

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

***HISTORY OF THE COBB COUNTY BRANCH OF THE NAACP AND CIVIL RIGHTS
ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

**AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE HIST 4425 (ORAL HISTORY) CLASS AT
KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY, FALL SEMESTER 2009**

INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDE AND WILLIE MAE JOHNSON

COBB NAACP/CIVIL RIGHTS SERIES, NO. 12

CONDUCTED BY CLAUDIA ZIBANAJADRAD

7 OCTOBER, 2009 AND 4 NOVEMBER 2009

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 12
Interview with Claude Johnson
Conducted by Claudia Zibanajadrad
Wednesday, 7 October 2009
Location: The Johnson residence, Acworth, Georgia

CZ: Mr. Johnson, do you mind if I ask you what year you were born?

CJ: June 15, 1936.

CZ: You were born in Acworth?

CJ: I was born in Acworth—way out somewhere around Mars Hill.

CZ: Mars Hill.

CJ: Yes.

CZ: So when you got to be school age you went to what was called the Rosenwald School?

CJ: Yes.

CZ: What was it like to go to school there?

CJ: Oh, it was just school. We was on a farm. Sometimes we went three days a week. Sometimes, we went two days because my dad had us farm. We had to help him take care of the farm. So, if there wasn't much going on, like a rainy day like today we'd come every day. If it was clear, he kept us out. We had to help, you know, with the farm. I made it to the eighth grade and that's as far as I went.

CZ: That's as far as the school went, right?

CJ: Let's see, did it? Yes. Then I had to get out and go to work. I went to work when I was fourteen years old. I worked at Lockheed, but it was the ARE food system. I got hired on as a cook and I worked there twenty-five years for them. Then, I left there and went to Hewlett-Packard Company and I worked there thirty years. In 2000, they come to me and told me that they were getting rid of me—well, I was sixty-four at the time—and so they retired me. You know, a computer company, once you reach up in the sixties, they want young minds, so we all left. I was head of shipping and receiving and like I said I was there thirty years and in 2000 I left. I left Hewlett-Packard and have been retired since 2000. Now we're just sitting here wondering. So that's my work history. I worked for them for thirty years and ARE Food Services for twenty-five years.

CZ: So when you worked at Lockheed at fourteen, you were just working in the food services? What kind of job did you do?

CJ: Yes. Well, we did everything. When I first went there, I was just the handy guy. I would go get stuff, wipe dishes, whatever. Then after three years, I moved up as a second cook. When you move up as a first cook and the next thing is chef. I didn't make it to chef, but I was a cook. That's what I did.

CZ: And they trained you there?

CJ: Oh yes, we trained. I could just about do any kind of cooking but I never did. You know, my wife, this is her kitchen. I cook every now and then but she's the head knocker. So that's it.

CZ: When you went to the Rosenwald School, how many teachers were there?

CJ: Three teachers, no two. The old teacher taught the first, second, third, fourth grades, I believe. Then the other one taught the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth. Yeah, I got it right.

CZ: They divided that room into sections?

CJ: Right, we had two rooms.

CZ: Okay, there was a wall between.

CJ: Right. But you could open that wall. When we opened that wall, that's when we had plays and things like that. But yeah, one teacher taught four classes and the other teacher taught four classes. I think I'm right. First, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth. That's right. Two teachers did all that

CZ: How often did you have plays and stuff?

CJ: Probably every day or every week, didn't we? Once a week they'd have something and whatever. It wasn't much but it was fun.

CZ: Did you have parties and stuff over there?

CJ: Oh yes.

CZ: Did you ever go to them? Did you go to them all the time?

CJ: Oh yes.

CZ: What kind of parties?

CJ: Little bitty things. Just little plays and stuff like that.

CZ: And birthdays or weddings or anything like that?

CJ: No, no weddings—just birthdays, Halloween. To be honest with you, it wasn't all that much but it was just something to get by.

CZ: Entertainment.

CJ: Right. And we walked to school. We walked from, do you know where, do you know where Mars Hill is?

CZ: Vaguely.

CJ: We walked from there to school.

CZ: Did anybody ride buses to the school or did everybody walk?

CJ: There wasn't no buses then. They got buses in, let's see, I can't think of the year but I think it was about 1954 or 1955.

CZ: What year did you go to school?

CJ: I went from the time I was seven or eight up until 1952. That's when I quit and went to work. But no, there wasn't no buses; we had to walk. You're not familiar with this but when you come into Acworth now, there's a road there called 92. Well, that wasn't the road then. There was a road right here in Acworth called Similo Drive, it went all the way to Mars Hill. So it wasn't far to walk. It seemed far but now it's the long way around. That was the shortcut then. Right here, this McCall School, it used to be called Acworth School, we all—white and black—got in the road and walked to school. They all would get out of school before we would. When we got out, they'd be sitting and waiting on us. We'd walk home; we lived on them people's farms. My daddy was a sharecropper. We all played, had fun and that was it. When all this here Martin Luther King started, I was already integrated with the white folks. They treated us nice and we treated them nice. I mean, that's just the way it was.

CZ: You never thought it was strange that the white kids were going to one school and you were going to another school?

CJ: We never thought about it. You just did what you had to do. I never did think about it. We just did what we had to do. But they'd be sitting there waiting on us when we come out and we'd walk home together, play together, get out there and hoe cotton and all that stuff together. Just because we went to different schools, I just never thought about it up until it got over. But when I went to work on my job, like I said, there was a few blacks there, most of them were white.

CZ: Most of the blacks were in the food services?

