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Interview with Deputy Sheriff Sgt. Rhonda Anderson transcript

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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 DEPUTY SHERIFF SGT. RHONDA ANDERSON

COBB NAACP/CIVIL RIGHTS SERIES, NO. 20

CONDUCTED BY CLAY ANDERSON

THURSDAY, 12 NOVEMBER 2009

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 20
Interview with Sergeant Rhonda Anderson
Conducted by Clay Anderson
Thursday, 12 November 2009
Location: Cobb County Detention Center

CA: I'm here with Deputy Sheriff Sgt. Rhonda Anderson at the Cobb County Detention Center and we are going to discuss the segregation of the sheriff's department. Ms. Anderson, if I may start off, tell me a little bit about your growing up, your family, where you grew up, brothers and sisters, what your mother and father did.

RA: I'm from Cobb County. I grew up here in Marietta. My mother retired from Kennestone Hospital after 25 years. My father is also retired. He used to own Gem City Cab Company here in Cobb County. My grandfather owned it, and when he passed on, he left it to my father and my uncle. So that was a family owned business forever here in Cobb County. I have two sisters and a brother. My brother lives in Ohio now; he's retired from the military. I'm the oldest. My middle sister works for WellStar Hospital, computer analyst, and my younger sister is a cosmetologist here in Cobb County.

CA: Where in Cobb County did you grow up?

RA: In the city of Marietta. I attended Lemon Street Elementary School, Allgood Elementary School, Marietta Junior High (now Marietta Middle School), and Marietta High School. I graduated from Marietta High School in 1977.

CA: What years were you at Lemon Street?

RA: I attended Lemon Street Elementary in 1964 and 1966 through 1969. I attended Allgood Elementary in 1965. I only attended Allgood in the second grade.

CA: How was your experience transitioning from the first grade at Lemon Street to the second grade at Allgood?

RA: It was fine. I had no problems. Lemon Street at that time had all black students. When I went to Allgood it was a mixture. I had friends, black and white there, and when I went to high school those same people remained my friends. But I went back to Lemon Street in the third grade. By the time I was in the fifth grade I remember we had our first Caucasian teacher. But I had no problems with race when I was in my time period. I don't remember any problems then being young.

CA: How about in high school? Were there any problems going to Marietta?

RA: Not a bit. I think they integrated Marietta and Lemon Street in 1967, so by the time I got to high school in '74 there were no problems. A lot of those people that I went to Allgood with were at Marietta High, so we were all friends and we had no issues then.

CA: Did you do any extracurricular activities at Marietta High?

RA: Yes, I was a four-year varsity sprinter on the track team, and I also played softball. I was on homecoming court and Valentine's court. I was a pretty active person in high school.

CA: What was your favorite class?

RA: American Lit. I love to read.

CA: Do you still love to read?

RA: Yes.

CA: What books do you enjoy reading the most?

RA: I enjoy books by Sidney Sheldon.

CA: What did you do after you graduated?

RA: I attended West Georgia College, now University of West Georgia. I received a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. I attended from '77 to '81 and graduated in '81. I came back home, and I worked at a retail store, 4th of December 1981, and at a group home. It was run by a private Jewish women's group, and that job lasted for about a year until they closed down.

CA: Was the group home for . . . ?

RA: Delinquent female juveniles. They were either brought there from the juvenile court or DFCS. They weren't bad enough to be in YDC or anything but they couldn't stay at home.

CA: How was working there? Did you enjoy working there?

RA: I enjoyed working there, and most of the girls were nice girls. We took them on field trips. I stayed there, lived with them four days a week, and then I went home and someone else replaced me. We'd alternate, work four days and be off three. The girls attended Osborne High School because it was right here on Pat Mill Road at the time, and they went to school during the day and then they had activities during the nights and chores that they had to do there. I enjoyed that job. I still see two or three of the girls every once in awhile, and they remember me.

CA: What was the turn over, not turn over rate, that's not the proper word to say. Were there a lot of girls that were changed for the better because of it?

