

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 EVELYN GRAGG

COBB NAACP/CIVIL RIGHTS SERIES, NO. 24

CONDUCTED BY CLAUDIA ZIBANAJADRAD

WEDNESDAY, 7 OCTOBER 2009

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 24
Interview with Evelyn Gragg
Conducted by Claudia Zibanajadrad
Wednesday, 7 October 2009
Location: Home of Ms. Gragg, Acworth, Georgia

CZ: I'm talking to Evelyn Gragg, and you were born in 1907?

EG: October 12, 1907.

CZ: So you'll be 102 in about a week or so.

EG: Next Monday.

CZ: Are you going to have a big birthday party for that?

EG: Well, I don't know if I'll have a party. I've got so many grandchildren that we'll just have a party here. I don't know what they're going to do.

CZ: Oh, it'll be fun! Well, I'm going to take you way back to your school days; that's what I'm interested in is the black schools. You said that you had gone to school in a Mason Hall.

EG: Mason Hall was back there on that road that goes behind the projects. You know where the white church is up there [Acworth Christian Church, 4476 Northside Drive]. It's a little road [School Street] that goes all the way around. My school sat down in there—the old Mason school.

CZ: Was it a black Masons that owned it or white Masons that owned that building?

EG: I don't know who owned it, but it was black teachers.

CZ: Was it abandoned? Nobody else was using it but the school, right?

EG: That's all; it was used for the school

CZ: When you went to that school, do you know how old the building was? Was it like really old at that time?

EG: Well, it seemed like it wasn't painted; it was just bare looking.

CZ: But it had windows and doors and everything.

EG: Yes, it was a nice place.

CZ: Just nobody ever whitewashed it?

EG: Not that I know of.

CZ: It was two stories?

EG: Yes, you come in the back door and then go downstairs to our school.

CZ: When you went in the front door you had to go downstairs to get to the first floor?

EG: Yes, had the stairs right next to the wall. I'll never forget that. Our teacher was Ms. Mary Buffington. That house up the street there with the high steps out above that church up here, that's where she lived.

CZ: Buffington. And she was the lower grades teacher or the upper grades?

EG: It's been so long. It was a big building, and there was one [teacher] in one room and another room.

CZ: So when you went to that school what kind of subjects did you do? Did you do all of them?

EG: I wish I had brought that little book in here. We studied the encyclopedia, and we had English. Yes, it was all of it.

CZ: What kind of books did you have?

EG: They had everything just like a school has. I wish I had brought that book. I didn't think to bring it. It was the encyclopedia that thick.

CZ: Oh, about an inch thick.

EG: I wish you could see it. I don't know how come I brought it home, but I didn't steal it. But I gathered my books sometimes, and I guess it was gathered in my books, and I brought it home. It's about this big. It says "encyclopedia" on it. It didn't have picture pages in it, but it was an encyclopedia from A to Z. That's what we had back then. I won a couple of encyclopedias from the *Constitution*, on account of they had that puzzle in the paper and I won. Every weekend they have something for you to try to figure out, and I was pretty good, too. I figured it out, and they sent me two big old encyclopedias.

CZ: Then you had to go to Atlanta to go to high school?

EG: Yes, I went to Washington High.

CZ: Did you stay with your aunt?

EG: I stayed with the preacher's wife.

CZ: The preacher here?

EG: No, not now; it was way back. He's been gone a long time. He was the pastor over here, and his wife told my grandmother—my mother died when I was two years old and my grandmother raised me—and she told her that she'd let me stay there with the family and all.

CZ: It was like the traveling preacher?

EG: No, he was a preacher, just straight preacher over here at our church. They had a nice home.

CZ: They lived in Atlanta, and he came to preach here.

EG: They were so nice to me, but I got worried about my grandmother. She had so much to do. Of course, she had to pay them some. She was one of the old nurses, you know, about babies.

CZ: Oh, she helped deliver babies?

EG: No, she didn't deliver them, but she would go stay with them if your husband was gone.

CZ: Oh, so when you had your baby, she would come and help you with it.

EG: She would stay about two weeks with you. You know, along those times they didn't make much. She's trying to do that and wanting me to go through school. I had enough sense; I said I couldn't do it. I went through the ninth grade.

