

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

VIOLA CUTCHEMBER

Interviewed by Carol Locke-Endy
June 1, 2002
at St. Mary's College of Maryland Kickoff Event
Transcribed by unknown
Edited by Tania Jordon
Logged by Tania Jordon on September 11, 2005
Original format is one cassette tape
31 minutes, 26 seconds

[Begin Side A, Tape 1 of 1]

Carol Locke-Endy: Today's date is June 1st, 2002 and this is an interview with Viola Cutchember. It is being conducted at St. Mary's College by Carol Locke-Endy. Would you tell me where you were born?

Viola Cutchember: I was born in St. Mary's County. This is my county.

CLE: This is your home.

VC: Yeah, and I don't mind, in 1932.

CLE: And, which schools did you attend?

VC: Okay. I attended a school called Patuxent Beach Elementary School, and it was up on -- in California, on Patuxent Beach Road. It used to belong to my grandmother, my grandparents. In fact, they built the school and they allowed the school system to have school there. And, it was a one-room school: 1st through 7th Grade. All sizes of children [chuckle], but we had one small teacher; but, she could handle us all. She was a very

good teacher. She used to board with my grandmother.

CLE: And, what was your grandmother's name.

VC: Sarah Hayden.

CLE: Sarah Hayden. And so, you were probably there from about 1938 --

VC: Yes.

CLE: And went all the way through 7th Grade?

VC: Right. Well, I went as far as 5th Grade because they closed that school, and then they sent us to Jarboesville.

CLE: Jarboesville. And, you stayed at Jarboesville through what grade?

VC: High school. I graduated from Jarboesville High School, um hmm.

CLE: And then, you went on to be a teacher.

VC: Yes.

CLE: And, what schools did you teach at?

VC: Okay. I went to Bowie State College, at the time, and I taught in Carver. That's where I first started. And then, I went to Park Hall. And then when they integrated the schools in the 60's, I went to Town Creek and I retired from Town Creek.

CLE: From Town Creek. So, you moved around a great deal in St. Mary's County.

VC: I don't know -- a great deal. I only moved because they closed school [chuckle]. So when they build that school at Park Hall, I think, to sort of replace the school that was at Carver, so.

CLE: Now, Jarboesville School was located, physically at a different place from the modern Carver, is that true?

VC: Oh yes.

CLE: It was located where the Base is.

VC: Right, up on 235. It would be across from the EMA Building, but it was in the Base.

CLE: In the Base.

VC: In that area, it was located.

CLE: Now, the little brick building on the corner there by Gate 2 that used to be -- It looks as though it used to be a school, right across from Great Mills Road, that's used by the Base.

VC: Oh. It was a school, wasn't it? Frank Knox? Is that what you're talking about?

CLE: Yeah.

VC: It was a school: Frank Knox.

CLE: That was another school.

VC: Um hmm.

CLE: The little school that you went to -- your grandparents' school. What was that like inside? Did it have chalkboards?

VC: We had chalkboards. We had one room, of course, and the seats were double seats with - - connected. Well, the seat of one was the back for another, something like that. And, I don't think -- There were not very many of us there. And at that time, we all had to walk to school. And sometimes, I'd see the children walking in very late in the day because it was very cold.

And, I can recall a family whose last name was--Hmm. Cumiberti, I think. Cumiberti, I think. Cumiberti or something like that. I can remember they used to make hot soup and bring it to school for us if we wanted it. Of course, I would go to my grandmother's house every day for lunch, but there was hot soup there available for the

people. And of course, it was a one-room school and the teacher had to get there and make the fire and keep it going, and she did just that.

CLE: And, what about your text, your school books?

VC: Oh, we had to share our books. We didn't have many and those that we did get were all marked up or written in or, you know.

CLE: They were used when you got them.

VC: They were used. Um hmm.

CLE: And, you couldn't take them home?

VC: No, we could not. We could not take them home.

CLE: Were there other resources at the school other than books for the teacher to use with you?

VC: That was it. Just the books.

CLE: And, what did you do at recess?

VC: Oh, we'd go outside. Play around the back side of the building. The usual games: jump rope, hopscotch. Of course, the boys used to make their own little ball out of old clothing and stockings and things and then go in the woods and get a stick or something to make a bat, and they would have their fun also.

CLE: Did they play baseball kind of games?

VC: That's what I'm talking about. They made their ball out of old clothing and stockings and paper and stuff, and then they would get a piece of wood out of the woods for their bat. That's what they used.

CLE: Did the lessons always go the same way every day?