RA: I think that pretty much the girls that came there turned out for the better. It changed their lives around. Some of them had no family contact or anything. They were distanced from their parents, and I think they felt when they came there that someone truly did have some concerns or cared about them, so I think for the most part they changed.

CA: How old were you when you started work there?

RA: That had to be right out of college; so I was like twenty-one or twenty-two.

CA: So they looked up to you as more of an older sister.

RA: Yes, not like their mother. Yes, they thought of me as their big sister.

CA: So what did you do after they closed?

RA: After then I got a job at a retail store. I think it was Georgia Girl. I worked there for a year. Then in '83 I came to work here at the Sheriff's Office.

CA: What was that process like for joining the sheriff's department? What kind of things did you have to go through?

RA: First you had to take a written test, a psychological, physical, the obstacle course, polygraph and they talked to everybody. I found out they talked to my first grade teacher. They go back and they really check on who they're hiring when you come to work here. They talked to my neighbors; they talked to them and everything; so they do an extensive background check on you before they hire you here. A lot of the stuff they checked on I didn't know until later until they told me. "Someone from the Sheriff's Office came and talked to me about you."

CA: Was your family pleased that you wanted to join the Sheriff's Office?

RA: My father wasn't. He said, "I sent you to college to come back and work for the Sheriff's Office? You could have come and worked here without a college degree." I said, "Yes, I could have but that's what I want to do." I've always enjoyed it, I love the Sheriff's Office; I love working here.

CA: What about your mother?

RA: She was fine. As long as I was happy she didn't have a problem with it.

CA: When did you meet your husband and do you have, what's your family?

RA: I met my husband here at the Sheriff's Office in 1987. The Sheriff's Office has a nepotism policy. You can't be married and work at the Sheriff's Office so from 1983 to 1989 I worked here at the Sheriff's Office. In 1989 I married my husband. I had a

college degree so I left. I worked as a probation officer from '89 to 2000. At the time it was the Cobb County Probation and a year later in 1990 it became the Department of Corrections. I then became a state employee. Then in 1994 my husband left the Sheriff's Office and went to MARTA Police. I returned to the Sheriff's Office in 2000.

CA: How was being a probation officer? Was that taxing?

RA: I enjoyed it. It was a good job. They just have a high caseload. When I walked in the door in 1989 they gave me an office with 357 probationers that belonged to me. They said, those are yours, you supervise them.

CA: I know that a lot of times people come back in. I imagine it would take a toll on you to see a lot of these people come back through.

RA: You see it every day. It's a revolving door, but I kept up with the caseload. I'm a good manager of time. Some people get in trouble, and you don't see them any more. The ones that reported, I tried to keep them on the straight and narrow and tell them what they need to do, so they would not fall through the cracks. The ones that listened to me, they did pretty good on probation.

CA: Do you have any particular cases that stand out in your memory?

RA: No. A guy came back to me later and thanked me for putting him in jail as his probation officer because it saved his life. He said he thinks that if I hadn't gotten him then and sent him to prison, he would have been dead. So he came back years later and thanked me.

CA: Do you have any children?

RA: Yes, I have two children, I have a nineteen-year-old daughter in college at Missouri Valley College; her name is Ryisha. She went to McEachern High School, and she's there on a track scholarship in Missouri. I have a seventeen-year-old son, Rory, and he's at McEachern High School, and he's a junior. Hopefully he'll be on a scholarship somewhere. He plays basketball and football. My husband and I have been married twenty years this year in July.

CA: Were you sad leaving the sheriff's department because of the nepotism clause?

RA: I was. I didn't want to leave. I really didn't want to leave, because like I said, the reason you're interviewing me, in 1983 I was the first black female that they hired, and I had no problems here at all. They welcomed me with open arms, and I moved and worked in just about every division in the sheriff's department. When I came back in 2000 they welcomed me back, and they've treated me great since I've been back.

CA: Was there any fanfare, you know, articles written in the newspaper about you being the first black female?

RA: No.

CA: Being the first African-American female, were there white females there? Was being a female the problem?

RA: There weren't many females in the sheriff's department in 1983. As a matter of fact, you could probably count them on your hand. There weren't many at all. I can't tell you how many it was, but I bet it wasn't ten or fifteen if—I'll say ten females at the time.

