

ARLINGTON COUNTY LIBRARY

Oral History Project

NARRATOR: Dorothy M. Hamm

INTERVIEWER: Edmund Campbell and Cas Cocklin

DATE: February 21, 1986

INTERVIEWER: This is the Arlington County Library Oral History Project. This is January 30, 1986. With me is Cas Cocklin, a co-volunteer with me in this Arlington County Oral History Project. We have the privilege today of interviewing Mrs. Dorothy Hamm, of Highview Park in Arlington. She's been a resident of Arlington since 1950. She's a native Virginian, and she played a very important role in a very traumatic period of Arlington history. Dorothy, you were born in Virginia?

NARRATOR: Yes, I was.

INTERVIEWER: When?

NARRATOR: 1919, in Caroline County.

INTERVIEWER: Caroline County is between Fredericksburg and Richmond, just off Route 1, is it?

NARRATOR: That is right.

INTERVIEWER: You came to Northern Virginia when?

NARRATOR: I came to Northern Virginia about 1927, and I lived at

Bailey's Crossroads in Fairfax County.

INTERVIEWER: What was the situation at Bailey's Crossroads at that time?

NARRATOR: Well, it was an entirely segregated situation, the schools and all other facilities and accommodations.

INTERVIEWER: It was segregated.

NARRATOR: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Dorothy, you are black.

NARRATOR: Yes, I am.

INTERVIEWER: And you have played quite a role in attempting to break up the segregation laws of Virginia, have you not?

NARRATOR: Yes, I have because my feeling was that all people are equal.

INTERVIEWER: I think we certainly can agree on that -- straight back to the days of Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence. Well, let me get back for a minute to your own personal history. You lived in Bailey's Crossroads for awhile. What was your first connection with Arlington County?

NARRATOR: I moved to Arlington in 1950, and from that date on [?]

INTERVIEWER: You were married then?

NARRATOR: Yes, I was.

INTERVIEWER: When were you married?

NARRATOR: I was married in 1942.

INTERVIEWER: Was your husband in the service at that time?

NARRATOR: Yes, he was in the service, but he actually was AWOL when we were married.

INTERVIEWER: Well, he must have wanted to marry you pretty badly..

NARRATOR: I think we both wanted to.

INTERVIEWER: You have how many children?

NARRATOR: I have three children.

INTERVIEWER: And they were brought up in Arlington County?

NARRATOR: Yes, they were. All of them attended Arlington schools, and they all graduated from Washington-Lee High School.

INTERVIEWER: Dorothy, were you employed by the United States government after you came to Arlington, or how did you earn a living?

NARRATOR: Well, I guess I can go back a little bit before coming to Arlington as far as earning a living. I came out of college in 1941, and . . .

INTERVIEWER: What college had you attended?

NARRATOR: Minor Teacher's College in Washington. The only type of job I could find at that time was a live-in domestic job, taking care of a family of seven making \$5.00 a week.

INTERVIEWER: In Arlington? The family lived in Arlington?

NARRATOR: Yes, that is right, they lived in Arlington.

INTERVIEWER: After you came to Arlington in 1950, you were married, and you got another kind of job then?

NARRATOR: Well, at the time I came to Arlington I was working with the government. I had been with them for a few years prior to that.

INTERVIEWER: And you then got your home in Highview Park which was formerly known as Hall's Hill?

NARRATOR: Yes, we designed and built our own home, and we're still there.

INTERVIEWER: What is the address?

NARRATOR: 1900 North Cameron St.

INTERVIEWER: Dorothy, let's look at the conditions you found in Arlington in 1950 as far as the relationship between the races is concerned. Were there legal restrictions that were repugnant to members of the black race at that time?

NARRATOR: Yes, there were. At that time, the schools were segregated. The libraries did not permit blacks.

INTERVIEWER: You mean you could not come in and get a book in the library?

NARRATOR: No, we did not -- the children could not -- in fact, we could not.

INTERVIEWER: You're speaking of the public library?

NARRATOR: As far as I can recall, the Arlington County Libraries were. The children obtained their information from the school libraries.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any way adult blacks could obtain books from the library?