CZ: So partly it was being homesick and partly you felt responsible for your grandmother.

EG: I just told my grandmother when I come back after eighth grade, "I'm not going back no more." She said, "Yes you are." I said, "I have never said sassy words to you, but I'm not going back." She said, "How come?" I said, "Because I'm going to come back and go to work." I came back and went to work.

CZ: And you started doing domestic work?

EG: Yes, I did work with children. I kept children, and I've got some big boys there. One called me the other week, eighty-five.

CZ: He's eighty-five?

EG: I've got another one living in town, and he's sixty-three. I raised him. I was the first to put my hands on him. I did catering. You know, go out and fix dinners like if you wanted to have dinners for twenty-five or thirty. Well, then I'd go.

CZ: You did the cooking and everything.

EG: Yes, everything. I'd go in and leave one job, come home and take a bath, put my uniform on and go back to another job.

CZ: Someone told me that you were an Avon lady at one time and sold Avon cosmetics?

EG: Oh yes, for twenty years.

CZ: When did you do that?

EG: I did that in between times, at night. I'd go out at night and call on the phone and all.

CZ: Like a second job. What years did you do that? The sixties?

EG: It was about 1947.

CZ: In the forties?

EG: Yes, because my boy was born. He was born in '45, the wartime.

CZ: Did you sell just to black folks or did you sell to the whole community?

EG: This is some of it. My granddaughter sells it now. That's the best stuff.

CZ: The Skin-So-Soft. I remember that.

EG: You remember? Well, I sold lots of this stuff.

CZ: When I was little the colognes in the different shaped bottles were real popular.

EG: Yes, she sells that. She does pretty good. She works at a computer place.

CZ: I didn't realize that Avon carried the black cosmetics at that time.

EG: Yes, they were more for black folks.

CZ: They sold more to black folks than they did to white folks?

EG: Yes.

CZ: Somebody told me they remember their parents had to pay for them to go to school because they had to pay the teachers. Do you remember if your grandmother had to pay for you to go to school?

EG: I just don't remember that.

CZ: I'm sure she had to pay for the books, right?

EG: Oh, yes. We had a store here, McMillan's store; they kept books for people. Yes, we had to buy them.

CZ: But you don't remember if she had to pay the teachers or anything?

EG: No, I don't know about the teachers now. I don't know who paid the teachers.

CZ: Did your teacher use a strap or a paddle?

EG: Yes, they had a little strap there, that's right. They would make you stand in the corner. They made you mind. They made me mind. I never did give my grandmother trouble.

CZ: Do you remember when they built the Rosenwald school? Do you remember them building it?

EG: Oh Lord, yes. I was out of school then.

CZ: Did they do a fundraiser or something to get money up to build that?

EG: Yes, my daddy-in-law was a trustee. I don't know.

CZ: A trustee?

EG: They had men for the school; they had their offices; and they'd be up there.

CZ: Like a school board?

EG: Yes, that's right. I guess that's what you'd call it.

CZ: And he was in charge of helping get the money together?

EG: Yes, they'd get money and all.

CZ: How would they get the money? Bake sales?

EG: They'd have things like bake sales and different things like that. They made money. Rosenwald was a good school. When they decided to build the Roberts school, they gave it to Acworth.

CZ: Then it was used as a community center?

EG: They moved it. Colored men tore it down and built it back like it looked

CZ: So to you it looked the same when they rebuilt it?

EG: Nice, it's nice inside. It had a kitchen.

CZ: Did they put the front on the back and the back on the front?

EG: I don't remember that. It's always been the front like it is to me.

CZ: Did you go to parties and so forth when they had them at Rosenwald?

EG: Yes, they still have parties there. And they make money off of that now.

CZ: Claude Johnson was telling me they used to have plays.

EG: Yes, they had plays.

CZ: Did you go down to see the plays?

EG: Oh, yes, I used to go down there. I go down there now. We have different things now.

CZ: Halloween parties and Christmas parties.

EG: Yes, we sure do. Tim [Houston] is over that thing, and you have different folks over it, you know. We have to pay so much to have parties and things, though.

CZ: Back then, in the old times, when they had the parties there, was it like bring a dish, everybody cook something and bring something?