CJ: Yeah. They were cooks, chefs and all that stuff. Most of my bosses then, they was white ladies and they trained us. They taught us a lot, how to do and whatever. Most of the

people were way older than I was. All the people were way older. There were white ladies there, like my supervisor. They were nice to me and I was nice to them. There was another lady, she's dead and gone now; she lived right down there. Her name was Lucy Garden and I worked with her. I worked with another lady - she lived to be about a hundred. Her name was Ms. Carly. But anyway, I worked with her and there was a couple of guys from Cartersville I would ride with back and forth to work until I got me a car. I got married in 1954, is that right? I got married in 1954; then we started housekeeping. First of all we lived over there with a man because his wife had died and we had a son at that time. We had one son and me and my wife just went from there. We moved to Marietta and stayed about four years and then we came back and moved over here. Then we bought this place in 1966 and we built us a house and we've been here ever since.

CZ: Did you purposely build it near the church?

CJ: No, we were living in the projects. Ms. Evelyn Gragg—I know you know her.

CZ: I'm hoping to interview her this afternoon.

CJ: She told us there's a man who owned this property here named George Callahan. He run the post office. She told us he had a lot over here he wanted to sell and we come bought it. Then the next year we built us a house in 1966. Ivey Jones' brother, Jerry, built it. They were house builders. We didn't have no problem with no credit. Like I said, it was the man here that run People Finance Company - I forget his name now - I went to him and told him that I needed a car and I was eighteen. I wasn't no eighteen, I was sixteen. But he let me have credit. I paid him back and my credit has just been booming ever since. I would always pay my bills.

CZ: What kind of car did you get?

CJ: We got a 1953 Chevrolet, yellow and black. I paid him back.

CZ: And that's the car you used to go to work and back?

CJ: Yes. When I got ready to have my house loan, my credit was as good as it could get because I always paid my bills. I never will forget, the first check me and my wife got when I got married, I was making seventy-five cents an hour. I got a check for \$75.00 and I let my wife have it and she went to the store and she spent it all. We were young and she spent it all except a few dollars. I took the bills then and paid them up until 2000 and then I gave them to her.

CZ: That's because you were retired, you didn't have to do that any more.

CJ: Yes, I gave them to her. We've just been here ever since. I was seventeen before I got married and my wife was sixteen so we've been married, fifty-five years. So this is us.

- CZ: Everybody started getting married young back then, didn't they?
- CJ: I guess the reason why we got married was because her grandmamma wouldn't let us see each other much. If you come to their house at 4:00, you had to leave at five after 4:00. So you didn't have much time to mess around. I'm serious!
- CZ: It would seem like you wouldn't want to get married that early because you wouldn't know her if you've only seen her five minutes at a time.
- CJ: Well, you just trusted them. It's different now. It's like I told my wife the other day, we were looking at TV last night, somewhere out in California on a farm there was some kind of stuff is growing out there and it's irrigating the farms They was irrigating the farm. They've got to hire people to get there because strange things are happening every day. See you're still young. This butterfly running around out there now, butterfly is going to be dead, it's going to be gone, it's strange things happening. What people need to start listening to—see that's the reason why I can tell young people something but they're no good, they don't pay you no attention. Like all the old things we listened to, people don't pay it no attention. I don't know what it is, we've been living here this year it'll be forty-three years, these big old worms, you go out there eon the porch now, I've been sweeping those worms for the last two or there weeks. I don't know where they're coming from. It's strange, it's a strange thing happening. God is showing people something and they better listen to it and look at it.
- CZ: Are you talking about crops? What kind of crops did your daddy grow?
- CJ: Cotton, corn, everything. Everything you could raise we had it.
- CZ: Well, then you had your private garden too.
- CJ: Oh yeah. The private garden was just everything: potatoes, lettuce, green beans, onions, tomatoes, just whatever. These here green English peas, you had everything. You have everything running out there that you could eat. Pigs, chickens, guineas, let's see what else, goats, cows. Oh yeah, milk - I milked every day. My daddy had us milk every morning, six in the morning and six in the evening. I mean, no in-between. That way the cow would give more milk. You know, these kids now, they don't want to get up. They say, I milk this morning at seven, maybe that morning at eight. That cow's bag gets so full it would just be stripped. You had to have a system, six to six, and then turn her loose in the pasture. That cow would come home every evening between five and five fifteen because you fed them the real stuff. You would put cottonseeds, just the real food that they would come to eat. They'd eat, they'd have more and you feed them and then you'd turn them loose in the field. We had one little red cow, that cow would give two gallons of milk in the morning and two gallons in the evening - that was a lot of milk. My mama would churn and make butter and we'd have sweet milk, buttermilk, butter. And our smokehouse was full of all kinds of meats. Pork, sausage . . .
- CZ: Did you make the sausage?

- CJ: Oh yes. We made the sausage. Well, this time of year it wasn't quite cold enough to field one. If we'd be running out of meat, you'd have what you'd call a shoat, about 250 pounds. You kill that and that would last you. You didn't start killing hogs until around the last of December or the first of January. Then you'd kill three hogs, put them up, cut them up, have chitlins, liver, hogheads, take the hogheads and make what they call press meat—you don't know about that.
- CZ: I know a little bit about it. My sister used to live in a town where it's the home of the chitlin strut so I know what chitlins are.
- CJ: Like during the winter months, this time of year, my daddy would be gathering. We would have the cotton get ready and we'd bale the cotton. Maybe we'd have ten bales, sometimes there might not be very much. That's when you got your money. You sold the cotton, the owner would give you your part and he'd take his part.
- CZ: Do you know how much the owner would take?
- CJ: Whatever those bales of cotton sold, it was half. We'd get half and he'd get half. This would be all the money you'd get, there wasn't no more money. If my daddy didn't find a job then during the winter months, it was hard to have money.
- CZ: What kind of jobs would he get during the winter?
- CJ: Well, that's what I'm fixing to say. I'm going to tell you. He got with guys that lived around in the area and they'd find a bridge and they'd make corn liquor.
- CZ: Liquor was legal at this time, right?
- CJ: I don't know. They did it, if the revenuer would catch them they'd get them. That's just the way it was. They would get together and go down on a branch and we'd bring it home and cooked in the corn, in the old toe sack. That's hard for you to believe, calling it something like that. He would sell it and that's the way we lived during the winter months. During the winter months, if you had wanted something sweet, if you didn't have the sugar or the money to buy the sugar you used syrup. We had plenty of syrup most of the time we used syrup in our coffee. That's the way it was.
- CZ: Did you have biscuits and syrup for dessert?
- CJ: Oh Lord, what you talking about? You had biscuits and syrup every day.
- CZ: That was our dessert when I was kid. We'd have it for dessert.
- CJ: My mama would make what you call sweetbread teacakes. Like I said, there's a smokehouse full of meat. You had all kinds of meat, sausage, all kinds. You know when you cut your hogs, you had what you called middlings, ham and shoulder. We had plenty of food but you just got tired of biscuits and things. Like I said, that would be all you had

and you wanted something different. You know, up in the city you didn't have any money to buy nothing that you could find so you just ate what you had. As far as wildlife we ate possum, squirrels, rabbit.

