

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

THERESA CASSAGNOL

Interviewed by Carol Locke Endy

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[Begin Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

Carol Locke-Endy: Today's date is June 1st, 2002. This interview is with Miss Theresa Smith Cassagnol and it's being conducted by Carol Locke-Endy. Would you tell me where you were born?

Theresa Casagnol: I was born on the Naval Air Station. That's what it's called today, but it was called Pearson, Maryland back in the 30's. I was born in 1933.

CLE: 1933. Let me just turn the level up on this a little bit. So, you were born in near the water or back in--?

TC: No, most of the blacks did not live near the water. I guess if you would describe it today, it would be closer to 235 at the light than it would be to the water area.

CLE: And, you -- Which schools did you go to?

TC: Okay. I went to -- I attended the second Jarboesville School. It was about, less than two miles from where we lived, and I walked to school with other children.

CLE: Now, that was located, really on Three Notch Road, on 235?

TC: Right. Right. It was located on 235. You know, I can -- I can see, see the building. It looked like a large barn. It was -- The shingles were very dark on it, and I can still see the outside ladies and men's room. They were outside. That, that building housed 1st

Grade through high school, believe it or not! And, it was -- It was a wood building. I can see -- The floors was wood floors. I remember a teacher named Mrs. -- Miss Gatton. She played the piano and she had 1st through 3rd Grade, and she did a lot of playing the piano.

Then, I went on to 4th and 5th Grade with Mrs. Bulla Bennett, the late Miss Bulla Bennett, and I distinctly remember that she was a very serious teacher. And, she really wanted you to learn. And if she felt like: "I know you can do this because you have your work all the time," and then one day you don't have your work. And, she has -- I was interested in current events and somehow this day I didn't have anything. I guess I came to school feeling real bad. And so, she said, "Well, get up anyway and go in front of the class." I did that. And she said, "Pick my paper up off of the desk." Her desk was in the front of the room, and she always stayed, spent most of her time in the back of the room.

So, she -- She said, "Now, just read the headline," and I stubbornly read it. And, she called me back there and put me over her lap and gave me a good spanking. [chuckle] She said, "I'm surprised. You never miss your work. What's wrong with you?" I distinctly remember her. She was -- She expected you to do all you could do and if you didn't, she let you know she meant business.

I was there until 5th Grade and then what had happened was that the Catholic students who lived in the upper end of the county -- There was no bus to transport them to the school in Ridge, which was St. Peter Claver's school. So now by this time, my parents had worked on that and there was a bus coming up to pick us up. So I left Jarboesville in 5th Grade, and I started 6th Grade down at St. Peter Claver's in Ridge, the parochial school.

CLE: And what was that like?

TC: It was a bit different. We had nuns [laughter] and they were very strict, and the regular -- There seemed to have been many more students because wherein at Jarboesville, one

room held 1st, 2nd, 3rd and then the next room: 4th, 5th, and 6th. When I went into 6th Grade, I think there was only 6th graders there, and we prayed before class. Every Friday we went to mass. We'd walk over to the church and go to mass. In fact, the whole school -- the grammar school and Cardinal Gibbons, which was the high school -- would all come together on a Friday morning for mass.

And, the nuns were very impressive, but the most impressive person was the late Horace B. McKenna. He was, to me, like a walking saint, and he would come in and talk to the kids and -- I was deeply impressed by him, and more and more so. And now today, I can really see what he was trying to do with the students and with the community and with the parents. He was a tremendous principal.

CLE: What do you -- What do you think he was trying to do?

TC: Oh, I would know now. I understand now that -- after I read the book on him, that he wanted the best for the parents. And, it was a very poor area and he would use monies from the collection to pay people's rent and utility bills. And, it didn't matter whether you're Catholic or not. If you had that need, he was there for you. He, he, he wanted the students to be the very best students because he, he had in mind that if they were very good in grammar school that maybe they could go away to another high school, a private high school that prepared them for college. He was a tremendous person. He, also at the same time -- When we left Jarboesville, we were living, like, in a hut across the road from Jarboesville because the Base had just disrupted everything. My father had a beautiful farm and everything. But when the government said, "Go," you had to go. So, we moved over into this shack. And, Father McKenna was instrumental in influencing my father to the extent where he helped him get land in Ridge very close to the church. So, I -- We were so very thankful to Father McKenna. He was also Principal of the high school. After I left St. Peter Claver's, I went to Cardinal Gibbons for four years, and that was a big building.

CLE: That was 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th--You stayed at St. Peter Claver's--

TC: St. Peter Claver's was 1st through 8th.

CLE: 1st through 8th.

TC: And then, there was a graduation class and you went -- About a half mile away, you could see the high school. Then, you attended --

CLE: It was that far?

TC: Yes, it was that far.

CLE: Half a mile away.

TC: Yes. You could see the building. One building to the other. You could see them.