CA: Since this was a male dominated group did you have any problems with the male-female...?

RA: No. I didn't. I'm kind of a straight forward, aggressive person, and I don't take a lot of stuff from anybody, so they guys got to know me well, and they had a lot of respect for me. When we were on the road they'd say, "Rhonda, I'd rather ride with you than some people." So I had no issues with them, no trying to be macho or put me in my place, no, I didn't have those issues here.

CA: You said you worked in all different divisions. What types of divisions are there?

RA: The jail, you have court security—I never worked court security; we have field operations, that's the warrant division; we have a civil division—I worked in warrants—and then we have criminal investigations, which we have forgery. I've worked forgery. Back then we had a bad check section. I don't think they have bad checks any more. I think they kind of combined that. I worked bad checks, I worked forgery. We have a juvenile division. Now we have a domestic violence division. We have internal affairs. I think that's it.

CA: Which one do you prefer the most?

RA: I enjoy working here at the jail.

CA: Really?

RA: I do.

CA: Do you work with the females or the males or everybody?

RA: Everybody. I work in classification right now, I'm a sergeant assigned to classification, and what my job entails is basically each inmate, person, that walks into this jail is classified as far as looking at their criminal history and behavior and things like that. We decide based on their classification of criminal history where they're housed here at the jail. I know basically everybody's name. Their paperwork has crossed my desk.

CA: Now when you began working in 1983 was there any problem with white criminals who came in about you being African-American? Were there things said, issues brought up on that side of the proverbial fence?

RA: There may have been a few comments made. You've got some knuckleheads that call you the "N" word or something like that or you've got the African-American calling me an Uncle Tom. Because I grew up here I knew a lot of people that came to jail. So they used to say, "Well, don't tell her my real name"—because I knew them and they would be coming here saying other names or something or use their cousin's or brother's name. They'd say, "You don't need to do that." But people who really knew me knew that I'm a straightforward person, and I was going to tell the truth, so they knew that was just a waste of their time, so I didn't have many issues there. Just a few people made comments.

CA: Have you ever had to classify or bring in someone who was really close to you?

RA: No. I've had cousins and relatives come through here and classified them. I treat them like everybody else. I had to arrest one of my cousins before. I had to go out and get him because he beat up his wife, but he didn't give me any problems. I just went there and told him to get in the car and let's go. He knew not to give me any problems. I mean, people I grew up with here in Cobb County, they all know me, so really I've had it easy. They don't give me any trouble, and that's just the type of person I am. I'm just like my mom. I'm just straightforward. I tell you what's on the table and leave it there.

CA: Have you ever had any close calls going out and giving warrants or picking people up?

RA: No, I really haven't because usually you don't go by yourself. You always have back up, so I haven't had any close calls or scares or anything. You always go into situations cautious of everything, but, no, nothing serious. I've been blessed in that area.

CA: When I went into the other area the man called you Sergeant Anderson. Where do you begin as a sheriff?

RA: A deputy.

CA: A deputy.

RA: Yes, and then you have to be in the sheriff's department four years before you can take the test for sergeant. You take a test, and you have to go through an assessment board where a panel of people, you do different skits or they set up different programs and you have to do a presentation and role playing and stuff like that, and then after that basically you're put on a list, and then when the openings come up the sheriff promotes you.

CA: How many openings are there?

RA: I just got promoted a year ago. I finally decided to take the test. When I came back I had to wait four years, and I was at the work release. Oh, I didn't put work release as one of the places of work. You pass that coming in. I worked at the work release; when we first opened that I was assigned there. One of the reasons I was chosen there was because of my experience with probation, and I ended up working work released. I enjoyed that. I came back down here in the jail and worked in sentencing, and I decided to take the sergeant's test, so I took that test and got promoted. You just take your test, get on the list, and it depends on how many openings there are. I think four people got promoted when I got promoted. Then from that list there's probably about six others, so maybe ten people got promoted within that last year. They just had a test recently, and I think there's like twelve people on that list, but they haven't promoted anybody yet. It just depends how many openings there are.

