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INTERVIEW WITH CLARA GARRETT JENKINS

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CONDUCTED BY ERIN SANDLIN

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Interview with Clara Garrett Jenkins
Conducted by Erin Sandlin
Monday, 19 October 2009
Location: Ms. Jenkins' residence, Marietta, Georgia

ES: Good afternoon, Ms. Clara. Thank you for interviewing with me today. I appreciate it. Now, first question: Please share where you were born, grew up, and went to school.

CJ: I'm a native of Cobb County. I was born in a little section they call Happy Flat. That's near Atlanta Rd. here in Cobb County Marietta. I do not remember being there, but that's where my mother said I was born. I was born January the ninth, 1930. This coming January, if I live that long, I should be eighty years old.

ES: Congratulations.

CJ: I take the good experiences with the bad because your experiences make you strong, I think. We lived in a section of Marietta called Baptist Town [north of the North Marietta Parkway and east of Cherokee Street] and the street was called Mulberry Street. Later, they built a housing project in the section we lived in. There were four predominantly black communities in Marietta. There was a section they called Library [or Liberia], that's where Lemon Street is near Zion Baptist Church [in the Fort Hill area]. Now, and another place they called Louisville [in the Wright-Reynolds Street area]. It was a predominantly black section where it was. And so that's three. Another section was called [Holland Town, between Roswell Street and Waterman Street where Clay Homes were later built]. I went to school in Library.

We walked to school every day; it didn't seem like it was far to walk because I was used to it. We had no school buses. During that time, schools were segregated. The first school I went to was first through sixth grade. [It] was in a wood building. It had two floors. On the first floor, it had first graders, second graders, and I think maybe some third graders. The fourth graders were on the second level. Then they built a high school and they called it Lemon Street High School; it was right across the street. I was in the fifth grade at the new school. At that time, we did not have a football team or anything. I had five brothers, and I think all of them must have played on the football team at some level. When we got the football team, we had an old piece of bus; they called it Tin Lizzie. I don't know how it ever made it to Cartersville or Rome; that's where they went to play.

All five of my brothers were in military service at some time. The one that lives with me now was in the Military Police. After he got out of the Service, he met and married my sister-in-law, and they have lived in Miami for over thirty years. They had two sons; one of them is living in New Jersey; he went to Hampton University in Virginia. The other one son lives here, in Marietta.

After living on Mulberry Street, we moved into what is called a “shotgun house”; you go to the front room and see out the back. Those were the type of terms we used back then. On Mulberry Street, I lived next to a juke joint. My grandmother, my father’s mother, cooked over there. She would cook stuff like pig tails, pig ears and things like that. On Saturday morning, we would go over there and eat. We were used to pork at that time. I don’t remember eating much beef and hamburger. We ate a lot of pork. During that time my father raised hogs. Everything from a hog we used; we had fatback bacon, and we would use the grease for other dishes. It was very tasty because it was preserved with salt. My grandmother had a cow and chickens, sometimes she would give us a chicken, and we would have chicken and dumplings with dressing.

The house we moved to was a very nice house; it was owned by Mr. Medford, a prominent real estate man in Marietta. We had a cousin that worked for him, so he let us rent the house. In 1916, my grandfather Joseph Kellog and his wife (Eliza Kellog) started the Kellog family reunion. He was born a slave in Forsyth, Georgia. He was freed at the age of 29; he was given 5000 acres of land. In 1913, he moved to Atlanta for a modest new start and moved to Cobb County with his wife and children. Every year since that time we have a reunion on the first Saturday of August.

When I finished high school, I went to Morris Brown College in Atlanta. I wanted to be a nurse. Well, I really wanted to be a doctor at first, and they had a hospital in Marietta, on Cherokee Street. I had never been in a hospital before; and so one of the black maids was on her two-week vacation. They let me come work in her place while she was on vacation. The area I was covering was the black section. I met a white nurse; she was the head nurse. Her name was Mrs. Andrews, and I told her I thought wanted a nurse because I don’t think I have the money to get to be a doctor. She let me go to the operating room and look at an operation and said, “Stand against the wall. Stay out the way, hear?” and I said, “I will! I will!” It was very interesting. That was the first experience I had in a hospital. As I mentioned, when I finished high school, I went to Morris Brown. I didn’t get in the first year, because I sent all of my papers, but the school was closed for summer. They had not sent in my records. Freedman’s only took students in once a year. They wrote me a letter saying that they had not received my requirements for that year in time, so I could not be accepted until next year.