EG: Yes, and they cooked it down there.

CZ: Oh, they cooked it in the kitchen there?

EG: In the kitchen there. Then if you wanted to have something, they'd bring the stuff in, you know, and have music.

CZ: Where'd the music come from?

EG: Well, way back I don't know, it's been so long.

CZ: Did they have live music where people would come and play?

EG: I wasn't much into that. I've been out of that a long time.

CZ: Too busy working.

EG: Working and after work I went down to Atlanta. I worked overtime—all kinds of work.

CZ: If you could have finished school what kind of career would you have wanted?

EG: Nurse. That's what my grandmother would have wanted me to be.

CZ: That's why she wanted you to stay in school.

EG: She wanted me to stay in school, but I couldn't do it. I think she died in '40, and she raised me from two years old. My mother died when I was two years old at childbirth. She was giving birth to my little brother—he died, she died.

CZ: That happened a lot back then.

EG: It's been a long, long time. I don't even remember.

CZ: Your grandmother would take care of babies after they were born?

EG: The husband would come and tell her when the baby was going to be born. I was eight years old then and I would do the writing. She couldn't even read. I'd do the writing, and she had her book there. I would put down the name and what dates. The husband would sit there and tell me, and I would put it down in that book. Then, when the time came, he'd come and tell her. She'd go and stay two weeks.

CZ: She wouldn't come home at all?

EG: No, she stayed there. They had a room for her and she stayed there seeing about you and the baby.

CZ: Who took care of you?

EG: My aunt. She had a daughter.

CZ: What year was your grandma born?

EG: I don't know, but she didn't look old. She was a church worker. I was raised up in the church here.

CZ: You went to Zion Hill?

EG: Zion Hill.

CZ: All your life?

EG: Since I was twelve years old. I was the secretary down there for twenty years.

CZ: When did you quit doing that?

EG: Well, I got eyes.

CZ: Oh your eyes started to go.

EG: Yes. I sung in the choir and all that stuff. I had a good time. I went to church four times a day on Sunday.

CZ: Four times?

EG: Yes. We'd go to Sunday school. Then, we'd go back and go to church. Then, we had a BYPU—there's a young folks thing in the evening around 6:30 or 7:00. Then I'd go back to church. You had to go; you couldn't lay out then. Old folks wouldn't let you lay out; you had to go.

CZ: Claude Johnson said you'd go to church all the time. You walked, yes?

EG: Yes. I lived here on Cherokee.

CZ: That's not too far.

EG: There's a little new house right there on the street, and mine was the second or third house; it was right there.

CZ: Oh, okay, that's where your grandmother lived over near there.

EG: Yes, I bought that right above and they lived there.

CZ: Explain to me why Zion Hill and the Bethel AME Church went to church together.

EG: They did.

CZ: Why?

EG: I know about that. Our church was up there by the cemetery. There's a road on the end of the cemetery going back over in there. Well, the colored folks that lived back over there—their church was back over in the woods. They stayed over there a long time. I

don't know where the Methodists came from. Then, they let the Methodists come in with them. Well, the Methodists had the first and third and our church had the second and fourth. We moved first to town, down here on this street—my street. You know where the road turns to go to Old 41, there's a fire station over there. Well, that's where our church was sitting right up there. That's where our church was, and after the Methodist folks stayed up there under the cemetery for awhile, then, they moved over here.

CZ: But the A.M.E. church has been there for a long time; it's been there since . . .

EG: Ours is 1864, I think.

CZ: Yes, since right after the Civil War.

EG: So they came in with us.

CZ: So that you all could share a minister?

EG: They mixed up the Sundays first and third, second and fourth. Ours was second and fourth. But now everybody has their own church every Sunday.

CZ: That's a long time to remember.

EG: Yes, it's a long time to remember. But I think I've got a pretty good memory still to be as old as I am.

CZ: And you said your son had gone to the Rosenwald School for a little bit, didn't he?

EG: Oh, yes, he went.

CZ: He didn't graduate from there? He went to the Roberts School?

EG: No. Roberts school? I don't think he went to Roberts school.

Ms. Graggs's Granddaughter: Yes he did.

EG: Did he? Okay. That's his daughter. I can't remember that. I know Roberts school and when they built it and everything.