CA: While your husband was working here was he a sheriff or was he a deputy?

RA: The sheriff is the sheriff. We're his deputies.

CA: Oh okay, deputy sheriff.

RA: Yes, he was a deputy sheriff too. We're all deputy sheriffs. You are promoted to sergeant, lieutenant, major, and colonel.

CA: Are you going to try to keep going, go to lieutenant?

RA: I think so. I can retire in two years which I don't think that I am. I think I'm going to go ahead. Whenever my opportunity comes up I'll take the lieutenant's test.

CA: How was the crime in Cobb County? Have you seen a spike?

RA: Yes. Crime has spiked. The criminals are getting younger. And they're more violent now. We have more kids that are coming in here for assault charges more than used to be. They used to come in here for theft and now they're coming in for armed robbery at eighteen and nineteen years old.

CA: When did the spike occur do you think?

RA: Probably more since the recession. People are getting desperate, I think.

CA: What demographic make up normally comes in?

RA: Now that part I would have to, I can't be specific. Cobb County used to be more Caucasian than African-American, but now it's a total mixture, so right now it's all nationalities, everybody, black, white. A lot of people think there are more African-American people in jail, but there really isn't. It's based on the people in the county.

CA: How about females? Are more females coming in for violent crimes or things of that nature?

RA: They are. Women used to come to jail for shoplifting, trying to take care of their kids, but now we have women in here for armed robbery and murder. They're just as violent as the men. There's not as many of them, but they're here for the same type of crimes.

CA: You said the recession has caused a lot of this spike. What other things do you believe have caused this spike in violence?

RA: With the younger people I think that the problem is the family break up. There are so many young kids that are raising children these days that they really can't teach. They're young, so they don't have the experience.

CA: So what do you think Cobb County or the family or the church, the school, any organization could do to turn that around?

RA: I think it starts at home; everything starts at home. The schools can help; they can play a part; but it all starts at home; and people have to sit down and talk to their family. We have to get back to being a family and sitting and having the family dinners. People don't sit down and eat dinner together and talk any more. People just pass each other every day; there's no conversation. I think if we could get back to that that would change a whole lot of what's going on today.

CA: How about drugs and alcohol?

RA: That comes in with the family thing I think because if you don't have the closeness of family you look for other things out there. A lot of people that end up in here, it's probably caused from alcohol or drug use. But it's just the break up of the family that way too. They're not getting that support from their family. It doesn't matter if you come from a home where the parents are divorced or anything. I really don't think that is an issue if there's one parent—parents don't have to live in the same house to raise you right.

CA: I don't think either. Cobb County is still growing, and it's still getting diverse. How do you think that's going to play in with your job?

RA: It's going to make it a lot busier, I think, because the more it continues to grow, the more our population at the jail will grow because like I said, I grew up here and at one point when I was a young girl, there was black and white in Cobb County, there were no other groups here and everybody knew each other. Now everybody's coming from everywhere else, and nobody knows each other any more. When I was in school my teachers knew my parents, and when I got in trouble in school they'd call my parents and I got a whipping when I got home. But now the teachers don't know the parents. They don't communicate, and nobody knows each other, and people are afraid to talk to each other any more. It used to be, neighbors were close, but people are just distanced; they don't

get involved; they don't know their neighbors any more; so that's an issue too when you don't know who's living around you and what's going on; and you're not looking out for each other.

CA: What role do you think the churches could play?

RA: I go to Turner Chapel right here off the Square.

CA: African Methodist Episcopal. It's a beautiful church, I pass by it.

RA: That's it. Yes it is. I've been attending there all my life, and we have a lot of groups for children. If the churches could be more involved in drawing the children off the streets and find more programs for the kids to be involved in. If more churches could be involved in getting those kids off the street, to reach those kids that are in trouble and help out, that would deter some of the problems that we're having.