I had two or three little jobs; one was babysitting for the Hagoods; they were a white family, who was a medical family and I worked for them. My mother worked for them also. They let me take care of their three kids, two boys and a girl. There was a lady that lived on the corner of Church Street; she took in boarders; and she had a heart condition. She wanted me to clean her house on Saturdays, because she couldn’t climb the stairs. Sometimes while I would be cleaning upstairs she would holler, “Are you through yet?” or “I want you to do something down here.” She wanted me to be done by twelve o’clock, because she did not want to feed me lunch and her husband would come home at that time. But it was all right with me because my mother worked on Saturdays down the street at the Hagoods. She would fix lunch and I would go there to eat. The Hagoods liked me; I had been around them since I was young. When I got ready to go off to school the next August, they bought me a suit, and gave me some money, and they wrote

me letters of encouragement. During the summer for a little while I worked for them at Mountain Park, Georgia.

In the community, we played on the non-paved dirt road. We would ride up and down the street in our homemade wagons. We'd take the wheels off our skates and put them on the wagons and ride and ride until it was time to go in and do our chores. We always had chores to do. I remember my oldest brother and I had the responsibility of washing the supper dishes that was part of our chores. I am always grateful for my father and mother. My father did not make money; our rent was one dollar and fifty cents a week. He only made three-fifty a week, fifty cents a day for seven days a week. He worked for Marietta City taking care of the disposal plant. Sometime we would go to work with him and play, and roll around and get chiggers all over us. Our furniture was made out of boards; you had a long table with homemade seats, and sometimes if you worked for someone and if they had things they didn't need they'd give it to you. Sometimes that would be part of your pay. Whenever my father could pay for furniture it would come from a company named Chandler. I remember the salesman coming to our house every week to collect fifty cents for a sofa or chairs or something. We were grateful for whatever we had.

ES: How did that shape you as a person?

CJ: Well, I know some of the rules, since I had five brothers. I had to know the rules; there was a lot of lynching going on. There were a lot of accusations by people towards innocent men. They would catch them, hang them, and do whatever they wanted to them. There seemed to be so much hatred from some white people toward black people, especially black men. I did a lot of reading, and I'd come to the conclusion about things, how it would be to get along with each other.

My mother taught all of my brothers, "If I send you to the grocery store (Big Star) and you see a white girl walking down the street, cross over to the other side. You can cross back after she passes and then go onto the store." They were hunting black men to try and catch them doing anything wrong. We tried to stay out of the way and behave; it was about survival. I could tell you other things as I grew up that I was exposed to, but I was never made to do anything against my will. Thank home training and God's determination.

ES: Did you find this to be a common occurrence in this community?

CJ: Yes, we had a lot of support from the church. I joined Holsey Chapel CME Church before I started elementary school. Sometimes that was the only thing you had for hope. Not everyone in church is perfect—not even the pastors—but they were a lot of help. Usually they had a lot more knowledge. Teachers, even though they were only teaching black students, went by the directions and rules of their masters. I recall when black people joined the PTA and said, "We want our children to have typing." The superintendent would say "No," and "We don't have a place to put them for typing." We got left over books from the white high school if we got any. We were trying to make

progress; we need some changes. Once I was in as president of the PTA. I invited the assistant superintendent to a meeting. He was very nice and smiling. I told the parents that you could ask anything you want, but we were going to have an orderly controlled meeting. One parent asked about math and social studies books. The school district was supposed to have bought books a long time ago for the sixth graders. He said "I'll see that you get some books." After a while [the parents] were getting a little rough with their questions. One parent was about to get ugly. I told her to be nice with her questions, and he would be nice with his answers. His face was turning red and he was getting upset. He turned to me and said, "Tell them to lay off." I asked, "Are you going to come back?" He said "No, I am not coming back." The next day or so, he calmed down, and he sent some boxes of books over. They had pages missing and covers ripped off. I called him and said, "Those books are all torn up! How can the teachers teach with these? Whenever they refer to a page, it was torn out." He said, "Okay, I will see what I can do." That was the kind of community we grew up in. When I joined the local PTA, as local president, I would take my mother along. Some black leaders became PTA presidents. After my children began school, I was the Cobb County Council President, Atlanta District President, and State Representative. I also worked with the Cancer Society.