NARRATOR: I do not believe it was [possible] -- after so many years I cannot really say.

INTERVIEWER: Would you repeat about the hospitals because I did not get that? And the theatres -- you say the theatres remained segregated until about 1963.

NARRATOR: Until about 1963.

INTERVIEWER: What about the hospitals?

NARRATOR: The hospitals were segregated.

NARRATOR: Did they take maternity cases for blacks?

NARRATOR: In some instances, they did, but the mother was put on a hall with the blacks, and the baby was allowed to be put in the nursery.

INTERVIEWER: The baby was allowed to be desegregated -- that was very kind, but the mother had to remain in the segregated hall. What about public toilet facilities?

NARRATOR: In many cases, there were no public toilet facilities for blacks -- in stores and in other places.

INTERVIEWER: In the courthouse?

NARRATOR: I am not certain about the courthouse but as far as I can recall -- yes, at the courthouse there was a sign that said "White Ladies - Bathroom Facilities" and "Black Women" for the black people.

INTERVIEWER: If you wanted to go to a meeting at which both blacks and whites attended, could you sit together?

NARRATOR: In the early 50's we could -- after the county, or some people in the county -- discovered there was a seating law on the books, then we were not permitted to sit together. But there were several instances that I can recall that made me very uncomfortable -- one, in particular, was a school board meeting that I attended with 2 other blacks. When we arrived, there was a row of chairs almost to the ceiling. The whites sat on one side, and, of course, we were told that the blacks were to sit on

the other side. There was also a time when I was chairman of the Health Committee -- this was prior to the building of Yorktown High School. I was a member of the County Council of PTA's at that time, and I was acting chairman of the health group. I had worked in my group for quite a number of months, but prior to the presentation at Stratford Junior High School I was informed that because of the seating law I would have to sit in a separate section from the white people that I had worked with previously. However, there were several people on my committee who said that I could not sit with them, but they could sit with me.

INTERVIEWER: Well, they violated the law at that time themselves, as I remember, because you remember the famous case of Faith Bissell where she insisted on sitting in the -- shall I call it the black section -- and was arrested for that act. You recall the Supreme Court decision directing the desegregation of the public schools "with all deliberate speed" which was made in 1954. After that time, you became rather active in the -- shall I call it -- the desegregation movement, did you not?

NARRATOR: Yes, I did. My reason for doing that was because I felt that with the Supreme Court's decision my two sons would have an opportunity to attend Stratford, an integrated school -- and I told them the meaning of the Supreme Court's decision, and I also told them that they would be going to Stratford. However, almost 2 years had passed, they still had not been permitted to attend; and this is why I really got involved.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do?

NARRATOR: On one occasion, my husband and I took our oldest son to Stratford in an attempt register him, and he was denied. I was also one of the original plaintiffs in the suit of 14 parents and 22 children.

INTERVIEWER: What suit was this?

NARRATOR: This was the suit that was filed by the N.A.A.C.P. in May of 1956, 2 years after the Supreme Court's decision.

INTERVIEWER: This was the suit, was it, in the federal court for the Eastern District of Virginia before Judge Albert Bryan?

NARRATOR: Yes, it was.

INTERVIEWER: And you were one of the original plaintiffs?

NARRATOR: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Did you take any other action at that time other than participate in that suit? I mean were you involved in any other desegregation movements at that time?

NARRATOR: Not really at that time. They came just a little bit later -- my suits involving the theatres, the hospital, eating places and working places.

INTERVIEWER: May I ask, in these desegregation suits where the children were involved, what was the feeling of the children? Were they truly indignant and anxious for equality of education

or opportunities or was there any compulsion on the part of the parents requiring the children's cooperation?

NARRATOR: No, I think all the children were very eager to go. All of the parents were very anxious for their children to attend the school because they felt this was a better opportunity for their children knowing that all of them had attended segregated schools.

NARRATOR: Well, there came a time, Dorothy, when Judge Bryan rendered his decision. Do you recall when and what that was?

