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Consuela Rotan Jefferys

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Consuela Rotan Jefferies Interview
By Joe Nilles
Regarding Camp Washington
Carver

Oral History Department
Marshall University
West Virginia

This is Joe Nilles and I will be interviewing Consuelo Rotan Jeffereys in regard to Camp Washington Carver to keep a record for the Oral History Department at Marshall University and the state of West Virginia. I guess the first thing we should start off with is let me get you to state your name, where you are from: name, rank and serial number part of the interview.

My name is Consuelo Rotan? Jeffereys, nickname Connie. I was born 1933 and raised in Fayetteville, West Virginia, to be exact Fayetteville Hill/Rotan Hill. I was a member at Second Baptist Church in Fayetteville and that is how I happen to be acquainted with Washington Carver Camp. Our Sunday school would come up here on their annual picnic. A group of people, most of the time we came up on a truck, a hay-ride and it was very nice. The first time I came up, I think I was around ten years old, ten or eleven, 1944ish. I think we came up every year after that through age fifteen at which time I moved. So, it was a good experience for me, very, very positive influence because our teachers, our preachers, our Sunday school teachers and church members all together enjoying the camp and each other. I do believe it made a positive impression on me for my life as a grown person I came up with a group from Huntington of adults and our children and we enjoyed that but it was raining so hard we decided not to stay overnight when it finally cleared and this is the first time I've been back since the sixties. But all told, I guess I've been here about seven times and I've enjoyed each time.

How long were you here when you stayed with the Sunday School, was it just a day or ...

It was just a day, just a day's trip. We left the church early in the morning and spent the whole day, went back home. I've never stayed overnight and I'm so sorry I didn't have that camp experience, I am so sorry about that.

That's OK. Where there other people up here when you were at the camp, just your Sunday School, or was there an opportunity to meet other blacks from West Virginia?

I think it was maybe just our Sunday School on that day, I don't know why my memory isn't any better for that, I don't note that at all. I guess we were just a big group and we went swimming, and so on, I enjoyed that; of course. I learned to swim in a place called Jacob's Hole. It was below our water reservoir in Fayetteville. I don't know if it was illegal but we, all the young folks in our community learned to swim there.

It doesn't matter if it was illegal when you are that age.

Pretty gray rocks or cliffs, is what we used to dive from and when we were children, before we could swim there was something called a 'sand bar', over on the low end of that stream of water and that is were we learned to swim. The big kids took care of us, when they thought we could swim well enough we would go up and dive off the cliffs. And most all of us from Fayetteville Hill could swim and we enjoyed it.

Did the camp have a special meaning to you, I mean, did you know at the time it was

specifically a black 4-H camp?

I did.

Did that have any special meaning to you?

No, it just...I knew about segregation, I knew it wasn't right. I knew our school books were used school books from much of the time I was in school. No, at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old, I am not in a competitive work force or anything like that, I'm a child. And as a child, we were enjoying childish things. You know, we swam, we played softball, we jumped rope, horseshoes, tag and I saw them doing square dancing and something in one of your videos, but we didn't do any square dancing. We played London Bridge many a time and it's so interesting, the videos. You could see how we dressed at the time, you don't see girls with pants on, no matter what activity they were doing, they had dresses on. And I thought, when we first started looking at the photographs, I thought this was after I grew up because we did not wear pants. We wore dresses. And the hairdos were different too, and the bathing suites, real prominent, very prominent. It was really neat to see, things you don't think about.

Yes, it is very interesting. You've met, I guess you've had an opportunity today and other times to meet other people that were campers here, what did they recall of the experience? Do you recall anything that anyone has said?

For the most part, the ladies, the people that I've, and you know what- they were mostly ladies, I don't know if the men were there or not, did you notice that?

There were, yeah...

There were a few young men, I hadn't thought about that. My husband had never come here growing up, but he has been here a couple of times. But they were mostly people who were on the staff here, just happen that I sat at that table I suppose. Or maybe, they were the bulk of the people here because they wanted to see what was going on and relive old times, and I think probably that's what it was.

Well, I know a lot of the people were quite old and couldn't up here because it's so... I don't know if that...

The other thing that, and I've told my children and other young groups that I have had the occasion to speak with, there was a lifeguard here, and there were several people on the staff who were our teachers, negro superintendents of West Virginia or Fayette county and prominent ministers and things like that and we all knew each other, and saw each other and lived near each other. I thought that was really neat, to see those people again on the side of the pool as a lifesaver when they were a college graduate, school teachers, superintendents, and what not.

So as far as you could see, it provided something of community?

Oh, indeed. Not only that but I think children, especially African-American children don't get a chance to see a facility such as this, even now with positive role models and good, clean wholesome fun and so on. I think it was very important, and our community was like that. We played ball, our parents went to church, we were good neighbors and we had pretty yards and we were home owners, that wasn't anything unusual. I mentioned to someone I was sitting beside that I had never heard of a slum or ghetto or anything like that even though the definition might fit now, but we were homeowners and landowners and pretty yards. We sat around the table when we ate and played ball and horseshoes and all that. But children, I think probably black and white and all colors, they just don't have to rely on those things, but I think that was good for us.