CZ: Did you go fishing?

CJ: Yes, every now and then but there wasn't much fishing going on. The way we caught fish, we'd go down to the creek and dam up the creek and let it dry up and back up. We'd get all the fish we wanted. See, once you dam it up and go downstream, you could go down there and find all the fish you want because there wasn't no water down there. Then we got all the fish we wanted, we'd just let it go back again.

CZ: You talk about going and buying stuff from town to eat, there were restaurants and stuff in town, though, right?

CJ: Yes. There was stuff here. Now, I'm going to tell you, my grandmamma, she knew a lot of the white store owners. Every Saturday evening come uptown and. See back in those days, everybody knew everybody. We would come and get what they call beef boxes, They'd cut off bologna, there'd be about that much on a piece of bologna, there'd be four or five weenies and just stuff like that. They called them beef boxes. Meat boxes, and they would save us the leftovers and that's what we ate. But that's the way it was babe, it wasn't bad. My dad bought us shoes. We had shoes and clothes.

CZ: That would be after he'd sold the cotton.

CJ: Right. And that was good. If he didn't find a job maybe saw milling. There was a lot of that going on too. Some of the men would have sawmills.

CZ: Yes, there was a big sawmill that they were talking about.

CJ: I tell you the man was named Reb Riches, I never will forget it.

CZ: What was his first name?

CJ: Reb.

CZ: R-E-B?

CJ: Yes, that's all I ever knew.

CZ: Is it a black man or a white man?

CJ: He was white.

CZ: Weren't there a bunch of businesses that were owned by black folks too? Because I understood that there was a good bit of money in the black community at one time, that's how these churches got built.

CJ: I don't know nothing about that. That was way before my time. The only thing I can remember is in the late forties and early fifties and on from there. That's what I come through. We lived on a farm called Homer Womack's farm.

CZ: How do you spell that? W-o-m-a-c-k?

CJ: I guess so. Then we lived on the Kienel farm, which was, the Kienels owned a lot. They used to own Unique back then. They made sod at Unique Mill, and they kept that up until I guess - when did they go out of business - it was in the late sixties. I worked two jobs, I worked there for about a year, I was working at night at the ARE Food Service. I'd go in at 11:00 and get off about 7:00. Then I'd go up to Unique about 7:00 and work till 4:00. But at that time, Acworth was full of businesses. They had Coats & Clark, Unique, what else did they have around here? The Harrison's had a chicken farm that they supplied. There was a lot going on but now there ain't nothing here. All the little mills and business just shut down except the old mill up there. Now that used to be, the old mill up here where the Old Mill restaurant is, my wife used to work there. What did you do there?

Willie Mae Johnson (wife): Oh, we did fabrics. It used to be something else in there before we did the fabric. Upholsterers, I think.

CJ: But see, all these yarn places - I say yarn, they make fabrics and stuff - all that's gone. Now there's nothing here in Acworth but a few restaurants. That's about it.

CZ: So where did the money in the black community come from, from these people that owned the cafes and businesses?

CJ: We don't know. I don't know.

WMJ: We don't know but they sold plates I was told. Sold food, you know. They raised money that way; the black people themselves. They were just trying to survive and the main thing they were together, you know. Together we can do things; divided we will fall. So that's a problem we have now, we're not together like we should be as people.

CJ: See, that's how Obama got elected, togetherness and they believe in it. But now, after he got to be President and now they want to kind of pull away from him, they don't want to go along with his plan but I don't know what's going to happen.

WMJ: We'll survive. God is above it all.

CJ: Yeah, if they don't get back together and stick with the plan, I don't know what's going to happen.

- CZ: When you were going to school did you think one day that there would be a president that was a black man?
- CJ: No! I didn't think black would even be black no more. I'll be honest with you. I mean, it just wasn't there. Even the guy down here I was listening to him this morning, I can't recall his name right now, he's eighty-eight years old. He's a NAACP leader; you probably know who I'm talking about. I can't recall the name, but he's eighty-eight years old and he said, no, he didn't ever think he'd see nothing like that. Reverend Laury. I was able to talk to him yesterday it was his birthday and he was eighty-eight. All the black schools got together and they was asking him this morning did he ever think he'd see that and he said no. He just never did. So me either. We don't know what's going to happen. But it's a lot of strange things happening out in the world now. I think God wants us to see it and tell somebody about it, because like I was telling you, all those big, old worms up on our carport, butterflies flying around in October. They're supposed to be dead but they're still here.
- CZ: It's been kind of a warm fall so I guess that's it. The crepe myrtles are starting to get their blooms back on too.
- CJ: Yeah, but there's a lot of strange things happening but we don't know what it is. I think God is putting a lot of things out there for us to see to learn from. See, people that got away from the old traditions and things.
- CZ: The way you all are talking there was such a sense of community back in the day when you were younger. Everybody just seemed to know everybody.
- CJ: Yeah! Now her grandma (Mrs. Johnson) that raised her knew every white person. You could go in Acworth and get something from every white person around here. That's the way they lived their life.
- WMJ: And see, I'm seventy-one and my grandmother, you know, she would tell me about she would live next door to white people. You know, it's been integrated all the time. In some areas, they would come and borrow sugar and milk from my grandmother to cook with and didn't think anything about it. Like I said, togetherness, and that's the way God wants us to live. They were just together and they loved one another. They knew one another, but it's different now.
- CZ: So you didn't have the kind of protests and stuff in Acworth that you did in other places, like downtown Atlanta?
- CJ: It didn't happen here. They were never like that around here. We may live across the tracks but if there was anything you want over there from white people, you get it from them. My wife worked for the Eatons, they would give her anything she wanted. They own the store up here. But now everybody done got on their high horse it looks like.