CA: Going back a little bit, how did your family react to the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

RA: As far as I know, in fact my mom and dad both grew up here in Cobb County too, and they had no problems. They lived through the King era and all that stuff, but they were all for it, integration and all that stuff. They had no issues that I know of growing up here. I think for some reason here in Cobb County it may have been because we were a small, little community at the time, we didn't have all those issues that Fulton or some other counties had back then because my mom and dad have never mentioned having any issues here. My granddad owned a business here in Cobb County, and he knew everybody, and everybody knew him. When I came to work here the police chief said, "Are you John Henry Williams' granddaughter?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I know your granddaddy." I said, "Is that a good thing?" "Yes, he's a good man." I don't know, I think they didn't have any issues in their time. The schools were segregated when they went to school, but then they integrated and they have no issues.

CA: How did your family and you react to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King?

RA: I was little, so I don't know. I do remember there was a lot of crying going on, and people were upset, and things like that, but I'm sure it took a toll on my family, parents because they grew up in that era. I just remember the crying, and I remember when Kennedy got assassinated. That was a sad day in our house. That was my brother's birthday that day too, and I remember there was a lot of crying. We were looking at it on TV.

CA: You said your brother is retired military. Was he in Vietnam?

RA: No, he's too young; he's younger than me. No, what did he do? He went over to Panama and got Noriega because he was in the Special Forces. He's a Green Beret Special Forces type person, so he did jump out of planes and did stuff like that.

CA: Wow, that's exciting.

RA: But that's what he did for twenty-four years in the military. The minute he graduated from high school, he went into the military.

CA: How did your parents react to that?

RA: We didn't know he did that until after it was done. It was secret because with him being in the Green Berets and Special Forces, he disappeared for a while, so we didn't know that he was doing those tasks until after it was over.

CA: How about when he signed up? Were your parents nervous?

RA: No, he just went into the service, and the next thing I know he told us he was joining the Green Berets. No, they were really supportive of anything we did, and they were confident that whatever we chose to do, we'd do it well.

CA: As Cobb County is growing and as Cobb County is getting diverse, how do you see race relations in Cobb County?

RA: I think it's probably taken a little toll on the community because there are just so many different nationalities here. The Hispanic population is just blooming here in Cobb County. I think there's more hype in the talk than it is the race relations problems. I think people are doing a lot more talking about the problems, causing more problems, but they talk more than there is an actual race problem here in Cobb County. I don't see it.

CA: With your job, what is the most memorable experience you had as being a deputy sheriff—both good and bad if you have them?

RA: I tell you, I haven't had any bad experiences here. The most memorable thing I think is just coming back to the Sheriff's Office in 2000 and getting promoted here because this is something that I have a passion for. I just love working for the Sheriff's Office. I don't complain about it; I love my job.

CA: I might have asked already but what is your favorite part about this job?

RA: My favorite part about the job is I guess the people because here my co-workers are great. It's just like everywhere else; there are some knuckleheads there; but my co-workers are great. Even working with the inmates here, I really enjoy talking to the inmates because I run across people from everywhere, and you learn something from somebody whether they be a co-worker or an inmate. You learn something every day. I really enjoy talking to the people that are incarcerated here.

CA: How do you see Cobb County in the future?

RA: Just booming off the seams. I don't know where all these people are coming from, but I think Cobb County is a good place to live, raise your children. No matter where you live there are going to be bad things happening and good things, but I think it'll settle down in a little bit, the crime and all that; it's going to settle down after a little while. I think overall it's going to be okay. Cobb County's just a good place to live.

CA: How do you see yourself in the Sheriff's Office after—when do you see yourself retiring?

RA: In five years. I'll be sitting on my porch at home. In five years I'm going to be retired.

CA: Do you plan on just, like you said, sitting on your porch or do you see yourself doing something else?

RA: I don't know. Maybe if I do it'll be a part-time job somewhere. I won't be looking for a full-time job anywhere, no. I'm going to enjoy my children, watching them graduate from college, and, hopefully, in a couple of years after then, I'll have grandchildren. No, I'm going to enjoy it after five years. I'm going to stay here for five years, and I'm gone.

CA: That's great. That sums up my interview with you. I would like to thank you personally, not only from me but from Dr. Scott as well. Thank you very much.

RA: You're welcome.

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