VC: It varied. And of course, some of us who were older were able to help the younger ones, but we only had one book. We were all in the same book but on different pages.

[Chuckle] And, it worked out, I think, okay. And if we were wise, we could listen to what was being said ahead of time or to what the other groups were saying. I'm not sure anyone did that, but they could have and moved on up. But, we didn't have --Actually, we didn't have that many books because most of the things is what the teacher would put on the board or would talk to us, tell us.

CLE: Were there any maps on the walls?

VC: Hmm? I don't remember any maps except what was in the book. And, I'm so sorry that my mother -- after my grandmother died and after they stopped using it as a school, she -- some people rented it. They wanted to live there, so they did. And then when they moved out, my mother had the building torn down and I just -- I'm so sorry now. I wish that we could have at least taken a picture of it, the old schoolhouse, and it looked just like all of the other old schoolhouses that we have, that we see pictures of: one room and one door and the windows on each side.

CLE: And, did it have a little vestibule on the front where you came in the front door?

VC: It should have. It should have. I'm trying to think. Yes, it did. Right. It did, but it was -- It was really small. I tell you, it was very small.

CLE: When you think back of your years at that school at Patuxent Beach, do you have any memory that really stands out for you?

VC: Well, let me see. I think, the teacher. I think her teaching and her [pause] manner with the children, I think, was all very important to me because it made me want to be a better person. It made me want to do -- Not only because she lived with my grandmother [chuckle], but it made me want to be -- Do what was right. I can't really think of anything that really stood out. Let me think. Well, just her manner of teaching and her

thoughtfulness with the children, very considerate.

And of course, we used to have our little days, maybe on Fridays, we would make a little repast, and I'm not sure if we sold it or just had fun and enjoyed it. I don't know, but I can remember the repasts. And actually, hmm -- Nothing really, really stands out. I'm trying to think hard, but --

CLE: But when you went to Jarboesville, you were there Grades 6 through 11. So, that would have been through 1944. Is that right?

VC: Well, I graduated in '49 so it would be --

CLE: Must have been longer than that.

VC: Must have been '43 --Well.

CLE: Well, that's right now: '43-'49. So, you were there through most of the War and the time after the War.

VC: Um hmm [yes].

CLE: Did they let the Jarboesville School stay there on the Base or did they move it?

VC: Well, let me see now. It stayed there for awhile, but when the Base -- No, no. When the Base took over, they put that gate up and I'm sure they just destroyed the building.

CLE: So, it must have moved across the street at that point?

VC: No.

CLE: To 235.

VC: No. I think it was always on north. It was always, if you're going north, it was always on the right. If you're going north, it was on that side and that's the way I always remembered it. I don't ever remember it across the street.

CLE: So if it was inside the Base --

VC: It might -- The gate might have gone around it, I think. That's probably what had happened because -- Yeah. It was inside. They must have gone around. The fence, rather, must have gone around.

CLE: Are there any incidents that stand out in your mind, during those years at Jarboesville?

VC: Again, we only had two teachers.

CLE: For all of those grades.

VC: All of those grades: a husband and wife. Only two teachers.

CLE: And, what were their names?

VC: Julian and Grace Meares.

CLE: And then, he later was the Principal --

VC: Right.

CLE: At Carver. And, how many children were there when you were going to school at Jarboesville?

VC: Gee, there were not many. Now when I graduated, there were 16 of us. I think we started out with 23 and I -- For one reason or another, they dropped out or they didn't graduate, and there were 16 at graduation. Actually, I do have -- I do have a picture of a portion of that class. We had a reunion in '79 and I did take -- We have a picture of those who did return. Of course, many of them -- Some of them had died, but I do have a picture that's -- If you want it.

CLE: That would be wonderful.

VC: And, we were the Class of '49 and we had a union in '79.

CLE: So, that was your 30 year --

VC: 30 year reunion. Um hmm.

CLE: Did the teachers at Jarboesville ever teach about parts of American History that weren't in the books? About famous African Americans? About --?

VC: Oh yeah, they told us about African Americans. I do --

CLE: That wasn't in the books?

VC: No, it wasn't.

CLE: A lot of history that wasn't in the books.

VC: Because, now, Mr. Meares taught Math, Science, and what else? I know he taught Math and Science and his wife taught Language, or English, and Social Studies. I think they called it Civics at the time and that took in the government part of it. And of course, I said we had two, but then we -- I did have a Home Ec [Economics] teacher. And, there was a man who was the--They called it "Ag" at the time, the Agriculture teacher. So, there were actually four teachers, but it was so amazing though. Amazing is not the word, but it was so strange how we felt -- I felt completely capable with two teachers. And I --When I went to college, I met up with children who had come from large schools with many teachers, and we were able to compete or hold our own, if I could use such a phrase, in spite of all of their numbers of teachers and what have you.

