived in the next house...

(They talked about people who lived in the area)

WG: Do you remember Ms. Simms ma'am?

LW: She was my first grade teacher.

WG: You remember her?

LW: Sure.

WG: Do you remember some of the ways she taught...

LW: Good lord, she was very stern, very stern. She speaks but one time and the next time, smack, smack...(slapping her wrist with her hand)

EJ: Yeap that ruler on you (All laughed).

LW: She was a good teacher but very stern. When we took pictures 'you better not move' (laugh) where she placed you.

WG: Did she ever say anything about education or certain things that were going on in the community or the society...

EJ: I don't remember that...

LW: I can't remember that either, I was five, six years old...I tell you could give you all the information that would be Mrs. Fairfax.

EJ: I bet you Mrs. Fairfax is about ninety years old, she could tell you.

WJ: Was she taught by Ms. Lucy?

LW: I do not know but I would imagine so.

WG: Do you think that I could speak with her?

WJ: I will give you her phone number when you get ready to go. She lives up around the corner and she's retired. She's very, very, very clear and alert now still. She's got a lot of history.

LW: Maybe you can talk to Elon too. Elon and I graduated the same year, and Bundy and Louise Brooks, yes.

WG: When she died, there was an article on the newspaper and I was wondering how the community reacted, I'm sure that everybody was sad but do you remember...

EJ: Harry Sellers found her...

LW: On her front porch, she was ill and she was stricken on the porch...

EJ: Harry Sellers worked at the professional building and he use to go to work about five o'clock and he found her.

WG: Who is this, what's his name?

LW/EJ: Harry Sellers, he dead.

EJ: Excuse me a minute. (Left the dinning room).

WJ: It's a lot of history here Wond, talk to other people too.

WG: Yes, it's hard just to focus on Lucy Simms because she was part of so many other things that were going on...

LW: yes that's exactly right.

WG: And a lot of people know little about her daily life but they know a lot about what was going on. So every bits is a help, don't feel that thing you tell me won't help/

EJ: Yes I understand.

LW: You all are doing, is this documentary going to part of Library at JMU.

WG: Yes it's going to be compiled and then it will be in the Special Collection so it will be available for the community.

EJ: We have a big picture of Ms. Simms, it a big picture 14 by whatever, and this year we gave it to the display for the reunion but I left it with the committee and when want it to go to right place and maybe JMU is where it should go. I will give it to Ellen so she can give it to you...

WG: The school will preserve it.

EJ: Yes, they will preserve it, it might be the ideal place to be.

WG: This is a picture of her with you family?

EJ: No, it's herself, a picture of Ms. Lucy.

WG: Thank you all for giving me some time and to interview you

EJ: No problem young man, glad to help you, what little I can, what little I remember (laughed).

End Tape 1/Side A; end of interview.