NARRATOR: Judge Bryan's original decision was that some of the children would attend school --however, because of the school board's request for a stay this did not go into effect. Judge Bryan's decision in 1958 was that four of the 30 children who were plaintiffs in the case would be admitted to Stratford in February of 1959.

INTERVIEWER: Do you recall who those children were?

NARRATOR: Yes, they were Gloria Thompson, Michael Jones, Lance Newman and Ronald Deskins.

INTERVIEWER: The parents of those children, were they neighbors of yours? They lived in Highview Park, did they?

NARRATOR: Yes, we were all neighbors. We all lived in the segregated ---

INTERVIEWER: And you all lived in the area that would be served by Stratford Junior High School?

NARRATOR: That is right.

INTERVIEWER: Stratford Junior High School is now closed. The building is still located just off Old Dominion Drive, is it not?

NARRATOR: Yes, and Lorcum Lane.

INTERVIEWER: What happened then? Were those children finally admitted in February 1959?

NARRATOR: Yes, the four children were admitted in February.

INTERVIEWER: Meanwhile the United States District Court of the Eastern District of Virginia in Norfolk had declared the Massive Resistance Law in Virginia unconstitutional, had it not?

NARRATOR: That is right.

INTERVIEWER: And so there came a time that they would be admitted in February?

NARRATOR: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us what happened, insofar as you know, at the time that they were actually admitted, on the morning.

NARRATOR: Well, prior to their being admitted, I would guess over several years, we had been having workshops and meetings, and different churches had been helping us. I feel that the

children were really prepared. The morning that they went to school --

INTERVIEWER: Excuse me just a minute, you say that the children were really prepared, it was a thing that would make them nervous, is it not? And then you were trying to prepare them for meeting possible hostility?

NARRATOR: Yes, I'm sure any 11 or 12 year old child would be nervous in a situation of that kind. We had tried to explain to them the types of things that may happen, could happen, perhaps how they could accept or respond to some of these situations. And I think the day went somewhat smoothly. There were a few number of incidents but nothing to really upset the children.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any relationship or contact with any whites who were involved or interested in desegregation at that time?

NARRATOR: Well, the morning that the children went to school I received a call from Theda Nehenle.

INTERVIEWER: She lived near Stratford, did she?

NARRATOR: She did. She lived perhaps 7 blocks from Stratford.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know her?

NARRATOR: I had gotten to know her, casually, because of her attendance at court when we were in court many times.

INTERVIEWER: And she was on your side -- I mean she was in favor of desegregation of the schools?

NARRATOR: Yes, she was. However, that morning she called and asked some of us if we would like to come over to her house -- and I was quite surprised to receive a favorable phone call because most phone calls that we had received had been a threatening type of phone call, and it made me feel very good to know that someone was sympathetic with us, that someone was really appreciative [?].

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to her house that day?

NARRATOR: Oh, yes. We went to her house that morning. The parents of the 4 students went.

INTERVIEWER: As I recall, my own wife, Elizabeth Campbell, who was a former member of the school board and had been active in the movement attempting to get desegregation was there also.

NARRATOR: Yes, and present was also Mary Marshall.

INTERVIEWER: Mary Marshall, now a member -- I don't know if she was then or not -- but now a member of the Virginia General Assembly.

NARRATOR: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And a number of others?

NARRATOR: Right. Also present was Barbara Marx who had taken a

very active part in the school situation.

INTERVIEWER: Barbara Marx, as I recall, was one of the few white members of the N.A.A.C.P. She was a member of the N.A.A.C.P., was she not?

NARRATOR: Yes, Barbara was a member of the N.A.A.C.P. She was also one of the original plaintiffs in the suit because she had signed up for her 2 daughters. There were also 2 other white persons who were plaintiffs in the suit.

INTERVIEWER: Did Theda say anything, also, about the children coming by her home?

NARRATOR: Yes, Theda indicated to me that after school if any of the children should want to come by her home and stay until they were picked up or until they later walked home, they were welcome to do so, and I thought this was very [?].

INTERVIEWER: The opening day of the desegregation of Stratford Junior High passed without any particular incident in the school?