ES: Was the PTA influential in the community?

CJ: Yes, they had the white PTA and the black PTA. A white lady named Mrs. [Alice McLellan] Birney from Marietta formed the national PTA; [her house still stands] on Kennesaw Avenue. It was moved from Church Street. The [Marietta First] Presbyterian Church bought the land and sold the house to the new owners who] moved the house to Kennesaw Avenue, near where the Civil War was fought. In 1926, a black lady named Mrs. [Selena Sloan] Butler, from Atlanta, founded the black PTA [National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers].

ES: Was the national PTA segregated?

CJ: Yes, we were segregated. We used the same PTA book of rules and guidelines, but we were segregated. I think we were the first organization to become integrated along with the nursing organization. Several of our members were on the Georgia PTA board; I was one of them. We had some very rich ladies on that board. I recall a big argument we had with them about hanging honoring pictures of Mrs. Birney and Mrs. Butler. They wanted to place Mrs. Birney's picture near the front of the State Capitol building, but put Mrs. Butler's picture near the back. When I got on the board, we had people from Savannah and Atlanta. There were only four or five of us. Mrs. Kathryn Woods was on the board too; she was a mentor. We knew some of the black legislators; someone had told them that we were arguing. Governor Joe Frank Harris had a black person working for him; his name was Mr. Strickland. He wanted us to vote for him. He spoke to the governor and a legislator for us. The governor said to the legislators, "I want you to vote, and if Mrs. Butler has to go in the back room, Mrs. Birney will go also." They didn't want that; that is how Mrs. Butler's picture got into the front room. That's how you had influence; you had to have someone to fight for you.

We had former teachers that were for it, but they couldn't say anything most of the time. We had some very misinformed principals, black and white, that want to control the PTA money; that was against the rules. We did fundraising in the community. Cobb County Libraries were segregated; we had a small one on Lemon Street. Mrs. Hattie Wilson pioneered the PTA and library there, at Lemon Street High School, along with Ercelene Adams, Ernestine Slade, Beatrice Key, and Mozelle Miller. Before I went to Morris Brown, I had never been in a library, and I didn't know how to behave, but I knew that you were not supposed to be loud.

I was able to go to college because my oldest brother went into three parts of the military. He was in the Navy first. During that time, if black men didn't have anything to do or couldn't find any work, they would join the service. My brother was about fourteen or fifteen; you didn't need a birth certificate; they let him join. After a tour in the Navy, he transferred to the Army and then the Marines. They would give him a \$100 bonus every time. That is how much it cost to attend Morris Brown College. He was in the service for about fourteen years. He was my resource for education. When I left Morris Brown I applied to Freeman's Bureau—at the time it was Freedman's Hospital, but now it is Howard University Hospital—for the nursing school.

ES: In Washington D.C.?

CJ: Yes. My mother's cousin told me to go to Howard University [formerly Freedman's], the training place for nurses, dentists, doctors, and all pre-meds. It was interesting and I enjoyed it. I attended several activities at Howard University. I met Mary McLeod Bethune and Dorothy Height. At the Howard Theater, I met Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington. At Freedman's, student nurses were given a \$19.22 stipend. That's what I used to buy my uniforms and necessities that I needed.

