

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

JAMES W. NEAL

Interviewed by Dorothy Waters
June 1, 2002
at St. Mary's College of Maryland Kickoff Event
Logged by Tania Jordon on December 12, 2007
A verbatim transcript is available
Original format is one cassette tape
44 minutes, 14 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 1

Track 01

- 00:00 He was born in St. Mary's Hospital in Leonardtown Hospital. He also has been working for the hospital for 38 years. He was told he was born in 1940.
- 1:00 His wife went to Banneker and graduated from Bowie and returned to teach at Banneker. He went to Banneker when it was a wooden two room structure with a wood burning stove. He went to Banneker from grades 1st through 12th. Banneker and Carver were two of the three modern schools built for blacks at the time. 1st through 5th grade were combined in one classroom. For the 6th grade, "you went to Maryland Spring School in Loveville." Mr. Butler was the instructor at Spring School. There was no indoor plumbing. They had outdoor "lanterns." "They had a real unique odor."

Track 02

- 4:18 The games they played at Maryland Springs were Cowboys and Indians. One day he was an Indian that got tied up to a tree and couldn't get off. The students left him when recess was over. They also played dodge ball and duck duck goose. The people he played dodge ball with "would try to kill you". If you played baseball, the students would bring the ball and bats. He doesn't like sports today because of the things that happened at school.

Track 03

- 7:08 What resource did you have at school? The schools had the typical old wooden desk with iron legs. These deskS had slots under the desk to store your books. Later they had desk that combined the desk and chair. The books sat on a slot under the chair. These chairs were all designed for right handed people. He is

left handed but was not coerced into switching to right hand writing. The resources were adequate but he knows they did not have all the items that the white schools had.

Track 04

10:28 Typical Day at School: They would stand outside and wait for the school bus. At least 10 buses for the white school would pass before the bus would arrive for the black children. Upon arriving to school they would put their bagged lunch in the locker. There was somebody at school who would steal people's lunch. The thief would specialize in the thief of desserts. Mr. Neal made a chocolate cake made from Ex-lax especially for the crook. "Needless to say, I didn't have any problems with anybody stealing my lunch after that."

They played ball or had snow ball fights until school started. The classes would be approximately 55 minutes long. They would go to three classes and then take an hour lunch. They would either burn up from the wooden stove or freeze depending on where they sat in the room. "Like typical black people, give me something to eat and warm me up and I'd go to sleep. How in the devil are you going to learn that way?"

We would go home and do our chores, eat dinner, watch television and then do homework. "I enjoyed school, especially the girls. Maybe that's why I didn't get to far in school." "You spent a lot of your time watching the girls. I still like to watch."

Track 05

14:48 Things that stood out in school. There was a lady who was a bus monitor who would not let them have fun on the bus.

Talks about when he got in a fight with somebody who picked on him all the time. He picked him up and through him out the door. He almost was removed from the Honor Society because of this incident. He and the guy became good friends. His name was Sterling Shelton.

Track 06

17:52 He also got in a fight on the school bus because the bus was crowded. They would also put thumb tacks in the teacher's chair. He also loves tractors and trucks because his teacher Doc Smith (Industrial Arts Instructor) would not allow him to drive the tractor.

Track 07

21:35 Who were your favorite Teachers? His worst teachers were Mrs. Waters, Mrs. Somerville and Mrs. Thompson. They were the strictest and made him work. After he got out of school, he appreciated what they did for him. His favorite teachers were Mr. John Robinson because you could play and not do anything in his class. He also likes Miss Moore the music teacher because she didn't have any control of the classroom, "we had a rockin' good time." Miss Brody was the math teacher. "We did have to do any work because she would give you a problem that had the answer in the back of the book. Miss Samson would change the problems around "so we couldn't go to back of the book for the answers. After he left school, he realized the ones that were his favorite teachers did not help him to much so the ones that made him work, were actual his favorite. Mrs. Young would always threaten to hit him if you didn't do your work. She taught the 5th or 6th grade. He also found a mistake in the text in Mrs. Young's class so he told her thinking that she would automatically give him a good grade. She told him to write a letter to the publisher regarding the mistake. She made him rewrite the letter several times over three weeks. She was trying to tell him a lesson on the proper way to write a business letter.

Track 08

26:36 He remembers how the black superintendent, Mr. Waters would always tell them to "let's put on our thinking cap." Mr. Neal said he never could find his thinking cap. He knew that Mr. Waters would use a stocking cap on his head that he thought was his thinking cap. He got a stocking cap too, but it never did help.

28:27 Did your teachers ever talk about outstanding African Americans, civil rights movement or other things that may not have been included in your school books? I graduated in 1959, so the civil rights movement hadn't really started yet. They would talk about outstanding blacks such as George Washington Carver and Charles Drew. I went to Benjamin Banneker, but he was never mentioned. He thinks that they were maintaining the status quo. He did see some changes when he graduated and went away to college at Morgan. They got involved in "sit-ins."

Track 09

31:40 He remembers that there was no janitorial services when he was in school. The students cleaned the facilities. The floors were cleaned with sawdust that was soaked in a petroleum based product. They would sweep up the sawdust and this would keep down the dust. This made the floors shiny and slippery.

32:45 He recalls that during the talks about integration, there was concern that some of the black teachers would not have jobs. He thought that integration was great because "he could get the same quality education that his brethren across the street were getting." He remembers during segregation, you played with white kids everyday, but in the morning you would get up and go your separate ways (school).

34:15 Joan Groves was one of the first black students to go to an integrated school. “I think it turned out to be an experience a little different from what they anticipated. The bottom line was; I think they packed up and moved to New York or somewhere.” There was a big story in the paper about it. “It wasn’t the experience they were looking for.”

Track 10

35:03 What was your experience civil rights experience at Morgan? It was limited to small groups that were not funded or sanctioned by the college. I learned more once he left the county. Everybody in the county was going by the status quo. Example: “Bob McDensky knows Joe Jones (who is black) and Bob McDensky says Joe Jones is a good man because he’s part of that family over there. “You’re in the county 30, 40 or 50 years; your family goes back two or three generations. Everybody is aware of who you are and where you come from. Who can be trusted and who cannot. So the status quo is maintained. But when you get out of the county you start to look around and say this is different, I didn’t have to go in the back door. But when I go back home, why do I have to go in the back door? Why can’t I sit down in the restaurant and have a cup of coffee. Mr. Charlie is sitting down having a cup, why can’t I have a cup too?” You don’t start to think until you get out of the community.” “You see another aspect or another side. When I get back home, I want to be able to do it, I want my parents to be able to do it and I want my kids to be able to do it”.

When I was in the military, you would see the same kind of garbage and it was more difficult to fight it.

When you start to think, you want change. My children were equal.

Track 11

40:24 Do you think integration has gone as far as it can go? “No, No, No, No, because you have too many on both sides with separate tunnel vision. Until you get that generation or segment out, it’s always going to be that way. I don’t think that it will ever go away. You just hope that there will be less and less of it. They have less influence, position and significant where they can’t push their influence on others”.

Since there were limited black resources, they had to take more than they should have. College students had less to lose so they were able to fight without losing land or homes.

He bought back his ideas from college but it didn’t do much because he was still living under his parent’s roof. You can’t mess up your parent’s name. When you

get out on your own, you have an investment in the community so you can't be as radical.