NARRATOR: Yes, it did. There may have been just a few minor remarks made, but on the whole it went very well.

INTERVIEWER: Were the children reasonably well received, on the whole?

NARRATOR: Yes, they were, especially the girl. There were the 3 boys. There was this one little white girl who welcomed the little black girl, and until this day they are still friends.

INTERVIEWER: What has happened to those 4 original students?

NARRATOR: Well, out of the 4 original students, 3 of them graduated from college; and at the present time Gloria is a social worker in Baltimore, MD. Michael is an auditor with an insurance company in Washington. Lance is an electronics engineer in Concordia, and Ronald is a firefighter in [?] County. They have all done very well.

INTERVIEWER: Now, Dorothy, the admission of the 4 original students to Stratford Junior High certainly did not end the legal problems as far as desegregation is concerned. Tell us, did the schools proceed fairly smoothly after that toward desegregation in Arlington?

NARRATOR: I would say, yes, they did up to a certain extent. After the 4 kids went in in February of 1959, there was another group of 7 or more students that went in in September of '59. And after more court action, 7 or 8 kids were ordered into the schools about 2 weeks after schools had opened. This went pretty well.

INTERVIEWER: How about your own children?

NARRATOR: Well, my oldest son was 15 in the first group in September of '59. My younger son was with the children who were ordered in about 2 weeks after school opened in '59. There was one thing in, perhaps around December of '59, that

concerned me a little bit. I was called by the principal of school because the children were participating in a musical that was to be held at Washington-Lee, and I was asked if I would ask the black parents attending this musical to sit in a separate section; and, of course, I wanted to know why this was necessary because the children were all participating together. Well, I was told that the children were standing while singing, but if we attended we would be sitting, and therefore because of the law we would be required to sit in a separate section.

INTERVIEWER: Did that come from the Arlington County Government?

NARRATOR: This came from the principal of Washington-Lee High School at that particular time. I would like to indicate that many of the parents attended this affair, and they sat wherever they wanted to, and nothing happened.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us now what other steps you took or participated in to, shall I say, to complete legal desegregation in Arlington.

NARRATOR: Well, after we once got our children into school, which I thought was one of the most important things, I became involved with the theatres. We were not allowed at the theatres. We started picketing the theatres in March of, I believe '62, and we were not allowed in the theatres until June of '64; and then it was only after quite a few of us had been arrested while picketing, and I was one of that group. We also were in court as a result of that; but the manager of the theatres, who at that

time lived in Richmond, told us that if we would call off our picketing for 1 month, then we would be allowed to go into the theatres. On the first night when it was o.k. for us to go, my son and I and white couple were among the ones who went to the theatres.

INTERVIEWER: Any particular incident of interest when you went into the theatre?

NARRATOR: Well, I wasn't really sure whether they were going to let us in or not, so on that night a white couple and my son and I went to the theatre. The white couple purchased tickets, and when I went to purchase a ticket I wasn't really sure whether they were going to sell me a ticket or not. We had prearranged it where I would be given a ticket by one of the white people, and I was going into the theatre. However, it happened that we were sold tickets, and my son and I went into the theatre with the white couple.

INTERVIEWER: You spoke earlier of Arlington County, or perhaps they were state, seating laws. Now with the theatre selling you tickets, was this their own decision or had the seating law been changed?

NARRATOR: I don't believe the seating law --well I'm not certain about that. I do know that it was a decision made by the manager of the theatres. However, prior to this --

NARRATOR: Did you know him? Mr. Wade Pearson?

NARRATOR: This was Mr. Thalmeiner. Prior to this, I had been called by the manager of the Glebe Theatre, and he had indicated even if he gave blacks separate seating they only had one toilet facility, and separate toilet facilities were also required in order to make [?].

INTERVIEWER: When was that practice of separate toilet facilities abandoned in Arlington? Later?

NARRATOR: Yes, it was.

INTERVIEWER: Was it abandoned by custom or abandoned by the position of the law?

NARRATOR: Well, I don't have too much legal mind so I'm not real sure which it was, but I know that in the course of time they did do away with the separate toilet facilities.