CZ: Do you think it was different because Acworth was a small town so blacks and whites knew each other and were closer together? It wasn't like "us" and "them", it was more of a "we're together" kind of thing.

WMJ: Yeah, small town togetherness.

CZ: Because I think when you know each other you don't have that fear of, okay, I don't know who you are so I don't know what you're going to do.

WMJ: Exactly. You trust one another. You know about each other so it's easier that way.

CZ: Right. I think a lot of the hostility is fear from not knowing somebody.

WMJ: Exactly now, that is right.

CZ: Have you all always gone to the church across the street?

WMJ: Yes. Years ago we would have church every other Sunday, we would have it at Zion Hill, later we would go at Greater Bethel Methodist Church, that was then, but now of course, we have it every Sunday here and they have theirs ever Sunday but that's the way it was back then in the fifties, the late forties and fifties.

CZ: You all shared a minister with AME Church, right?

WMJ: No, we didn't share a minister, they had their own and we had ours but we would close down, like on one Sunday and Zion Hill and go to the Methodist and then vice versa, they would do that.

CZ: What was the reason for that?

CJ: They made the rules and we went by them. That's the reason why now, like if a preacher come here, would come here to this church and he'll ask us why y'all do that? We didn't do it, they did it. We're just carrying out the order. You were talking about Reverend Houston, when he started his church about ten years ago, he come out to our church. He was a member of Zion Hill back then and he just went out on his own. When he went out on his own ten years ago, I never will forget on a Friday, he brought some of those patches around saying he was going to start his own church. He went with Reverend Black and would start his church in the evening at 2:00 o'clock. When he started, me and my wife helped him.

CZ: You're talking about Tim Houston?

CJ: Yeah, we were with him up until today, we're with him. If he's going to do something and they'll let us know, we'll help him. I never will forget when he started church on Sunday. That Sunday when he started, me and my wife was sitting out there waiting on them to come. I'd help him do devotion. We would sing and pray and all that stuff.

Reverend Houston, I will always help him. If you want the truth, he would tell you the truth; he don't hold up for nobody. I don't care who it is, he's just frank. I will help him until the day I die. If he needs my help, we will give him some - whatever we can. We are going to stay at our church but if he needs our help we will be there for him, sure will.

CZ: That's the community that we're talking about.

CJ: But from that to then, you about got all you can get out of me. I don't know nothing else.

CZ: Okay. Well, I know you're tired; I'll let you rest then. We'll stop.

END OF INTERVIEW

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 12
Interview with Willie Mae Johnson
Conducted by C.L. Zibanejadrad
Wednesday, 4 November 2009
Location: The Johnson residence, Acworth, Georgia

CZ: Mrs. Johnson, can you give me your full name?

WJ: My name is Willie Mae Johnson.

CZ: What was your maiden name?

WJ: Brown.

CZ: Did you tell me you were raised by your grandmother?

WJ: Yes, I was. I was born in Cobb County in Marietta, Georgia, and I came to live with my grandmother when I was eight years old because my parents had died. My mother - I don't remember her - but my dad died. So, my grandmother raised me and another brother and sister.

CZ: Older brother and sister?

WJ: Well, younger sister and older brother.

CZ: How did your dad die?

WJ: He got killed.

CZ: In an accident?

WJ: Not really. It really was an accident but not in a car wreck or anything, he got shot.

CZ: An accidental shooting?

WJ: Yes.

CZ: So then you came to Acworth to live with your grandmother?

WJ: Yes, she raised us.

CZ: Was that your father's mother?

WJ: My mother's mother.

CZ: What was her name?

WJ: Her name was Lizzie Furr. Her husband was William Cicero Furr but everybody knew him as Bud Furr. Uncle Bud.

CZ: Had they always lived in Acworth?

WJ: No. Not really. I think they lived maybe—I'm from Acworth, maybe Acworth but sort of out in the country area I think before.

CZ: Had they worked as sharecroppers when they lived out of the town?

WJ: Probably. I'm not for sure of that.

CZ: They never talked to you about it?

WJ: No.

CZ: But when you came to live with them they lived in Acworth, right?

WJ: Oh sure, right here on Northside Drive.

CZ: So kind of in the neighborhood.

WJ: I heard her talk a lot about Red Rock so they lived out in that area of Red Rock at that time. I don't know if they ever lived in Kennesaw, Georgia or not. I know I had uncles that lived in Kennesaw years back and they moved here. I couldn't tell you when.

CZ: What kind of work did they do when they lived in Acworth?

WJ: My grandmother she was a domestic worker and my grandfather wasn't working when we came to live with them. He was just home. He was like ten years older than she was and she was up in her years herself when we came to live with her. She wasn't a young grandmother at all. But she was a good person and she did the best she could to raise us because my mom got sick and I don't know what all. Grandma would always say that my mother knew she was dying and she wanted my grandmother to take care of her children. Of course, by that being grandmother's daughter she did. She did the best that she could and she raised us till we all moved out and got married.

CZ: Was your mom an only child?

WJ: Oh no. My grandmother had ten kids; five girls and five boys. So no, she wasn't the only one.

CZ: But you were the only grandchildren that lived with your grandparents?