CZ: And they built it right on the site that the Rosenwald school used to be?

EG: Well, there's a little road going back of it. Use to be a school back there, my school.

CZ: Your school was back behind where the Roberts School is?

EG: Right on around, right behind the projects. In the back next to that fence that runs up to that church. There's a road and there's a house sitting there. Mrs. Davenport sits there. Then, you go right on around, and that's where my school was until they tore it down.

CZ: I guess once they built the Rosenwald school, they didn't need it.

EG: Well, the Rosenwald school was sitting there on School Street facing that white church. You know that white church up there?

CZ: Yes, I know the white church.

EG: It's a cute church.

CZ: It needs a little bit of upkeep.

EG: Yes, I know it.

CZ: And so does the A.M.E church, unfortunately. It's got some windows broken out.

EG: Oh, yes.

CZ: Everybody knows everybody around here, don't they?

EG: Ain't many folks I know here in Acworth because they're all dead. We used to have lots of people around here. All the older people are gone.

CZ: Back then there wasn't a problem between blacks and whites?

EG: Not with me. I lived in the white section.

CZ: You lived in the white section?

EG: What's the road that goes through town? We lived there, my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother lived there a long time. I was raised there. Then, she moved when I got ready to go to school. She moved me into Acworth. She bought the house down here. Yes, I was raised down there. There were two families that were colored. There was one on the street and one on the back street, then, one down around the store.

CZ: But your grandma always had to live near the town anyway since she was taking care of babies.

EG: Yes, when she moved from down there, she moved right down here where she bought this house down here.

CZ: How long did she take care of newborns? Until she was really old?

EG: Yes, later on she got that job. Then I started school when I was six years old.

CZ: And she took care of black and white babies?

EG: No, white babies.

CZ: Just white?

EG: They [blacks] weren't able. [laughter] Once, she went to North Carolina. Some people lived here, and they got her to go there and stay with their daughter for two weeks.

CZ: Goodness, she went all the way to North Carolina to take care of babies?

EG: Yes.

CZ: Sounds like it was pretty good money.

EG: Well, I don't know what it was. She got about \$10.00 a week, I guess, or something like that. It wasn't no money, really.

CZ: She enjoyed doing it though, didn't she?

EG: She did enjoy doing it. She was a sweet old lady. Everybody loved her. Melissa, her name was, Melissa.

CZ: What was her last name?

EG: Holmes. She married my granddaddy, and he died. I've got his picture in here somewhere.

CZ: There were a lot of illnesses going around back then.

EG: Yes, all that kind of stuff was going around. Well, she didn't have a husband when my mama died. They brought me to her—her and her daughter—and then she had to take me in. My daddy was a carpenter in Atlanta. After my mother died, he moved to Atlanta, and later on he married again.

CZ: But you never lived with him?

EG: No, I was up with my grandmother. I wasn't going to leave.

CZ: It was too good, huh?

EG: Yes. She was so sweet to me. I married in 1930 and you see how old I was when I married.

CZ: You weren't real young when you married.

EG: I was twenty-three I think it was.

CZ: Yes, some people I've talked to were married young.

EG: And then my baby was born in 1937. I didn't have children early.

CZ: Did you want more children?

EG: No.

CZ: But working was taking care of babies, so it's kind of like having your own children.

EG: That's right.

CZ: The difference is when they get sick or something you can just give them back.

EG: That's right. It's run, run, run, run. I agree with that. That was my son out there on the porch. He had a stroke.

CZ: Oh, I'm sorry.

EG: Not too bad, but he's gone to the doctor. That's where he's gone.

CZ: Well, this is your record. This is the working class black woman's history. Is there anything you want to say about your life or about living to be 102?

EG: Well, I had a good life. A good one.

CZ: Would you have lived anywhere else; done anything else?

EG: No, I wouldn't because I lived down in the white settlement, and they were nice to me. The white girls would walk to school every morning. When we'd get up here in town, they'd go their way, and I'd go across the railroad up there at the white church. That's the way it was. Every evening when I come home, Julia—her name was Julia—she'd come over and stay over there with me and come over there and play every evening. The best thing of it she would eat over there.

