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

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**INTERVIEW WITH SUSANNE HENRY**

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**CONDUCTED BY WILLIAM TRAVIS FRIED**

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project  
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 27  
Interview with Susanne Henry  
Conducted by William Travis Fried  
Friday, 30 October 2009  
Location: Pebblebrook High School guidance office

WF: First and foremost, Ms. Henry, could you tell us a little bit about you background? Have you always been a resident of Mableton?

SH: Yes, pretty much. I was born and raised in Mableton.

WF: Where exactly?

SH: Ivey Road. I still live there.

WF: Same house and everything? Oh wow. How long have you been an employee of Pebblebrook High School?

SH: I've been here since '03 at Pebblebrook. I've been with the county longer than that.

WF: Where did you start off with the county?

SH: At Bryant Elementary.

WF: Were you in the guidance office there as well?

SH: Paraprofessional.

WF: I understand, did you graduate from Pebblebrook as well?

SH: No, I graduated from Atlanta Public Schools. I was one of the ones that left and went to an Atlanta school. The other ones graduated from Pebblebrook. One of my sisters, Virginia, graduated from here.

WF: About what year did you graduate?

SH: In '70.

WF: Did you attend Pebblebrook at all before that?

SH: I didn't attend Pebblebrook, I went to Harmony-Leland. I never went to Lindley or Pebblebrook.

WF: What exactly was school like in the early days, like from elementary or so?

SH: Hard. Well, it was easy when we went to Washington Street. Washington Street was in Austell. We had to go to Washington Street, and then when they integrated we went to Harmony-Leland.

WF: That would have been '69 or so?

SH: Yes. I had started in kindergarten.

WF: What particularly do you remember about school and especially before integration, in the earlier years I suppose?

SH: I remember passing the schools, passing Harmony-Leland, and I was asking question like why we had to go to Washington Street. We wanted to go to that school because you knew other people that went to that school, so you wanted to go to that school. So I just remember our bus passing that school going to Washington Street School. But we liked Washington Street because it was all we knew. That was where we were supposed to go. Then it was frightening after we had to split up, and we had to go to the integrated schools.

WF: Ms. [Mary Ward] Cater was telling us about a pretty unique bus experience and having to walk up a dirt road to catch a bus? Was that you at that same bus there?

SH: Yes, we had to walk. All of it was dirt. We didn't have pavement. You just had dirt roads. The pavement started up the street from us. The gravel, we walked it, and then we had the pavement, but that's probably what she was talking about.

WF: You graduated in the late 1970s, so you started school just after the high schools integrated. Growing up, what exactly do you remember about the race relations in Cobb County?

SH: As far as just being maybe a difference, like all the blacks were together, and all the whites were together, but we didn't look at it like that. We just had it where we just wanted to be with everybody, but understanding why it was like that. But then once you were taught—we weren't taught to be racial, but you were taught when you were being treated that way. Hm-hm.

WF: Do you remember asking your parents questions why you couldn't go to specific schools?

SH: Oh, yes, most definitely.

WF: What did they generally tell you?

SH: They just mostly said that that's where we had to go. We were going with Carol, my other friend, and we just had to go to. And we didn't ask too many questions.

WF: Washington Street was an African American school. What do you remember from there exactly? Did you have any particular teachers or mentors?

SH: Oh, yes. It was just fun. I guess everybody was just like family. Everybody knew everybody, and it was just fun.

WF: A pretty close-knit group, huh?

SH: To me it was.

WF: What were you like as a student?

SH: I just did my work. Me and Carol, we were always sticking together. I wasn't that talkative. I was quiet. I was real quiet, so you have that one person where we just mostly just stuck together, just like not wanting to separate from each other. So that's how we were.

WF: Do you remember any of the teachers there, any specific teachers?

SH: Yes, Ms. Jackson, she was there, and Ms. White, those were the main two that I remember.

WF: Just after Washington Street, what schools did you move on to from there?

SH: Harmony-Leland. It's like they said, one day you go to school and then they say, you don't go to that school anymore. Your school is gone.

WF: About what year was this?

SH: Right after King was assassinated [1968], yes, right before that.

WF: Right after Reverend's King assassination? How long did you attend classes at Harmony-Leland?