While I was at Marietta hospital, which was almost a danger to black people, I decided not to become a doctor, but a nurse instead. I decided to be a "bush" nurse. A "bush" nurse was the beginning of public health nurses; they called them "bush" nurses because they went out to beat the bushes for patients from referrals from doctors. That's when I said, I want to be a "bush" nurse. I knew some public health nurses, and I liked it. I left school August 17, 1951. I had completed all my courses and everything. I caught the bus at five o'clock. I got off at three. I was all packed and ready to come home. After I got in on that Saturday morning, I rode the Silver Comet; it took twelve hours coming from Washington D. C. down to Atlanta.

ES: And what year was that?

CJ: In 1951. But after that, I came home. I got home Saturday morning at seven o'clock. I was in Atlanta. I went over to Marietta Street, caught the bus, and came home. When I got home I went to bed and slept a little bit. Later that day, I went to visit a nurse that was already working at Kennestone right down the street. I knew her in high school. I didn't graduate with her. I was maybe about the eighth grade when she finished. I went

down to see her. We were talking, and she said, "Go on up there and fill out an application." I said, "Girl, I'm so tired. I'm not ready to go to work. I want to stay home about a month, if I can." I didn't need the money or anything. She insisted, so I went up there about eleven o'clock on Monday morning. I went to my first day of work at eleven o'clock that night. That's how bad they were needing nurses.

Management at Kennestone decided to put me on the night shift. Night shift supervisors kept saying, "Well, could you come to work in two weeks? Do you want to come to work?" I said, "Oh, about a month; I'm so tired. They really worked us hard at Freedman's." She says, "How about coming in two weeks?" I said, "Hmmm, I don't know." The secretary of nurses said, "How 'bout tonight?" "Tonight? I don't even have a uniform!" But I went to work that night. I had an orientation. I didn't know where I was going. I had to go up on the second floor and work on pediatrics that night. Since the hospital was segregated, I was on the pediatric floor where they kept white children.

Downstairs, they had eleven beds and two wards, two full-bedded wards, and one was for females, and one was for males. Then they had one, private room, and one semi-private room. That's all that made up the eleven beds in B-Section. On the other side was the kitchen, and on the other side they had a separate dining area. One side was where the blacks stayed; it was on the other side. They had a common serving area. You would go and slide your tray along and be able to select what you wanted, and they would wait on you from on the other side. And so that's the way the segregation went as far as eating. Most of the black people who worked there were janitors or maids. They had three registered nurses for the black section. That's where they worked. When I went, they were fussing about not getting paid equal salaries, and they wanted me to sign a petition. I said, "But I'm just getting here. I don't know what you're talking about." They said, "I wish you would sign it, because we're going to turn it in." And so, I was thinking about it, but I don't know if I ever signed it or not. Their complaint was that they were not getting equal pay even though they were registered.

ES: As compared to the white registered nurses?

CJ: Yes, the white nurses were getting more. Now, there is a misconception that I was the first black nurse at Kennestone. You see that is wrong. I did not give that information out. A community reunion group decided they would make me the Grand Marshal and put the First Black Nurse on plaques. So, that is how it started. Ms. Elizabeth Johnson was the first black nurse at Kennestone.

ES: I would like to hear a little bit about your community, while you were growing up.

CJ: Well, I told you about the four sections of town: Baptist Town; Louisville; there was another little place called Holland Town. That's where my church was located. It was a wooden church; it was white; it didn't have a bathroom. We went across the street to one of the member's house in order to use the bathroom. We used to walk to church; it seemed far, but it wasn't a long way. I had an uncle that had a car. There weren't that

many cars in Marietta, period, especially not owned by black men. He would come over every Sunday and take us to church.

I enjoyed going to Sunday school. My brothers would walk back home, and I stayed for church. There were seven children in the family, five boys and two girls. Well, the children came along, one right after the other. Anyways, I stayed for church and there was a lady. I called her Aunt Maggie, and I like her. Whenever we went over to her house in the summer, her husband would say, "Let's make some lemonade and cookies," and in the winter he'd say, "Let's make some hot chocolate." We really enjoyed going down there. Aunt Maggie taught me a lot about church functions; she would take me along to conferences in Atlanta. We had that kind of relationship.

ES: How did your experiences in the community shape your career after graduation and were there any difficulties?