CZ: She'd eat at your house?

EG: Oh, Lord, yes. See, my grandma was a good cook, and she'd always have something good. She said, "You be ready to eat supper." It's dinner now, but it was supper [then]. She said, "Julia, would you like to have some?" "Yes, I would." I can hear her now. And she'd sit down at that table and eat. The funniest part of it, she wouldn't go home,

and her father would come, and he'd ask, "Julia, come on and eat." She would say "I ate over at Evelyn's." He would said, "Now, you mustn't worry the Miss like that. She doesn't want to be worried." She said, "No, she doesn't [mind]." So, one evening he came over there. Mr. [Ernest] Collins always came over there and talked to my grandmother. She was cooking, and she took one of those big cobblers out of the stove. I don't know whether it was blackberry or apple or what. He said, "Oh, what kind of pie is that?" She told him, and then he said, "Oh, listen would you loan me a little dish? I'm going to carry me and my wife some home." And we had more fun about that. He was getting after her, and then they ate too. He carried his wife a dish of pie over there. That's the way we lived. There was no trouble about being black and white. We didn't have a bit of trouble. You didn't think like that back then.

CZ: What was your favorite meal your grandma would make you?

EG: Oh she had a good stew meat, beef, you know. Cut up beef. Oh, it was the best stuff. She'd have tomatoes and all that good stuff, potatoes. She was just a good cook, that's all.

CZ: Did you all grow any of your own food?

EG: Yes, she had a big garden right there.

CZ: No animals though, right?

EG: No, but a cat.

CZ: But you didn't keep any farm animals or a pig or anything?

EG: No, there wasn't a man there, you know, that could do it. She raised sweet potatoes.

CZ: Greens?

EG: You know how to grow sweet potatoes, don't you?

CZ: They grow in the ground, don't they?

EG: Yes, they grow in the ground, and she had to go out there and dig around and get some potatoes out. She'd dig it back so she could grow some more.

CZ: But you can't have sweet potatoes without some collards or some turnip greens to go with it. Did she ever grow those?

EG: Oh, Lord, yes, we had collards greens, turnip greens, all that good stuff.

CZ: That sounds good to me.

EG: Me too.

CZ: When you used to go down to Atlanta, you said you used to go see shows and stuff like that?

EG: Yes, there were shows on, what was the name of that street, Decatur Street? No.

CZ: It wasn't Peachtree?

EG: Oh yes, Peachtree, yes. I saw some plays there on Peachtree.

CZ: Did you feel like you were treated differently by white folks when you went to town than when you were in Acworth?

EG: No, I always was treated nice. I always kept myself in my place. I never did try to go beyond. They always treated me nice. Everybody always treated me nice. I ain't never been mistreated. I slept in the beds and everything. See, Ms. [Ernestine] Donahoo had two boys, and they had bunk beds. It was real fine. They'd go off and stay a week sometimes, and I'd stay up there. These two boys would argue about where I was going to sleep because they had these bunk beds.

CZ: They wanted you to sleep on the top bunk?

EG: Well, one would say "You going to sleep on my bed?" I said, "No, I ain't sleeping up there." He said, "You going to sleep down here?" I said, "No, I'm not going to sleep down there. You all may fall on me." We just had fun, you know. I slept in there. They had a sofa, and I slept on that.

CZ: In their room?

EG: In the living room. I'd get up, get them up, dress them, bathe them, fix their meals, and we had a good time in all those days. I wish you could meet my boy. He loved me. He comes to see me all the time.

CZ: And you used to cook all their meals?

EG: Oh, yes, everything. She worked in town. They had their store there.

CZ: Oh, did she work at the store?

EG: Yes. She worked at the store and the Capitol too. She worked at the Capitol for a long time.

CZ: At the capitol in Atlanta?

EG: Oh, she went to that big school in Atlanta. Yes, she was educated.

CZ: So she was like a career lady.

EG: Oh, yes, she was a sweet thing. We used to go to St. Simon's. We went seven years straight, every year.

CZ: For a week?

EG: Yes, we'd go stay a week at St. Simon's.

CZ: They would take you with them?