SH: During the kindergarten, first and second, and then I left.

WF: You left and went to Atlanta?

SH: I'm trying to remember when we went to another school. We went back and forth between Mableton and Atlanta. My dad stayed there and my mom and then we ended up coming back. I always stayed in both places.

WF: Did you have two houses to go back and forth to?

SH: Yes.

WF: Was Harmony-Leland a black school as well?

SH: No, Harmony-Leland was just a white school. So Carol and I were the first. When they integrated we were the only two blacks that went to Harmony; we integrated Harmony-Leland.

WF: How were you received there? Do you remember anything about the first day? Were you scared or anything like that?

SH: Yes. Real hard.

WF: So going to Harmony-Leland was pretty tough?

SH: Scary.

WF: Why particularly was it scary for you?

SH: I was a new face, and it was just new, and it was scary, and you wanted to go back to your own . . .

WF: Where you're comfortable?

SH: Yes, and everybody was looking at you, and you had a few people that were just, "It's going to be all right." It seemed like we went in there, and they tell you you're going to be all right. Well, they put both of us in the same room at first, and then they separated us, so then that was scary. She was right across the hall from me. When we started at Harmony-Leland we were just holding hands and would not let go. I don't know; maybe they thought it was better to separate us. But, really, they shouldn't have done it; I think so.

WF: It would have left you a little bit more comfortable and a little bit more confident.

SH: Yes.

WF: How did the other students treat you when you first got there? Lots of name-calling?

SH: Our color was like—most of the persons would ask, "How did you get that color?" And different stuff like that.

WF: So they were almost as unsure of things as you.

SH: Probably so. I think some of them knew what they were saying, but to each his own.

WF: What about teachers?

SH: You had some that felt like it was a privilege for you to be here. You better not mess up. You're here not because we want you here, but because you had to be here. That's the way they were. That's how it was to me. They let you know that you were there for a reason.

WF: Specifically, were you the target for any sort of maltreatment on the part of the staff and faculty there?

SH: It was like, you had to go to a point of everybody else went first. You had some teachers—not all of them—they went first. We'd go to the lunchroom, and certain things stood out. One thing, everybody else had cots when you got ready to take nap time. But we had to lie on a towel on the floor. I wanted one of those things like everybody else. I know that I did not have it, and everybody else did have it.

WF: Did you ever ask the teacher for one?

SH: Yes.

WF: Do you remember what she said?

SH: We don't have one for you.

WF: Just kind of brushed it off?

SH: Yes.

WF: Do you remember any specific changes in the curriculum as far as what you were being taught?

SH: Well, everything looked different. They had better books. They had different things that you could work out of.

WF: Was it a lot bigger than Washington Street?

SH: Yes, it was much bigger. More classrooms and less students and more spacious, but the only thing is you had to get comfortable and get focused because you just missed the school where you were.

WF: Now, at Washington Street, was there ever an emphasis as far as like African-American history, anything like that?

SH: Yes. We had May Day, we had different stuff. I never do remember having stuff like that at home.

WF: Then you stayed at Harmony-Leland you said until about third grade?

SH: I think so.

WF: And then you went on to a school in Atlanta?

SH: An Atlanta school.

WF: Was that an integrated school as well?

SH: Yes. I wasn't there that long.

WF: Less than a year?

SH: Probably about a year.

WF: Where did you move on from there?

SH: I went to another Atlanta school and that's where I was until . . .

WF: You moved to another Atlanta school and you were there for the remainder of fourth and fifth grade?

SH: Yes.

WF: After that did you go on to a middle school, like a junior high?

SH: No, you stayed there until you went to high school.

WF: Do you remember anything specifically about going to school in Atlanta?

SH: Well, I guess the way they talked and the way they acted. I stood out to be different, you know what I'm saying, because you talk different, you acted different.

WF: Being a little more rural?

SH: They were rougher than I was! I would say rougher.

WF: I'm assuming it was an integrated school as well.

SH: They didn't have that many [whites], not that many. They had more blacks than they had whites.

WF: They had more African-Americans there?

SH: Yes.

WF: What was that like for a switch because other than Washington Street that must have been the first time?