WJ: No. It was three of us and plus I had another cousin that was living there at the time. Another one was like in and out at the time plus another one. See, what happened, she had another daughter to die and she raised this grandson from a newborn baby on. Well, he was number one there. Then, she had another older grandson. I think he was the oldest grandson of all of them. Well, he lived with my grandmother and he was in and out until he got grown and left. Sometimes he would come back. He was there. Plus, another first cousin, a daughter's son was there, also. The daughter was married and she came back home for a while and left, but the son still stayed there - the grandson. So, Grandmother had a house full of us.

CZ: And she worked?

WJ: She worked as a domestic worker at the time.

CZ: That was a lot of work.

WJ: It was a lot of work.

CZ: Did she say anything about whether she went to school or not? Do you know if she knew how to read?

WJ: Yes, she knew how to read and she knew how to write. She was a Sunday School teacher. How far she went to school I don't know but she was a smart, thrifty lady. Yes, she could read, she could write.

CZ: But she never mentioned anything about going to school or how she learned how to read?

WJ: She mentioned going to school but how she learned how I don't know. I remember she was telling a story and I really don't have it together but she was coming from school and her and another girl maybe had a little argument or something. I just sort of remember that. So, she did go to school, yes.

CZ: Did she own a Bible since she taught Sunday School?

WJ: Oh Lord, yes. Oh yes.

CZ: Did she read that to you when you were little?

WJ: Oh yes. That's where I got a lot of my standards and you know. Just to live as an upright lady through my grandmother because she was inspirational to me. She was just a good lady. She believed in God and she knew from where her help comes from which was the Almighty God. Sure, she owned several Bibles.

CZ: What about your grandfather? Did he read and write?

WJ: He wasn't too much into the Bible. I guess he could read and write but he just never did open books that much. He was a knowledgeable man and everybody loved him. He was a man that told a lot of jokes and he would get people to laugh about different things that he would say but he would say it in a joking way. I do not know much about education with him or whatever.

CZ: They lived in town, but did he keep a garden even though he was retired?

WJ: Grandmother didn't have a garden. I think she had a few tomato plants or something like that but where she lived we didn't have a garden at that time. No, she had a big pecan tree and it took up a lot of room and she had a plum tree, the Santa Rosa plums. They were very good, and she had an apple tree.

CZ: That works. That's as good as a garden.

WJ: That works. You used to see a lot of apple trees at that time and even peach trees too.

CZ: And a lot of pecan trees, they're still around from back then.

WJ: Yes.

CZ: When you went to the Rosenwald School, did they just teach like reading and writing or did they teach you any skills, like trade skills?

WJ: No trade skills. It was just like reading, writing, arithmetic, English, you know.

CZ: Because when they first built that school it was called a trade school.

WJ: I didn't know.

CZ: That was kind of the idea of Rosenwald was to teach people a trade and also teach them how to read and write so that's why I'm asking you that but I don't think they ever actually did it.

WJ: No, when I was going they didn't. It was just, what I call the standard; reading, writing and arithmetic and you learned some English, geography a little bit, you know.

CZ: And trade things you learned at home, like your grandmother was a domestic. She would have taught you how to cook, how to clean, how to take care of babies.

WJ: Exactly.

CZ: So that was something you were taught at home rather than at school?

WJ: Exactly, yes.

CZ: Do you remember, did they teach you moral stuff? Did you pray at the beginning of class?

WJ: Oh yes. We prayed. We'd have devotion. We'd sing a song. We'd say the Lord's Prayer. We would acknowledge the pledge of allegiance to the flag.

CZ: Did they ever teach you any other moral lessons in class or was that pretty much it?

WJ: That was pretty much it. On Fridays we would have like a little program going - maybe say a speech. See, I'm from a singing family and my brother, sister and I would sing. We would have a program and we would sing songs. That was one of the things that we loved to do and we were used to doing it. My grandmother could sing and my dad. He had what they call a quartet group at that time and he could sing. We would rehearse at least twice a week every week. We would know the songs that they were singing in those days a cappella, without music, so that was one thing that we would enjoy having like a little program on Fridays and we would do our singing.

CZ: But they kept you in line though, didn't they?

WJ: Oh yes, no doubt about that. That's right.

CZ: Did your teacher have a paddle?

WJ: She did. She had like a leather flat piece of leather, like it had some kind of substance in the middle but it was black on both sides and it was about three inches wide. She would hold your hand and she would hit you in your hand, so many licks or whatever. That's how she would chastise you.

CZ: Depending on how bad you were, you got so many licks?

WJ: That's right. It would hurt, too. I was always a pretty good person but you know, in those days, and even now, I say Satan - the Devil - is very busy. We would have kids in those days would tell what we call stories on you, but now we know it's untrue. Untrue is nothing but a lie. They would tell a lie and they would tell the teacher about it. They would say, "Ms. Nealy" - C.M. Nealy, she was a teacher. She lived in Atlanta and she would take the bus to come up to go to school. She didn't drive: her transportation was the Greyhound bus. But anyway, they told her one day, they said, "Ms. Nealy, Willie Mae was talking about my mama." You know, just stuff like that and I would tell her, "No, I haven't been saying anything about her mama." She didn't believe me and she would hold my hand and she would give me two or three licks in my hand. It hurt very, very bad. So, things like that happened in school. I guess I really didn't have the instinct in me to tell my grandmother, so it happened a few times. I went home and I told my grandmother about it. Like I said, she was a strict, upright lady. She'd tell you what she had to tell you, didn't matter who. So, she went to school and she explained to the teacher. She says, "Now, Willie Mae says she didn't do it. Don't whup her for anything she didn't do. These are homeless children and I am taking care of them and I do not

want them mistreated.” So I never did have any more trouble out of her whupping me any more because I did get something I didn’t deserve. But that piece of leather strap really hurt, it hurt.

CZ: I wonder where she got it from?

WJ: I don’t know. I don’t know where she got it from.

CZ: I’ve never heard of something that looked like that. Somebody else had said something about a strap that you sharpen those old timey razors. They said that the teacher used that. I don’t know what those actually looked like. I don’t think I’ve ever actually seen one. Do you remember if you had desks?

