

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

THE FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT PROJECT

FORMER INSTRUCTOR AT SMITH ROBERTSON SCHOOL

O. H. 78.19

VERNA ANDERSON

Interviewed
by

Jimmy Curry

on

June 23, 1978

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Oral History Program at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer, and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be used for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publication, or for other related purposes.

I, Ms. Verna J. Anderson have read the above and, in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Ms. Verna J. Anderson
Interviewee (Signature)
June 23, 1978
Date

O. H. 78. 19

JACKSON STATE COLLEGE
Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

I, JIMMY L. CURRY, in view of the
(Interviewer, please print)

historical and scholarly value of the information contained in the
interview with Mrs. Harna J. Anderson, knowingly and
(Interviewee, please print)

voluntarily permit Jackson State College, Jackson the full use of this
information, and hereby grant and assign to Jackson State College,
Jackson all rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information,
whether or not such rights are now known, recognized or contemplated.

Jimmy L. Curry
Interviewer (signature)

O. H. 78:19
Interview Number

7-9-78
Date

Introduction

Mrs. Verna J. Anderson was born in Preston, Mississippi. Mrs. Anderson is a retired school teacher. She holds a BS from Jackson State University, and has done further study at Teacher's College in Chicago. Her first job was at Smith Robertson School in 1936 teaching the second grade. Mrs. Anderson remained at Smith Robertson for thirty five years, until it closed in 1971. She spent the remaining of her teaching career in the Jackson Public School System.

Mrs. Anderson recalls her recollections of Farish Street economic institution in the community, experiences as a teacher at Smith Robertson for thirty-five years. government programs in Smith Robertson's maintenance in 1936. She also talks about the factors that caused Smith Robertson to close in 1971, and action taken to preserve the school.

INTERVIEWEE: Verna Anderson
INTERVIEWER: Jimmy Curry
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 23, 1978
TRANSCRIBER: Jacqueline Thomas
O.H. 78.19

Curry: We are interviewing some former instructors of Smith Robertson School. We are trying to establish the history of the school because we want to establish it as a historical monument for Blacks. Will you give us permission to use this tape for scholarly purposes?

Anderson: Yes. What do you want me to tell you? Are you going to ask the questions?

Curry: Are your parents originally from Jackson?

Anderson: No.

Curry: Were you born in Jackson?

Anderson: No, I was born in Preston, Mississippi.

Curry: In what way was your job at Smith Robertson, do you feel, valuable to the community?

Anderson: Teaching children how to study and be good citizens.

Curry: What activities have you been involved in outside of your home?

Anderson: You mean at present?

Curry: Anytime recent.

Anderson: I did volunteer work at the schools. I retired in 1974 and for two years I did volunteer work, helping the slow learners I worked four or five hours each day for the first two years. The last two years I did volunteer work at Saint Dominic Hospital. I would go there maybe three or four times a week and work in the office, in the dietary room or either work with the mental patients on the sixth floor.

Curry: Have you ever been involved in politics? In what direction do you see the Farish Street Community is heading politically?

Anderson: I think that there is a lot to be done to improve Farish Street

- Anderson: in many different ways.
- Curry: What are some of the factors that you think affect the various institutions in the Farish Street community?
- Anderson: I don't go around Farish Street very much, but from what I hear, it is a little rough down there sometimes.
- Curry: Around Smith Robertson, what were some of the economic institutions in the community? Were there any factories?
- Anderson: No kind of factories just the Sun-N-Sand Motel. It is not too far from there, just about a block. On Farish Street we just don't have any factories. Seale-Lily Ice Cream Company is located on Griffith Street.
- Curry: Not too much around?
- Anderson: No.
- Curry: Were the individuals that lived close in the vicinity of Smith Robertson renters of their homes?
- Anderson: Most of them were renters. There use to be a man named John Hart. He owned all the property around Smith Robertson on the south side.
- Curry: Was he white or black?
- Anderson: White.
- Curry: What were some of the power structures in the community that affected Smith Robertson?
- Anderson: When we talk about the rental property, they wanted to close Smith Robertson a long time ago but they said it couldn't be closed because the property was owned by whites. The school depended on those students that lived on the rental property. The school didn't close until May, 1971.
- Curry: What was the basic mean of employment? What help were you aware of from the national, state or government level in the community when you were working at Smith Robertson? Were you aware of any in terms of helping the school?
- Anderson: The government helped in providing lunches for the children. In later years they helped with providing material for the slow learners, the reading program, and the math program. We had a lot of mathematic books and material that were

Anderson: furnished by the government.