CLE: Advantages.

VC: Right. We were still able to cope with them and keep up with them, and I think we did wonderfully.

CLE: Because you had good teachers.

VC: Yeah. Those two did such a great job. They really did.

CLE: Now when you went to Bowie, you were there for -- It was a three-year program or four?

VC: Four years. Four years.

CLE: Four-year program. And, came back to the County.

VC: In 1954, that's when I graduated.

CLE: And, tell me about your first year of teaching.

VC: Oh.

CLE: What was that like?

VC: It was somewhat--It was exciting. I could use that adjective. It was exciting. It was --I was nervous, but [chuckle] I had -- I was with some older teachers who [chuckle] --Well, I think they tried to help me and they were very helpful to me, the older teachers that were in the school with me. But, Mrs. -- I remember Gaddingly or Bryant. She got married later. She was a Mrs. Bryant and Mrs. Jamison and they were the older teachers in the system. And, some of the kids, teachers have said that when they were there, those teachers seem to have picked the children that they wanted, and I -- but I didn't see that. I think that --I think that they were very, you know, they sort of allowed us to meet with the children and we decided what we wanted or who we thought would be best to work that particular person. That's the way I saw it, and I think this is the way probably it was.

CLE: Now, did you have a special subject when you started teaching? Were a Math/Science or Civics?

VC: No, I had all of it.

CLE: You had all of it.

VC: We had them all, and I had all grades -- all classes until I got at Town Creek, and I had 5th Grade then. In fact, that is what I taught anyway all the time. But when I got at Town Creek, there was someone who would, like -- wanted to have just one less class to teach or write a lesson plan for. I said, "Okay," so I ended up teaching Social Studies and the young man taught the science. And so, it was like that for a number of years. And then just before -- About two or three years before I retired, I ended up teaching Math to the different -- to one, to my group. We switched for Math. After we were able to group the

children according to their abilities, we switched. So I had Math and Social studies – well all of them. But I would teach Math to all of the other grades.

CLE: So you were a specialist. Now when you were at Carver, you had grades 1 through 5?

VC: Um, hmm [yes].

CLE: All in one room?

VC: On no, we had – we were in that old renovated dormitory. I think it was a dormitory, yeah. It was a dormitory. I guess that knocked out some of the rooms and made the walls longer, but not wider. They weren't very wide. And I had 5th grade there. But there again I taught everything. We were not departmentalized then.

CLE: And then you went over to Park Hall.

VC: Um, hmm [yes]. And it was the same thing.

CLE: And you went to Park Hall in '67.

VC: No I would say, it seems like it was '64 or '65, something like that. Because when they—the year that they integrated the schools. That's when it was done.

CLE: Well in '65, it was kind of voluntary integration. '67 ...

VC: Well, Okay. I thought it was voluntary for the teachers, you mean or the students?

CLE: No the children.

VC: Right, you see -- I thinking about the teachers. They integrated the teachers first and then they let the children come in. It seems like that's the way it was because – it was '60 – '60. I don't remember the date.

CLE: The middle '60's. Okay, How did you when you were teaching in the segregated schools and you taught Civics to the kids and you still had the old text books or did you get to order new text books.

VC: Well, we sort of had a curriculum at that time too. And our Social Studies was the United States, and I had a book. And I – Of course I would myself go out and look for different materials. I try to use that particular book as guide. I don't know, don't quote me but I think it was called Building the United States. I don't know if that was the title or not. But I do know we had a book that we used and it started about – with the colonization and then it went on with the different wars. Then it went on to the United States. Present day United States.

CLE: And did the children have their own books too?

VC: Some of them – well, we had to share them again. And again, you could not let them take them home.

CLE: Did they have new books?

VC: They were used? Um hmm, they were used.

CLE: How did you as a teacher deal with segregation... history?

VC: That's strange that -- I didn't give it any consideration. But that's the way it was so I accepted it, that was the only thing I knew to do. I couldn't change it. Yep.

CLE: Is there an incident or experience that stands out for you as a teacher, something you really remember about your teaching days.