SH: It wasn't the same. By that time I kind of wished I was back at Harmony-Leland because then you had made some friends. There were a couple of friends that I made. It was okay though.

WF: So it was mostly just the switching back and forth?

SH: It was just a different learning, yes, learning different.

WF: Now, at the school in Atlanta, did it go back to having an emphasis on learning a little bit about black history?

SH: Oh, yes.

WF: So there was more emphasis [on black history] there?

SH: I just felt the students and you had some of the teachers, but not all—I felt like I was just the same as the Caucasians. I didn't see myself being different from what they were. I felt like I was just a part of them, just as well as I was part of the African-Americans because I was exposed to both. But you found that a lot of people would talk against it [integration], so I felt that was against me just as well because I was a part of it. Then as far as having some of my family, it was just like, okay, you talk about one. I'm just all. My race is all. I just felt like that.

WF: For high school, did you attend Pebblebrook at all?

SH: I didn't. I wanted to experience—I went where I was with a mix at first. Not where I went the second part, but the first part of my high school it was more we had a mix. It was a balanced mix.

WF: This was in Atlanta?

SH: Yes. But then when I got ready to graduate my father and my mom worked closer to this other school. Then I had a relative who worked there as a teacher. So they felt like it was okay, it was better, and it was supposed to be a better a school.

WF: What school was that?

SH: Archer. That's where I graduated. Plus, my mom's side of the family was in that area.

WF: Would that be back north of Atlanta?

SH: Northwest Atlanta.



WF: So you were telling me that while you were in school in Atlanta, you were living down there but you were coming back and forth.

SH: I lived in Cobb and in Atlanta. Cobb was mainly my home.

WF: So was it staying in Cobb during the weekends and living in Atlanta during school days?

SH: Yes. Or even some times during the week I was at Atlanta.

WF: You would just find a way down there?

SH: No, my mom stayed in Atlanta, and my dad always stayed here at the home house. Then when she moved back over here, well, that was right when I graduated that she totally moved back.

WF: In high school you said you graduated in '78 and so then about '74 to '78 you were in high school?

SH: Yes.

WF: Not too much longer after integration, so was high school a different sort of experience for you or was there still a lot of animosity between the groups?

SH: Yes. And I mostly stood out in high school because they would tell me, "You've got to loosen up; you act like you're white." Because that's what I was around more, you know what I'm saying? Even though I went to the Atlanta schools, I still had in me what I brought with me from Cobb.

WF: So you're kind of facing it from two different . . .?

SH: The blacks had more of an accent. You didn't talk black if you were in Cobb because, of course, you were around more white people. So it was just a different tone; it's just the way you acted and the things that you did. When you went to Atlanta and saw how they acted, you weren't like that, so you stood out more.

WF: Stood out more to the other fellow black students?

SH: Yes.

WF: Did you ever get picked on by any of the white students in the Atlanta schools?

SH: No, they just wanted to know why would you want to leave Cobb and come here. It was probably just like for them; they had to move.

WF: You were still getting bussed around everywhere.

SH: Yes.

WF: Obviously, you went to school in Atlanta. When you came back to Cobb did you have any friends here in Cobb that thought ill of you for it, for having to go back and forth?

SH: No, I just didn't have my friends. We would keep in touch over the years, and even though they came from Pebblebrook, whenever they would have stuff and do stuff, because I was still around, it was just like I was just a part of both.

WF: So it was like having two groups?

SH: Yes.

WF: Okay. Outside of school, specifically in Cobb, and we'll get to Atlanta a little bit later, but in Cobb when you're out with your friends and everything was it still mostly segregated as far groups of people, where they hung out and everything? Was your neighborhood still predominately black and such?

SH: You'd have to see where we lived. Nobody lived around us. It's still that way. The houses are so spaced apart.

WF: It's a secluded area?

SH: Yes.

WF: Do you remember any specific instances while you were in high school, post-integration, do you remember hanging out with your friends and maybe around town getting picked on or anything like that or experiencing any sort of racism?

SH: No more than just like, I was always the type of person and still am, if I recognized you being prejudiced, then I addressed that, I let you know that I know what you're doing, you see what I'm saying? But as far as helping somebody else before they help you or like that. When you were first and then they might help the other person at the store or whatever, then that would always cause an argument. Because, you know, "I was here first." But as far as them wanting to get to fighting and stuff like that, I'd be ready to go and back up! No, I'm not going to be part of that.