INTERVIEWER: I don't recall a Virginia law. There may have one requiring separate toilet facilities, but it was almost the universal practice -- in fact, it was the universal practice throughout Virginia and the entire South at that time.

NARRATOR: That's quite true.

INTERVIEWER: Well, now, Dorothy, I don't know if you've mentioned it, but in the earlier days you were not even able to shop in stores, were you? Regularly? Or some stores?

NARRATOR: Some stores we could shop in. Other stores we were

not allowed to buy merchandise. However, we could go in and look around and look at things we would like to have, but the clerks at that time were all white; and, of course, they would not have to wait on us. Therefore, we could do no shopping.

INTERVIEWER: What about the necessities? Food and things like that -- as well as things like hardware. Where did you get those things, or did you have to go to black shops to buy those things?

NARRATOR: Well, we were talking about the 50's. We could shop at Safeway and other stores. However, we could not work there. We could shop at many stores during that time, but we still were not allowed to work in those stores. And I guess it was back in the 50's and 60's that I became involved with three Safeway stores and the drugstores -- also the liquor stores -- and a means of picketing hoping that they would provide employment for the blacks. It took quite a few years, and in some cases it took [?].

INTERVIEWER: Even after desegregation became effective, you still had a good deal of harrassment as you mentioned. Can you elaborate on that a little more?

NARRATOR: One incident I would like to mention regarding People's Drug Store. As you know, we were not allowed to sit down and eat there.

INTERVIEWER: This was when the People's Drug Stores had counters and were serving snack meals and sodas and stuff.

NARRATOR: That's right. After Sunday School one Sunday, my son and his friend went to People's Drug Store and sat down to be served. The white fellow sitting on the seat next to him pushed him from the seat to the floor, and this upset my son terribly. He came home and told me about it. This also annoyed me because I felt after many years of struggle and many years of court decisions that we should be able to at least sit at a counter and eat if we were hungry.

INTERVIEWER: Racial prejudice has existed, as you know, from the beginning of time, and it's awfully hard to get it out of the hearts of men.

NARRATOR: That is quite true. At one time I thought it was the law that was against us, but I found out that it was the hearts of many people, also. There are many people with very black hearts.

INTERVIEWER: Dorothy, were there any cross burnings in Arlington?

NARRATOR: Yes, there were several cross burnings in our area. One was in the yard of a family who took their children to school to be admitted prior to the Supreme Court's decision. The other was in the yard of Dr. Harold Johnson who also took his two girls to be admitted to school, but they were denied.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Harold Johnson was a really distinguished black physician who lived -- was it on Lexington St.?

NARRATOR: Yes, it was.

INTERVIEWER: Now deceased?

NARRATOR: Yes, he is deceased. However, he was one of the most outstanding physicians in Arlington. He did very much to help blacks.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned, off the record, the pupil placement forms. What do you want to say about that, Dorothy?

NARRATOR: Well, the pupil placement form was used as a means of assigning children to different schools, at that time they were all segregated schools. My husband and I refused to sign the pupil placement form. As a result, because our son had not been ordered into school through the courts, he was out of school several weeks; and we had to go into court along with another parent in order to have our son and the other student to attend the school. However, at the time, our son had to go back to Hoffman-Boston.

INTERVIEWER: You mention Hoffman-Boston. What kind of school was that?

NARRATOR: Hoffman-Boston was Arlington's only black school located in the southern part of Arlington, and we lived in the northern part of Arlington much closer to Stratford or other schools.

INTERVIEWER: I think you mean the only junior-senior high school. There were 2 elementary schools.

NARRATOR: Yes, it was a combination junior-senior high.

INTERVIEWER: And this was before 1959, of course.

NARRATOR: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: As I recall, the pupil placement board, while theoretically placing students anywhere they wanted under the pupil placement forms, in practice always placed the white children in certain schools and the black children in other schools. Am I right on that?

NARRATOR: This is my understanding.

INTERVIEWER: Now did you have any other experiences or did your children have any other experiences that you want to relate about in school?