Well, I've ran the list here...

Oh, you have a...?

There's a list here...

Questions?

If you don't answer something, I have to ask it, but you really have...Somebody actually did have a question. Do you think, and you touched on this a little bit, but do you think the camp was different for boys and girls and I understand that were not here as a 4-Her, but did you see any of that, anybody mention that?

That we were aware that girls might have been treated differently or something like that?

Yeah, was the experience different for girls or boys?

You know, I was a tomboy and I am not aware of thinking the boys had all the privileges and I don't remember anybody else, because some of the other girls played ball when the boys were out on the ball diamond which was out in front of our house. We rode bikes, played horseshoes, and it was just kid's stuff. I don't remember that discussion at all. I don't think so.

One of the interesting things that, was what Wesley Lynch mentioned was growing up, the black kids in the town had get together sandlot baseball kind of thing...

Uh-hum.

And then also the white kids and they would play..

My husband, Charles Jeffreys, Sr., has had those experiences...

I guess I never really thought about that, you know it's something that is sitting there...

My husband has had all those experiences living in Huntington, he has white friends that are acquaintances with whom he played sandlot football in the streets and all those kinds of things,

just all over Huntington. But, there were two or three white families that lived around our community, but by and large you know where I ran into my prejudice- the grown whites. They would make racial remarks when we would go to the grocery store or the company store or something like that but there were no whites for us to play with, except maybe two or three families I told you about. And one of them, I remember, had little kids and then there was, I heard my brothers mention this a while back, another family that had a teenager and they all played together. I don't remember any racial, you know, stuff up on the hill where we lived at all.

That is very interesting. Did, I guess the only other question would be if you really don't remember racial tension and all when you were growing up, you wouldn't necessarily notice difference between here at camp and there at Fayetteville.

I'm not saying I didn't, I wasn't aware of racial tension. It's just that I didn't have to deal with prejudiced people, and again as I said on a competitive level. And that is were the difference is. I think children can play together and get along, I think maybe we are more tolerant of each other. That's were it hurts, employment, I may not get the job in first place a grown, an adult wanting to purchase a home, I wasn't able to purchase a home where our money would buy it or where we wanted to. When we would go to a real estate dealer in Huntington, they would take us to the predominantly black neighborhoods, period. And I know you know where Norway Avenue is. In the fifties they built a whole new neighborhood out there and we were in the market to buy a home so we went to open house and it really startled people. They hardly wanted to show us the house but they couldn't get out of it so we looked at the houses, you know one by one? Later on that evening we were called by one of the real estate agents that we had won the door prize. He brought us the basket of soft drinks, and he wanted to show us a house. So we assumed it is going to be one of those Norway homes, took us down to Borden's Milk Company there on Eighth Avenue. Eighth Avenue, near Sixteenth Street, you know where that is?

Oh, yeah.

If you made a right off of that, the old Borden's plant is down in there. That is where he took us, and in fact, we said, we just confronted him, we said we didn't look at that house down there we looked at the house on Norway Avenue, that's the kind of home we want. We already knew how much the down payment was, but said what is the down payment, he told us that and I said no that is not the down payment and so on but then finally he just said we can't sell colored that home, those homes. So that is where it's affected me, you know, it affected most blacks is when they're qualified to do something or have the money to buy something then meet with the kind of prejudice and discrimination that really hurts. You know, you can hurt a child's psyche and self image if he doesn't have a stable home. But then on the other hand, my parents and grandparents, for the most part, generation or two before me were the teachers and preachers, their children went to college and we owned property. And we lived next, the whole neighborhood lived next door to each other so we didn't have any inferiority complex. But on the other hand I didn't feel like I had to say yes sir, no sir and those kinds of things, only to elders. People were people and by and large that's the way that our children were raised and we had three sons. And that is by and large what my husband does but we know what prejudice is, we know what discrimination is.

Prejudice doesn't bother so much but discrimination and racial bigotry hurts. But I don't know sociologically never wanted to be with anyone because they were white particularly or wanted to be with anybody black particularly. If we have the same outlook and our interests are the same that's what, you know, strikes me as important.

That is what one of the, something I have said once before but it continues to amaze me and I don't why I should look down on anyone else when they discover people are the same, no matter what.

Oh, sure.

And I always say, you see this and hear about history but you don't hear people.

That's right.

You know, you hear this happened and this happened and this happened, but it is very hard to get away from, or very easy to get away from the fact there were all people involved. I want to thank you very much, it's been very interesting.

OK, I wish I could tell you more about Washington Carver but I can't.

That's OK.

END OF INTERVIEW