VC: Oh my goodness. Well, I sort of remember when they integrated the schools and they sent me to Town Creek that September. Well, October the kids were giving me a party. I said, "why are you doing this, it's not my birthday and it's not your birthday is it?" No. "So what are we celebrating?" We just like you and we just wanted to let you know that we want to work with you. And I said, "Gee thanks, but if you do wrong, I'm still going to correct you." "Oh we want you to!" [Laughter] I remember that when I first started in that school. It was just uphill all the -- the whole time. Everybody – the parents were so cooperative. In fact they were cooperative with me in all of the schools. When we were in segregated schools, I can remember we'd always have or little Christmas Repasting and now that the kids are all grown – the kids that I taught are all grown. They laugh and say "Mrs. Cutchember, you used to bring that mashed potato salad in there." I said, "Well, I didn't realized that." [Laughter] But they would bring their little things and we would have a repast. I remember that.

And then I can remember also – I used to sell saving stamps. I get to – I go to the post office and get them. And on Monday we always had saving day. And the kids would bring their money in and buy their stamps. And when they accumulated enough to purchase a book, then I'd go to the bank and get them their bond. And I can remember one family, the Dyson Family. His name was Irvin Dyson [I think] would buy a bond every Monday. I was just an 1875 but I thought that was great. Now I still wonder did he – whatever happen to all those bonds that he purchased.

CLE: I hope he used them.

VC: I hope he would too. Of course they wouldn't be much but – at that time, it was a lot.

CLE: And that was when you were teaching at Carver?

VC: Carver, yes. I use to have stamp day every Monday.

CLE: I remember that when I was in school in the '40's and '50's.

VC: I can recall – and I would write at the end of the year to the company – to the stamp people and ask them to send awards to the people who purchased the bonds. And they did. I don't know if they still have those things or not. It meant a lot to them and they felt that they were doing their part. It was interesting.

CLE: When you think about your choosing the long road to becoming a teacher, were you a reader coming along?

VC: I didn't have much to read, but I did read. And I can recall some of the books were really outdated. But I do know we had something called the book of knowledge. Oh my goodness, it was so old, but I just held on to them. I just recently got rid of them. I guess I shouldn't have. But I use to read those books and I really -- Um hmm, I did.

CLE: It's interesting to listen to talk about your schooling and your grandmother because I listen to Miss Gaskin's interview and her teacher boarded with --.

VC: With her grandmother?

CLE: I think so, and she would skip home for lunch. And it was because of the boarding at her family's home. She was allowed to go to school at five years old because she could go with the teacher. That influenced her to want to become a teacher.

VC: Well, I think that situation with me too with and Mrs. Bowie – we use to call her Miss Bowie, Beatrice Bowie. Later in life she married and became Mrs. Jackson. But later in life she taught me in the 1st grade and on up. And I'm trying to think of it, one of my children that she taught -- had to have been my oldest daughter in the 1st grade. But then she was down at Carver at that time.

CLE: I see and you were with her at Carver?

VC: Right, Um hmm [yes].

CLE: So you were together.

VC: I had 5th grade of course and she had 1st grade. We were in different building but it was not that far away.

CLE: Did any of your children become teachers?

VC: One, and I told her -- I said, "why do you want to become a teacher, you won't get that much money". She said, I know". And so she's teaching at Oakville right now. And the others are in government – the government.

CLE: Is there anything else that you remember, that you would like to include for this memory tape? Anybody who was important to you?

VC: Well, I remember Mrs. Meares, my high school teacher. She certainly stressed—

CLE: Who was that?

VC: Meares -- Mrs. Meares, she stressed the importance of doing things right. She stressed the importance of being clean. She stressed the importance of not following the crowd. She was just a great teacher, I really think. And of course I think I was her pet. But I learned a lot from her. She would tell us, don't go in the ditch to get a husband. Don't — and she told us things that were very factual. And when you get older and think about it, you realize that she was telling us the right thing.

CLE: She was teaching more than just the subject matter.

VC: Right, she was concerned about our morals and what have you.

CLE: And were you like that when you were a teacher too?

VC: I tried to be. I'm not sure that it was appreciated, but I did.

CLE: Did you make home visits?

VC: Yes, especially when we had to get the federal forms signed. We went to the homes to get these people to sign. I didn't make home visits if there was a problem. I was fortunate; I didn't have many problems with the kids. But we would visit the homes to get these federal forms signed in April so that they wouldn't take them home and drop them and not bring them back. But, we did make home visit.

CLE: Do you think that those home visits had an effect on the way parents felt about school? Teachers don't make home visits anymore.

VC: No, they don't. No they don't. I don't know, I guess they [tape ends abruptly].

[End of Side A, Tape 1 of 1]

[Side B is recorded with an interview with Theresa Cassagnol on the same day]