WF: More of a pacifist than anything else.

SH: Yes, uh-huh, I just speak my piece and that's it. I just want to let you know what I recognize.

WF: Do you remember any experiences of maybe, at any time during your childhood, going into a place and having a store keeper or an office owner telling you that you had to leave or anything like that?

SH: Mostly just asking like what do you want? Like watching you like you're going to take something or whatever and like that. I didn't like that feeling because you should treat me just like you treat anybody else. Somebody else came in here, you wouldn't look at them funny or whatever, that's about the biggest thing.

WF: Now, after you graduated, was it always your intention to work in a school?

SH: No.

WF: What did you do right after high school?

SH: I was supposed to be going into the military, but my health went bad, and then I went to nursing school. So I was doing nursing before I got hurt.

WF: Before you got hurt?

SH: Yes. So by not being able to do that, I ended up just volunteering at the school. Then my kids—it was time for them to go to school. They started in Cobb County schools. You still had some prejudices that existed, so I didn't want them to be treated the same way I was, so I would always be around.

WF: Your plan just after high school was originally to go into the military. You said you sustained an injury that prevented you from going?

SH: No, my arthritis.

WF: So then you went on to nursing school and then fell into public school.

SH: Yes, I worked in nursing for awhile. Then I got hurt while I was in nursing. Then when I started volunteering at the school, I was up there so much that the principal said, "Why don't you just hire her?" So that's how I got into the school system.

WF: You started working as a paraprofessional?

SH: Yes.

WF: This would have been late 80s?

SH: Mid 1990s.

WF: That's a good long while with the school system.

SH: Yeah, about mid '90s.

WF: Really quick, because I know you need to get back to work but at any time do you remember any problems that you had, not necessarily with school or work, but just in general as far as accomplishing things just because of your race?

SH: Some. You had some where you had positions that were given to somebody else. Or somebody else did something and then they want to blame or put it on you. Or if you had some positions that you qualified for and then it was given to somebody else. But then, eventually, they would come and try to give it to you to do something in a different way; you know what I'm saying?

WF: So not immediately but eventually you'd get around to it. They made you just jump through a couple more hoops, so to speak?

SH: Yes, but like I said when I recognized something I'd just say something about it. I'll come out and ask because if it is, then let's get it straight now. That's how I am, and that's how I taught my children, to recognize, and then once you recognize for them to come to me and I can handle it. That's how I was when my oldest son went to Harmony-Leland. One of the teachers, he felt like that's what was going on, but once he asked me, did I think that that's what it was, then when I approached it, and yes it was. So I just told her she must be some kin to me because we had the same last name, so that got her back.

WF: So at Harmony-Leland he was having a hard time there because of a teacher?

SH: Yes, and this should have been long gone.

WF: But it was still just hanging around? Do you remember about what year that was?

SH: Kevin is thirty now, so he was in the third grade.

WF: So it would have been mid to late 1980s?

SH: Yes. Something like that.

WF: You said you approached the teacher? What exactly did you say? Did you request a conference with them?

SH: Well, I just saw her and I just let her know and addressed the issue and how she let somebody else go to the restroom, and then she said no when he asked. That was one incident. Then when he was trying to go to the board to do the thing she would always get somebody else to do it over him. So to me, that was you had your picks and stuff. It wasn't like a whole bunch of blacks when he was coming up around that time. But it was enough, and I know that they didn't have but like one or two black teachers. Ms. Jackson was one of the ones that was still there. So what I did was I told her, her last name was Ward, and that's my maiden name, so I told her, I said, "Ms. Ward, I've been intent on speaking with you. I would never think that you would be prejudiced. I don't even want to think that in my mind, but sometimes with children, you have to be careful. Kevin was

telling me about an incident, but I told him, of course, she's not prejudiced because she has the same last name as you, and she's kin to you." That really got her. She liked to start choking and she just couldn't take it!

WF: So you approached her and she was getting all choked up and she realized the error of her ways?

SH: I don't know whether she realized it but she was all . . .