WJ: Sure. Yes, we had desks. We had little desks; individual ones. Each one would sit in their desk with the little top on top and it would come back like this and you’d have a little line where you could lay your pencil on and write.

CZ: Did you have the inkwells put in there?

WJ: No. I don’t remember those.

CZ: I went to school one time and the desks were so old it actually had the little hole for the ink.

WJ: But you know I don’t remember that.

CA: But those were the desks, you’ve probably seen them where the person in front of you, their seat would be attached to your desk.

WJ: I have. Ours may have been that way at the time.

CZ: Because by my time that was a kind of old timey desk. That was when I was in first grade and I went to a really old school and that’s the way our desks were. Then the front desk had that little seat up there by itself so if you were bad you had to go up to the front row and sit in that little seat in the front so the teacher could keep an eye on you. I always thought that was kind of cool. And you could lift the desktop up for storage inside of it.

WJ: That brings back memories. Ours may have had that little hole there.

CZ: For your ink?

WJ: Yes. But I know we didn’t use ink then. Not for school.

CZ: You probably just had the lead pencils.

WJ: We did.

CZ: I'm trying to figure out where they got the desk from for the Rosenwald School because the community was supposed to provide that, too. That wasn't given by the Rosenwald fund; you had to get your own desks and stuff.

WJ: Of course, we never did get new books. I don't remember ever having new books; study books or any kind of book. They were always used books. I've learned that they would bring them from the white schools; that's what was told to me. They came from the white schools and given to the black kids. Then it wasn't said "black"; the "Negro" kids.

CZ: Right. That's what all the newspaper articles said - or colored.

WJ: Colored, exactly. Some pages would be torn, you know, but that's what we had.

CZ: Or marked on?

WJ: Exactly. So we had to use it and I guess it was just the only way that we knew, you know. We knew that probably wasn't the right thing to do because we were just as good as anybody. We're God's people, and we're meant to be on this earth. We're meant to be treated just like everybody. It was sort of like a down cast. It's something that I didn't dwell with; you sort of think it's just a way of life at that time and you go on.

CZ: That's like Mr. Johnson, when I asked him, when you walked with your white friends to school and they went one way and you went the other, didn't you ever think, "I wonder why they have to go to that school and I have to go to this school?"

WJ: That's true. You'd be wondering that.

CZ: That's just the way it was.

WJ: That's the way it was then. That's true.

CZ: Kids today, they don't understand that.

WJ: No, not at all.

CZ: They don't know anything about it. They look at you like you came from another planet. You said your grandmother was involved in church, was she involved in this church?

WJ: Oh yes, she went to Zion Hill Missionary Baptist Church, yes.

CZ: That was before this building was built. When was this building built?

WJ: It's a hundred . . .

CZ: Oh okay, so she's been going there for a while. It was already there?

WJ: Yes.

CZ: She never said where they got the money to build it?

WJ: Well, they sold, the women would get together and cook and sell plates and do different things like that to raise their money.

CZ: Did they sell them just to the black community or did the white folks come?

WJ: No, they were just for sale. Normally, I imagine, just to black people who patronized and bought the plates, the food, here. I imagine. I don't know, but they were for sale, whoever wanted it.

CZ: Because Ms. Gragg said she had a white friend that would come and eat dinner with her and she was telling a story about her father came to pick her up and said, it's time to come eat dinner and she said, "I already ate dinner." So I'm sure they loved the cooking.

WJ: No doubt. That's what my grandmother would do. She would cook where she worked. In those days a lot of women that's all they would do to go and cook.

CZ: I guess they would make boxed dinners. I read in a newspaper clipping, something about boxed dinners that they would auction off for money.

WJ: Yes. But anyway they built the church. That was before I knew whatever. They built the church and moved in debt free. They didn't owe anything and in those days that was a church, you know what I'm saying? A big church and they moved in debt free, they said. Didn't owe a penny on it.

CZ: So the minister must have had a lot to do with raising money.

WJ: I imagine so, in those days, too. I imagine so.

CZ: When you were little the minister was still like the leader of the community and you'd kind of turn to him?

WJ: He lived in Atlanta and I had great respect for him, I think everybody did. His name was Reverend P.S. Williams and he was a great man. But yes, people really put their trust in preachers then and they were really someone to look up to. They didn't change the stream of water; you know what I'm saying? He was very much involved I imagine into things.

CZ: I know right after the Civil War a lot of the times those were the only people that could read so you looked to them to be the educated leaders, that's the person we turn to for advice. But I imagine it stayed that way for a long time. Your minister now lives here.

WJ: No, no, he lives in Alpharetta.

CZ: Okay, he lives out near me. That's a drive.

WJ: Yes. He's been with us five years. Yes, that's a drive, it sure is. He's still a newcomer yet.

CZ: After five years?

WJ: We keep them for quite a while at Zion Hill. We don't change, not too fast.

CZ: Your grandmother worked for white families, but did you ever socialize with white families?

WJ: Sure. Yes. Always.

CZ: What did you do? Just go over and play at their house?

WJ: No, when I was a little girl going to Rosenwald school, in the evening after I got about fifteen years of age, when I would come from school I would go and iron. I would clean house. I really didn't socialize to go and play or anything like that with them, if that's what you mean. I was friendly. People were just friendly to me, I was friendly to them. No problem in that respect at all. But of course, I do a lot of associating, you know, with whites. Sure.

CZ: You're talking about ironing. I don't think most kids would understand having someone come over and iron for you because that was back before there was that non-wrinkle fabric and polyester and all that. Everything was cotton. And you had to iron every piece of clothing you owned.

WJ: Well, when I started off I would get forty cents an hour. Now, isn't that something? And the lady wanted to know, "Willie Mae, how did you learn to iron?" I said, "Well, didn't nobody teach me, it was just one of those things that I could do." I wasn't taught to do a lot of things that I did. It just sort of came naturally.

CZ: With practice.