Curry: Do you feel the government aid program discriminated against minorities?

Anderson: Not as far as I am concerned because at that time Smith Robertson was all black. Everything that we had there was use by the blacks. I don't know what the difference was in the black and white schools. After desegregation, we had the same thing. Of course, this just one particular school. Poindexter did not discriminate, we used the same things for the whites as we did for the blacks.

Curry: What churches in the community do you feel played an important role?

Anderson: Parish Street Church and Central Methodist Church.

Curry: Were you aware of any peer group members that existed in the community such as gangs or something of that nature?

Anderson: No, not that I know of.

Curry: Can you describe some of the activities that you were involved in, in the community?

Anderson: We had P.T.A. that was organized. We would have different things to improve the community that would involve the parent and teachers. Anything that we wanted to get over, we would try to do that at these meetings.

Curry: What type of structure was Smith Robertson built of?

Anderson: Cement blocks and bricks.

Curry: What were some of your early recollections of Smith Robertson when you began work?

Anderson: When I first started teaching at Smith Robertson, I enrolled as a second grade teacher. I had children ranging from seven to seventeen. I only had five children that were fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen. I can remember the boy that was seventeen years old and in the second grade.

Curry: You were teaching the second grade?

Anderson: Yes.

- Curry: Do you know in what year was Smith Robertson built?
- Anderson: 1894.
- Curry: Approximately how much larger was Smith Robertson at the beginning stage when you started? How many students were there?
- Anderson: I believe we had 900 students or more.
- Curry: How large was the school staff?
- Anderson: I can't give you the exact number, but we have always had thirteen teachers or more. It was a two-story building. Later there were twenty-three teachers.
- Curry: What grades attended Smith Robertson?
- Anderson: When I first started we had grades first through the sixth. I can't remember the exact date, but somewhere near the fifties we had first through the ninth grade.
- Curry: How did the facilities at Smith Robertson compare with the institutions of other groups such as whites in the City?
- Anderson: We use to talk as teachers. Our rooms were so crowded and different ones would say, "Maybe somebody had been in some of the whites' room. They would have eighteen, twenty, or twenty-five students.
- Curry: Do you think that there was moral support in the community for Smith Robertson?
- Anderson: As the years grew it became better. More parents would come out and support their school. It wasn't sufficiently supported at first by no means.
- Curry: Were you knowledgeable of a P.T.A. being in operation during the early years of Smith Robertson School?
- Anderson: Yes.
- Curry: How good was the school maintenance at your beginning phase?
- Anderson: We always had a man and a woman. They did the best they could, I'll say that.
- Curry: How would you rate the support given to Smith Robertson by the community?

- Anderson: I would say that it wasn't real good, but fair.
- Curry: Are you knowledgeable of any additions to Smith Robertson during your time of employment?
- Anderson: You mean the building?
- Curry: Building and additional personnel.
- Anderson: Yes. It was improved, new members were added to the faculty and more rooms were added to the school. We had an auditorium which we didn't have at first. We had only the classroom and if we had meetings we would have to go to the classrooms. At first we didn't have a lunchroom, it was very cool at that time. If the children wanted lunch they had to bring lunch. In 1914, a cafeteria was added. The children began to eat in school and the government gave lunch to those who were unable to pay. They were investigated and given free lunches. Those who were able had to pay a small amount.
- Curry: What was the average class size at Smith Robertson?
- Anderson: I don't remember everybody, but as I told you, we had very over-crowded classrooms. It seemed to me, maybe I shouldn't say this because I may be wrong. It seemed to me that when I first started somebody had eighty-five children.
- Curry: This might have been possible.
- Anderson: They all were over-crowded. The teachers didn't have much time for giving individual time to the students as they do now.
- Curry: What type of classroom discipline existed at Smith Robertson?
- Anderson: The teachers were permitted to punish the child. They could still punish the child if it was very necessary in the presence of the principal or two other teachers.
- Curry: In what year did the fire destroy Smith Robertson?
- Anderson: January 3, 1909.
- Curry: In what year was Smith Robertson closed?
- Anderson: It was closed in 1971.
- Curry: What are some of the factors that you would list that caused Smith Robertson to close?