CJ: When I was in G-section of Kennestone Hospital, they made me head nurse. There were older nurses with more experience. There were misunderstandings with funeral homes; they would bring patients to the hospital.

ES: What was it like working in a segregated hospital? Do you have any particular stories that stand out in your mind?

CJ: After I first went to Kennestone, the situation was sticking veins, but I did not learn that at Freedman's. I learned that at Kennestone; the doctors were delighted because most of them did not like to stick patients or didn't know how. If we were short on personnel, they would send me up to the white floors. I was a young nurse; I would do whatever I was told to do. That was before I became a head nurse. I had helped with a lot of births. I went to all the floors. I had been called "nigger" several times. There was a lady, she was very jaundiced, very sick, and they could not find her veins. She didn't want to be stuck anymore, and since I had the reputation for finding veins easily, they called me. When I got to her room, the floor nurse told her my name and that I was going to try to find and stick her vein, and I was able to and we started fluids. She asked me what nationality I was. She thought I was Puerto Rican, but I told her that I was "colored." There are some people that didn't believe any black person had any sense.

At St. Elizabeth's [in Washington D.C.] I was called "nigger" more by black people and black patients than by white people, but you can't blame mentally challenged people. There was a lady; she was very violent; they gave her a lobotomy. She became very aggressive; she called me names and tried to knock me to the floor. Another lady told another patient that the medication I was giving out was poison. They were sitting at a heavy table; it was black on one side and white on the other. She told me that I better stay on the black side of the table. There was another incident; I had a patient, a young boy who was in surgery for 8 hours. I was told to get his vital signs. He was not fully alert while I was taking his blood pressure. He called me a "nigger" and told me that I didn't know what I was doing. A month later that same guy came back to the emergency room to apologize to me; he said he wished he had something more to give me; but I told

him that his apology was enough. A few nurses asked me who he was, but I just said he was a former patient. It's those kinds of experiences that people go through that change them. I could have acted unprofessional, but I didn't. You don't have to act that way unless you choose to. It was those types of experiences that are inspirational to me.

After integration, they would put white and black nurse wherever they were needed. Some were very resentful and wanted to quit, but they could not afford to quit. They would take out their frustrations by not coming to work with us. I would work my eight hours wherever they sent me.

ES: You were out after eight hours?

CJ: Most of time; sometimes I would work sixteen!

ES: Can you give more detail about your fellow nurse at Kennestone? I found that very interesting.

CJ: The superintendent of nurses came down after the pediatric head nurse resigned. She said, "I would like for you to become head nurse." I didn't ask for that position. She said you can go home and talk it over with your husband. I said that I was the one that would make the decision. She asked Mrs. G, a fellow nurse, about me, and she told her that I was a pediatric nurse, but if I didn't accept the position that she would. Mrs. G was all right; she was part of a race proud to be human and black. It is written in the good book that he made us all, difference language and different tribes; only two people at first; then came the rest of us. Some hate and some love. I mention that because you have a prejudice sometimes on both sides.

ES: Talking about integration; how would you describe the result, as compared to the hopes that many activists had?

CJ: I think there are some people to this day that will not accept it. There are people that feel like that about Mexicans today. Many are taken advantage of; I think people grow up with that embedded in them. That's unfortunate.

ES: Are there any particular developments you would like to see within your community?

CJ: I had a lot of people that I loved, that I didn't like for them to be profiled and segregated. That's a new word for me, profiled, but I know what it means. There is some of that going on today. I hate to see anybody mistreat anybody.

I lived behind the projects in a home that my mother and father had purchased while I was in nursing school. There was a fence between us and the projects. I was the only civilian there when they tore those projects down. That displaced a lot of people who had been living there for twenty or twenty-five years. Some of those projects were bad places to live, but I had lived right about a project on Griggs Street. I know when they built

them and when they tore them down. My sister lived in those projects. I think about anybody they displaced.

Another pet peeve of mine is people who abuse children and women. Education and the church could help eliminate this kind of abusive activity.

ES: Well, I think that's going to wrap up this interview. Thank you so much for sitting down and sharing some of your experiences and thoughts with me.

CJ: It's been my pleasure.

ES: Thank you

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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