WJ: Yes, with practice, much better.

CZ: I'm still not good at ironing. I was reading something about when black folks went into the store, even if a white person came in afterwards, they'd have to wait until the white person got waited on.

WJ: Yes.

CZ: You had to do that?

WJ: You know I didn't. It didn't happen personally to me but I've seen it done before. I have walked into a few stores where the waitress or the clerk would be in there and would follow you around - every move you make. They wouldn't do a white person that way. Of course, I didn't like that at all. But no, that didn't happen to me personally but I know about it. Yes.

CZ: Do you remember your grandparents ever voting?

WJ: Oh yes. My grandmother, sure, I remember. You know when Jimmy Carter was running for president that stuck with me. He was campaigning and we met him in Marietta at one of the places. It was an outlet store in Marietta. Anyway, my grandmother and I and my sister was there at this particular store and he came in and we met him. Oh sure, Grandma would vote.

CZ: When did you first vote? How old were you?

WJ: Let's see, how old are you when you vote? That's when I started voting.

CZ: Eighteen.

WJ: Yes, and I've been voting from then on. Oh yes.

CZ: Really? So your grandmother was really active?

WJ: Yes, she was into things, yes.

CZ: That's good. Did she ever want you to get educated to be a particular thing or did she just want you to get married and have kids?

WJ: Well, no, I don't think she wanted me to get married. Well, she knew I would have eventually but she would want me to live a good life, you know what I'm saying. She never did say anything in that nature. Of course, I wanted to be a schoolteacher. That was one thing - an elementary teacher and I loved singing. I wanted to be a singer and I wanted to be an interior decorator, so those three things. I was going to be a busy lady but it didn't happen.

CZ: That crazy marriage stuff just gets in the way sometimes.

WJ: Yes, it didn't happen.

CZ: Did your brother go to school with you?

WJ: Yes, we all three went to the same school.

CZ: What did he end up doing?

WJ: Nothing really. He worked at Kennestone Hospital for awhile. Then, after he was a man, he'd go and cut grass. He didn't get into anything.

CZ: Sometimes I feel maybe families push the girls a little bit more than they did the boys because they felt like they had a little bit more opportunity to be teachers or nurses whereas men didn't necessarily have as much of an opportunity.

WJ: Could be, yes. So he was just, I guess you'd say an average person but not holding a big title or nothing.

CZ: Of course, you'd have to have gone down to Atlanta or Marietta to go to high school.

WJ: Yes, Marietta.

CZ: That would have been a lot - especially with your poor grandmother, all those kids and working. That would have been a lot of strain on her.

WJ: Oh, it was.

CZ: But none of you went down to Marietta?

WJ: I did. My cousins, my sister, sure, to Lemon Street.

CZ: Your cousins, were they girls or boys?

WJ: Boys.

CZ: Did you all go at the same time?

WJ: Different times. Well, no, it ended up at the same time but we were in different grades. Yes, sure.

CZ: Did they have a bus that went down there from here?

WJ: We had to catch the Greyhound bus. What was it? I guess Cobb County or the government would buy our bus tickets. Once a month we would get a little pack of tickets. We would go up here with everybody around that was going to the school and we would catch the bus to go to school. We had to walk from the bus station from Marietta to Lemon Street and that was a long walk. It was pretty bad in the wintertime.

CZ: Was the bus station still where it is at now?

WJ: No, it's in a little different place now, but it was a long walk. We made it. Like I said, it was a way of life and when you don't know any different or anything else, you take it and you go on.

CZ: I'm sorry, if you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

WJ: I was born in 1938. I'm seventy-one years old.

CZ: So it would have been in the '50s when you went to high school?

WJ: Yes, sure.

CZ: Then they built the Roberts school over there.

WJ: They built the Roberts and I was the vice president for a while at that school.

CZ: Oh really, what are the duties of the vice president?

WJ: Vice president of the PTA.

CZ: So they did have a PTA?

WJ: They sure did. My son was going there and you know about different duties of the school and what's going on and what should be for the good of the students and things like that. I remember the PTA. We got together and the people in the community would sell cakes and different things and would raise the money. We ended up buying a new piano for the school for the auditorium area. And the school, it hadn't been built very long at that time, that's when they got rid of it and they ended up with integration. We was wondering what happened to the new piano we bought.

CZ: What happened to it?

WJ: We don't know. We bought it but someone got it.

CZ: It's in someone's house?

WJ: Yes. We had a stage and we bought new curtains.

CZ: Yes, I've been in there. I guess they call it the cafetorium.

WJ: Yes, and we paid for those too. We would have like Halloween parties and we'd make sweets, cakes, cookies and all that and we would sell all of that and make money. We would put it in the treasury and we would buy things. I remember we bought musical stands for the band. They needed little stands to put their music on and we bought a bunch of those - the PTA did. We don't know what happened to all that stuff. We sure don't. In those days people would take things and we didn't know. But I thought a lot of times it wasn't fair for them to take it. We bought it. At least they could have said something about it and check with us. We would have known where things went but we didn't.

CZ: As far as they knew it could have been someone's personal stuff.

WJ: Sure.

CZ: But you know some people have to be underhanded to try to get around stuff. But that's too bad they took that piano. They could have donated it to the community.

WJ: Exactly. Sure could have.

CZ: You said something that there was supposed to be some kind of a wealthy black community at one time. You said your grandmother had mentioned it to you before? Do you remember that?

WJ: A wealthy community?

CZ: They had their own businesses?

WJ: Oh yes, I do. Yes. Okay, my aunt and uncle, they had a café. We called it a café then. Lucy Mae and Price Oliver's café. There was another café, Mr. Ernest Morris. There was another one, Ms. Lenora Hardin. Uptown here on Southside Drive there was a man named Mr. Jeff McConnell, he had a shoe shop. I think here and I don't know what else. Now, myself personally, I don't remember it. My grandmother was telling me about it. I don't think Claude remembers it either but I don't. But oh yes, there were black people that were in business.