WF: She got embarrassed?

SH: Yes, I know she left Harmony-Leland. I don't know where she went to, but she left.

WF: Shortly after that?

SH: She got sick that day, and the next thing I know she was gone. I don't think she was there that long after. You know, just little stuff.

WF: Well, I'd like to backtrack if I could. Washington Street School, your first school. Now, what was the actual school building like at Washington Street?

SH: It was just one big old building. That's all I remember, just being one, big building. You had the classrooms, but you had everybody in the class. I wanted to say they didn't have like different grades. It was just a big old school.

WF: It was just a couple of classrooms?

SH: Yes, but it wasn't like how you have . .

WF: It wasn't like first, second, third grade?

SH: You know like classes, classes. It was like here kindergarten was played over here, and especially with recess, everybody went out. You were over here, and they were over there, like that.

WF: At Washington Street, what were the books like and things like that?

SH: I don't even remember the books. I don't know.

WF: And then when you went to Harmony-Leland, then that was the first time you ever had actual textbooks?

SH: Yes, you actually had different tools, and books and you know, stuff like that to work with.

- WF: Now, when you were at Harmony-Leland, you were one of the few African-American students there. Did you end up getting like the hand-me-down textbooks or little bit worse for wear than some of the other white students?
- SH: Yes, we got the older stuff instead of the newer, yes. Like I said, you were the last to go in the line; you had to be in the back of the line. When you lined up in a single file, you were always the last. Everybody else had to take turns to be in front of the line, but you never got to your turn.
- WF: Do you remember any specific disciplinary actions for you or the other student, Carol?
- SH: Other than just having being time out and not knowing why; you just got blamed for a lot of stuff.
- WF: But you never got paddled or anything like that?
- SH: I did. I used to have these big paddles, and even at the other schools they had the big paddle, and I got like a couple of paddles in my hand and me and Bernice were like, we didn't do it, but it was mostly like they just didn't want us to stay together. Oh, we cried that first part, we cried all the time. She was in one room and you could see her, and we just always wanted each other.
- WF: Always trying to get back to what's comfortable, right.
- SH: Yes, because during class time, you could see her, from looking out of the door. I could see her in her class and she would be across the hall from me. I think they did that on purpose; I truly believe they did.
- WF: Did it on purpose?
- SH: They separated us. But they put us where we could see each other.
- WF: So they alienated you at first but then just gave you that little bit of distraction where you could see each other?
- SH: I think so. I truly believe so.
- WF: Now, do you think that might have been a good thing because if they had separated you and you hadn't been able to see each other . . .?
- SH: No, I don't know if they did it thinking it would be better. To me it wasn't, but I don't think so, but maybe. They might have been thinking it was for the best. It got a little better. I remember a friend Robin and Karen. Robin's grandma raised her, and Karen's mom was like real friendly. You got to laughing at lot because they would have little lunches bags and their food was different from our food, and they would laugh at their food. And you were looking at their food and wanting it, you know, so stuff like that.

Then when we were in the cafeteria with everybody else, and then you'd be the last one to sit down to eat. You would have to wait, and then by the time you got your food and get started it was time to go, so you had to throw your food away.

WF: So they really didn't give you much time to do anything?

SH: No, that would be unfair. You really didn't get time, so when you got home, my dad was the type of person that if anyone was mistreated, he wanted to know why.

WF: That's where you must get the protectiveness for your kids?

SH: Oh, yes.

WF: All right. I guess for the sake of time, I just have one more question for you really. Looking back at everything that you experienced and everything that you had to go through, and comparing that with today and the progress that we've made, how far do you think that we've come really?

SH: A long ways. They've still got it, but it's just in certain areas. Nothing like we used to be.

WF: So all in all you think we've made a big leap forward?

SH: Oh, yes, most definitely.

WF: What do you think that we still have left as far as you said certain areas?

SH: Just that everybody has rights just as much as the other person. That's it. You've got a right, just like anybody else.

WF: So just making sure everybody has a chance to be heard.

SH: Yes. That's it.

WF: Well, I know you've got a lot of work you've got to bet back to. I really appreciate you're taking the time to meet with me. Well, we'll call that the end there.

SH: All right. I've enjoyed it.

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