EG: Well, I had to go take care of the babies, you know. Michael [Donahoo] was about two years old, and Mary was like one. We put the carriage in one side of the car, and he'd lay in it. I sat back there with him, and then old Meanie—I called him old Meanie—he sat up there with his daddy and mama.

CZ: How old was he?

EG: He was like two years old then. We used to have a good time. They were nice people.

CZ: So he ran the funeral home, and she ran the furniture store?

EG: No, they didn't have a furniture store then. I don't think they had the furniture store. His daddy had it.

CZ: So they inherited it?

EG: Yes, after he died. These children's daddy took it over. And then the girls started to working there. He had three daughters. It was good times then. I enjoyed it.

CZ: Did you vote in the last election?

EG: No, my leg. I couldn't get there because the children were working. They still had to work. I was down there in Smyrna in the hospital, whatever you call it.

CZ: Like a nursing home or a rehabilitation center?

EG: Yes, for my leg then. They sent me from Kennestone down there. I stayed down there about twenty days, and then I came home.

CZ: So did you think that one day you'd have a black president?

EG: I don't know.

CZ: You never thought about it?

EG: Well, I didn't think about it, but this lady that could tell fortunes, she used to be in Atlanta, but she's in California now. They sent for this lady to come to Atlanta, and she came down there and spoke. She told them right straight, "You're going to have a black president."

CZ: When was this?

EG: That's when they were getting ready to vote.

CZ: From this past election?

EG: Yes.

CZ: Recently.

EG: She told them in a word. She said, "You all sent me to come back to Atlanta, but I didn't come for no trouble." She went to school to tell things. She can tell it too. Anything you want to know. Like somebody steals something from you, anything, she can tell you. And she won't hurt you. I forget her name.

CZ: Like a clairvoyant?

EG: They don't call them fortunetellers no more, you know. They call her something else. I don't know what it was now. But she's got it.

CZ: She was right.

EG: She was right.

CZ: I don't know how much fortune telling that took to predict that at that time.

EG: Well, she went to school for that stuff. We had one in Atlanta one time. They called it fortune telling. She lived in Atlanta. The funniest thing was that this lady I worked for—her cow went off and didn't come back. So, she went to this fortune teller in Atlanta. When they got to the fortune teller, the fortune teller was sitting on the front porch. She said, "Your cow will be up tonight." Before she got home, the cow was standing in the lot. Now that woman was a good one. I think her name was Harris; you might remember her. She lives somewhere around in Atlanta. Ms. Harris. I never did believe none much.

CZ: Oh goodness, well, I'm going to stop and let you rest.

END OF INTERVIEW

INDEX

Acworth Christian Church, 1
Atlanta Constitution, 2

Bethel AME Church, Acworth, 8-10
Buffington, Mary, 2

Collins, Ernest, 13
Collins, Julia, 12-13

Davenport, Mrs., 10
Donahoo, Ernestine, 14
Donahoo, Michael, 15
Donahoo, Mary, 15

Gragg, Evelyn
 Background, 1, 2, 3
 Schooling, 1, 2
 Family, 1-5, 7, 11-13
 Employment
 Domestic Work, 3-4
 Avon (Cosmetics), 4
 Zion Hill Church (secretary), 8
 On being raised by grandmother, 3-4, 7, 10-13
 On career choices, 7
 On passing of mother, 7
 On church congregations, 9
 On black and white relations (in Acworth), 11-12, 14
 On marriage, 11-12
 On rearing children, 12
 On current election, 16

Harris, Ms., 16
Holmes, Melissa, 11
Houston, Tim, 6

Johnson, Claude, 6, 8

Kennestone Hospital, 15

Mason Hall, Acworth, 1
McMillan's Store (Acworth, GA), 5

Roberts School, Acworth, 6, 9

This item is part of the following collection:
Thomas Allan Scott, 1943-
Kennesaw State University Oral history project, 1978-
KSU/45/05/001

The collection is held by:
Kennesaw State University
Dept. of Archives, Special Collections, & Records Management
1000 Chastain Rd
Sturgis Library Rooms 215-226
Kennesaw, Georgia 30144
(770) 423-6289
archives@kennesaw.edu

To request permission to publish, reproduce, publicly display, broadcast, or distribute this material in any format, you must contact the Dept. of Archives, Special Collections, and Records Management.