NARRATOR: Well, after my oldest son started Stratford, he was interested in wrestling, and he was not allowed to participate in wrestling because of body contact so we ended up in court again in order to have him to participate in the physical activities.

INTERVIEWER: And he was admitted then?

NARRATOR: Yes, he was.

INTERVIEWER: The court decided?

NARRATOR: Right, he was, and there was also another parent and a student who were involved, and they both were allowed.

INTERVIEWER: Dorothy, you mentioned the various court cases. Were you bearing the burden of the cost of those or was there pro bono work going on from either white or black law firms who were helping with that?

NARRATOR: The N.A.A.C.P. took charge of the cost, as far as I can recall, for a couple of court cases at that time, and they also represented us in court.

INTERVIEWER: Was Tom Monroe, now a Circuit judge, was he involved in any of those cases?

NARRATOR: I can't recall that he was.

INTERVIEWER: He is now a black judge in Arlington.

NARRATOR: However, lawyer Alexander from South Arlington did work with the parents and the parent groups in order to prepare our children and to prepare the parents; and we had many, many of those meetings over a period of 2 years.

INTERVIEWER: Any other incidents that you wish to relate with respect to the 4 children that were admitted to Stratford Junior High School?

NARRATOR: I can't recall any at this time -- incidents involving the children after they were admitted. However, there was a

meeting with the parents of the 4 children back in December of 1958. Congressman Joel P. Broyhill called one of the parents and asked if he could meet with the parents only, which he did at the home of one of the parents. At this particular meeting, he tried to discourage the parents from sending their children because he felt, perhaps, this would not be the best for the children.

INTERVIEWER: Anyone else you want to mention?

NARRATOR: Yes, I would like to mention Mrs. A.J.E. Davis. I call her Jerri. She was one of the original pioneers. She was also the person that took the first 3 black students to Stratford to register in about 1957.

INTERVIEWER: To try to register?

NARRATOR: Well, yes, to attempt to register, but they were denied.

INTERVIEWER: And she is white?

NARRATOR: Oh, yes, Jerri is definitely a white person.

INTERVIEWER: And I might just mention also that Theda Henley who called you on the day of the opening of Stratford to desegregation, she was also a white person, was she not?

NARRATOR: Yes, she was also a white person.

INTERVIEWER: You have some figures there with respect to the number of black students that were admitted to Arlington schools

in the first 2 or 3 years after desegregation.

NARRATOR: Yes, in the fall of 1959, there were 23 Negro students at Stratford; and in 1960 there were 42 students in the schools of Arlington; and in 1961 there were approximately 100 students in the integrated schools; and since that time the problem hasn't been great in children being in integrated Arlington schools. However, the busing of students across county did become a problem a little bit later.

INTERVIEWER: What other comments do you want to make with respect to the general condition of desegregation in Arlington schools. Is it reasonably well implemented now?

NARRATOR: Yes, I think it has gone reasonably well. There are still some little minor problems. I think many of the children being permitted to go to integrated schools -- the ones that have graduated, it has really helped them. We have found that over one half of the children who were involved back in the 50's have been college graduates. Some of them hold doctor's degrees, and many of them are in business for themselves. Quite a few of them hold professional positions, and I think much of this came about because of our struggle for equality back in the 50's and 60's.

INTERVIEWER: To close these very interesting stories you have given us, do you have any final remarks that you would like to make as to the progress that has been made in Arlington County?

NARRATOR: I think there has been lots of progress made with

students in the schools and also with the adults. However, even in the schools, our students are looked at many times as black students. We're looked at as black people, and I would be very hopeful that the time would come when we could be looked at as students or just people without being identified as black.

INTERVIEWER: We have just shared as a nation the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. That was his great wish, and I think I share it, and I'm sure Cas shares it with you; and as far as I'm concerned that's what you are.

NARRATOR: Well, thank you. Martin Luther King had a dream, and, of course, we too have a dream. Much of our dream has been fulfilled, but there is still much of the dream to be filled.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. I hope we can live together -- all races -- fulfilling all our dreams.