Anderson: I think that after the school desegregated no one wanted Smith Robertson. It was in the slum area and didn't anyone-- the white kids didn't want to go there, that's my opinion. They closed these schools so that they could intergrate. Smith Robertson wasn't the only school that closed.

Curry: Was there any resentment from the community?

Anderson: We had some parents who really didn't understand. They didn't want to send their children far away from home. They wanted it to stay open because of that. Therefore, they resented it.

Curry: What reason did the city administration give for closing?

Anderson: They thought, I think, that as far as Smith Robertson was concerned, it was downtown and it was too close. It did something to the childre. It affected their learning. They had to many things that would attract their attention. Whereas, they call, "Up and Down Farish Street." As I said, they wanted to close it before that time. It was to close to downtown, but all of this property belonged to John Hart. They were going to close it several time. That was why this rental property was owned by white people. They were making money off the lacks. They didn't want to close their school and they kept it open even after they had planned to close it many times.

They didn't close it until intergration. They began to shift teachers around after they intergrated. They had these places they use to call juke joints. All the parents would be working instead of the children going home, they would go to these places and hang around all afternoon. Sometimes parents would come home and wouldn't know where their children were.

Curry: Did community groups formulate to protest the closing of Smith Robertson School?

Anderson: No.

Curry: What is the basic reason, would you say, that Smith Robertson School is in the present condition?

Anderson: What?

Curry: Why do you think that the windows and all this have been broken?

Anderson: Just as I have said before, they took pleasure in going to the buildings that were closed and just playing around,

Anderson: breaking out windows. I think that is what happen. Most of those people were poor and some of them didn't care. I row that the neighborhood has improved. The parents are a little more educated about these things.

Curry: Do you see the citizen of this community being concerned enough about the institutions of their community?

Anderson: I really don't think they are.

Curry: Are you aware that there has been a committee formulated to preserve Smith Robertson as a Black Historical model?

Anderson: Yes. I have been told that there was a committee.

Curry: Will you jsut give us a summary statement of what work was like at Smith Robertson from 1936?

Anderson: At first, you really couldn't do anything because teachers didn't have much to work with. We didn't have materials. We only had to use just whatever they had, materials or whatever. Later we began using workbooks to accmopany readers and other books. After the years passed, it was better and I began to enjoy teaching more than what I did at first because I had things to work with. In later years, we began to use mathematics workbooks.

The music teachers and the physcial education teachers helped us. I enjoyed it more and the children enjoyed it more. Then you had more time because as the years went by the number of children became smaller and smaller. This gave me more time to work with the children. We had more time to work with slow learners. Later they gave us aides. The government paid for aides to come into the classroom. That was a great help because you could get one one group of children organized and after you presented your lesson the aide was a great help. Then I would go and work with another group while this aide was helping with this group. They even helped to carry out instructions and see that children were doing it. I think, that was when I began to like teaching. I felt like I was getting somewhere. I felt like I was teaching children. The children seemed interested, most of them. They really wanted to learn. I had a lot of them that really wanted to learn. I think that was because you had more time to motivate them. I had time to deal with the children, the slow learners, as well as the gifted children. I remember now how some of these little students reacted after I would get them started. They would appreciate it so much. They would help me at the end of the day. They would come and look up at me and some of them really wanted homework. They were proud to take this

Anderson: homework home and come back the next day and tell me, this is what I've done. So, I think, in my first years, if I could have had the opportunity to work with the children, as I did in my last years, I would have been more help to humanity.

When I first started some principals worked, they had a lot of work to do. It was just like the teacher and the parent. Now, I believe, that a good principal helps to make a good teacher. You know some grown ups are more like some children. If a principal finds a person that's trying to do he or she can say just a little word of encouragement, sometimes helps. Back in those days teachers would think that this was, or is right. They didn't believe in trying out new things, new methods in dealing with children.

You know, what works with one child won't work with another. Sometimes we would get people to think, well that just wasn't right. I believe, when you go out there you're suppose to work with the child and try to reach him. You don't just go out there and feel like we just got to do it, like you were taught. Well, I think, that what's good for one child isn't good for another. If you can't use this method with this child, try another method and sometimes that method will work.

This same method will not work with all children. I've learned that about children. I've learned that you find out the child's needs and you find out the best way of reaching him. If he likes to do this, then you work with him on that. When he learns he does that well, then you introduce him to something else. You know what I mean. Then you finally get him around to where you have made him a good student or he has made himself one by listening.