CZ: Would that have been before the Depression or during the Depression?

WJ: When was the Depression?

CZ: The thirties.

WJ: I believe it was during the Depression—that's just my thinking—sometime within that length of time.

CZ: Ms. Hill's mama had some kind of café.

WJ: Are you talking about?

CZ: Helen Hill.

WJ: That's the one. Lenora—that was her mom. Her name was Lenora and his name was Ed.

CZ: She had a lot of work to do, too. Also, she had a place up at the lake and she had the store?

WJ: Oh yes, George Washington Carver.

CZ: She said that she ran that restaurant up there too for a while.

WJ: Who did?

CZ: Mrs. Hill's mom.

WJ: Did she?

CZ: She said she worked up there for a while too until it closed.

WJ: Okay, I didn't remember that. I don't know that.

CZ: Did you ever go there?

WJ: Oh yes. That was a nice hang out place on Sundays, somewhere to go. Yes, I went out there a few times.

CZ: Was that before Acworth Beach opened?

WJ: I think we did still have Acworth at the time. I think so.

CZ: Did you ever go up to Acworth Beach or was it segregated?

WJ: I did not go. The only time that I would go, like in later years, you know, we would use the beach house for something but that as in later, later years. But as far as me going to the beach, no.

CZ: Because you didn't want to or you didn't feel comfortable going?

WJ: I'm just not a person to hang around at beaches.

CZ: You're not a water kind of person.

WJ: No. I don't swim so no. I didn't hang out there at all. I don't know about anybody else, but I didn't.

CZ: Let's see. You never had any big civil rights protests or anything here in Acworth did you?

WJ: You know I was thinking that earlier. In my times I don't remember any. I'll be honest with you. The things in that category that I know of and remember is something I read or I see on TV.

CZ: In Marietta I think they had a sit in one time there at the drug store.

WJ: I've heard about that. I think so.

CZ: But y'all didn't have anything like that here?

WJ: No, I do not remember anything honestly. No. I'm trying to make sure. No. Not to my knowledge, I don't think so. I heard at one time there were Ku Klux was going to come through Acworth.

CZ: Like a march?

WJ: Yes. I don't know whether they did or not because news got out from the Acworth city hall and it was talked about but I don't remember them coming through or anything. No.

CZ: Well, if they did you wouldn't want to go up and watch them anyway, would you?

WJ: No, I wouldn't have. No.

CZ: Do you think maybe because there's a few like well off white folks in Acworth, the majority of people were just regular white folks and it was regular black folks and you sort of lived together, it wasn't such an hierarchy here that made race relations a lot better than say, Marietta?

WJ: Yes, I think so. You know, in Acworth, from what I know, the people are just nice, average people. Wealthy people? I knew wealthy people and they're just nice people but you think about it. I mean, they stayed in their place and we stayed in ours. They know how to treat people and that's all you want. You want people to treat you the way you should be treated. But in those days everybody knew everybody so well and they was around them so long. They knew one another and they just got along pretty good as far as I know.

CZ: With the piano, did you ever think about asking somebody what happened to it?

WJ: I did but it was even years later that I was just thinking to myself. If I had thought it at the time I would have.

CZ: It was just sort of just a shock that the Roberts School was closing down?

WJ: Yes. I just didn't think about it. I would have even asked the president of the PTA. I was the vice president and I would have asked her or I could have check with some of the teachers or something. Maybe they would have known something or somebody. But at that time I didn't think, I wasn't using my senses in the right area I guess. Who knows? God only knows who got the piano but it was a new piano.

CZ: When they moved them over to Acworth, did you stay on the PTA?

WJ: No. No I didn't.

CZ: Why not?

WJ: Don't know why. The school closed and that was it. There wasn't anything else.

CZ: You didn't feel like you were really a part of the Acworth School?

WJ: It wasn't that I didn't think I was a part but it was just like period and so my mind wasn't focused to think or whatever. Once they closed it and they went strung out their merry way, I didn't.

CZ: Did you feel like a little bit of an ownership with Roberts School that you didn't feel once they moved it?

WJ: Probably, maybe a little bit. Because see, my son went on to the middle school.

CZ: What was the name of the middle school?

WJ: The middle school was Awtrey Middle School at the time and when he finished there of course, he went on to North Cobb.

CZ: But you didn't think about going on the PTA for Awtrey?

WJ: No, I didn't. I really didn't.

CZ: You don't know why?

WJ: I don't know why because I really didn't go to meetings to PTA. I guess they had them, I really don't know.

CZ: Did you just feel uncomfortable because it was different?

WJ: No, I didn't even feel that either. It just wasn't no type of instinct in that order.

CZ: Maybe because it just wasn't a part of this community.

WJ: I guess so, you know.

CZ: Because there's such ownership with the two churches and the two schools you kind of have a feeling of community and once they moved away from that you kind of lost it.

WJ: Yes, that was it.

CZ: Maybe that's what happened to some of the kids where they started dropping out and drugs and stuff. They kind of lost that feeling of community.

WJ: Yes. Could be. Because I just didn't get involved in anything after that school-wise.

CZ: But you're still involved with the church, right?

WJ: Oh yes.

CZ: What do you do over there? Do you teach Sunday School?

WJ: I have. I taught Sunday School for many, many years. I sang in the choir and president of the choir. I'm on the Mother's board. The Mother's board is a good standard of the church, you know. You're an upright lady and you have wisdom and you supposed to have eyes for the right things. If there is a wrong, you should correct it—In other words, just an upright person. That's my thing now.

CZ: So do you feel like the church is still a part of the community? Is everybody a part of the church?

WJ: Yes, it is part of the community, yes.

CZ: Does it ever do fund raisers any more for things?

WJ: Occasionally now. Not like it used to. They had quite a bit of fish fries because some fund raisers you got to know what to have. If not you will not raise much money. You do pretty good with fish fries but not bake sales anymore.

CZ: We're running out of tape, so I guess we'll end here.

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