CLE: And, at the time you graduated, there was a 12th Grade at Cardinal Gibbons?

TC: Yes, there was. It wasn't, but the class had been reduced to, like, about four students at that time. And, we had lay people also who taught, and they weren't Catholic. They didn't have to be Catholic, but they were great teachers.

CLE: And, what was your graduation year?

TC: I graduated in 1950. In 1950.

CLE: Now, the public schools, I think, did not have 12 grades at that time.

TC: The public schools. Right. No, they did not.

CLE: They only had 11.

TC: Right. Yeah.

CLE: So you got more.

TC: Yeah! [laughter] Yeah, got more. And interesting enough, at that time, everything was, like, sewing and cooking. [laughter] Of course, religion. Father McKenna would come in and teach religion class twice a week and then we'd have the others: Civics, Math, you know, Science and that type of studies. But, the encouragement was to become a teacher and teach Home Economics or sewing and things of that nature. It wasn't like -- Everything was a teacher. You don't have all the things you have today. Oh, it's just

tremendous! Like, I said, “Oh gee! Had I come up in this day, I would have majored in human development” because I think there’s nothing no more important than developing the human being to its greatest extent. But anyway, that didn’t happen. So --

CLE: So, what did you do after you graduated?

TC: After I graduated? Well, my sisters before me had graduated and gone to Hampton. It was Hampton Institute then in Virginia. So naturally, I followed the same -- the same routine.

CLE: The same route.

TC: Yeah. I went to Hampton two years and then my mother took seriously sick. She had heart attack. So when she came from the hospital, she wasn’t able to have a private nurse, but the doctor said someone has to stay with her. So, I came out of school after two years of college in Hampton and I stayed with my mother. I think I stayed with her about a year before she really got well enough to go back to work and everything. And then, one thing to the other and then, I got married. I got married and I moved to New Jersey. And then eventually, we came back to St. Mary’s County and I wanted to finish my education so bad. So, the easiest way to do it was come here to St. Mary’s College. So, I had my credits transferred and in two years--I changed my major to History [chuckle] and Social Studies. And, I graduated from here in 1973.

But, a lot happened in between then. I had 10 children in between that!

[laughter] But, that’s basically what happened.

CLE: And, did you want to teach?

TC: No, I didn’t. I didn’t want to teach. I always wanted to help people, so I -- I had some experiences during my internship that was regrettable. I did my internship at George Washington Carver, and I did my lesson plan. We were talking about people getting ahead and people not getting ahead. I’m trying to put it in middle school level because my degree was in secondary. And, I did my internship in middle school and we were

talking about the history and I guess what people wanted to be, and my father always wanted to be an undertaker.

And, the question came up: Sometimes you can do things you want to do and other times, you can't. And, I was very frank about it. I think he had gone to borrow money. He wanted to be this undertaker, and then someone white had gone to borrow money and they said they got it without any collateral. And Pop said, "Oh, I had land. I was gonna put my land up, but I didn't get it."

So then, that discussion somehow got back to the principal and he said, "Oh." He was very nice about it. He said -- He said, "You can't do that," you know. He said, "The parents'll be rushing in here on me." He said, "You're right about what you said, you know. It is different for different people, but--" He said, "You -- You just can't -- You can't do that because I want you to go on and get a job in the school and whatever." But you know at that time, I was just set on Black History.

CLE: Now, this was when you were in high school?

TC: This is when I was in, here at St. Mary's College.

CLE: In '73.

TC: Yes. Right. '72. '72 and I graduated in -- Or, maybe it was '70 to '72, and then I had to wait until '73 to graduate. Well, there were a lot of different things gonna on that was unjust. And when that happened to me, I would try to point it out to the person that it wasn't the right, the right thing to do. It wasn't the right way to treat human beings, but I managed to, to finish here. The black students -- The President at that -- Renro Jackson. I'll never forget. He wasn't too popular among black students! [laughter] I'll say that much.

I commute here. I commuted back and forth. At that time, I was on DSS because I had so many kids at that time. There was no way I could make it at that time, and my husband had, had gone. So, I -- They bought me a car and I commuted back and forth

and took care of the kids and things at the same time. But --

CLE: When -- You mentioned injustice and talking about that with people. When you were back in school at Jarboesville and then later at St. Peter's, did the teachers talk about segregation as part of the lessons?

TC: No.

CLE: Did they -- because it certainly wasn't in the books?

TC: No. No. I'm glad you mentioned books because we got the second-hand books.

CLE: Second-hand?

TC: Yeah. When the white schools got new books, then they'd bring their old books to us. So, like, we didn't get really the first edition or just what was we needed at that time. And, all -- At Jarboesville, all the teachers were blacks. The principals were black, too. And, I don't know. I remember my mother saying when she taught in 1924 that they had separate places to meet. One of the students would take her in a horse and buggy to Leonardtown, but she didn't meet -- She never saw the white teachers. The black teachers met separately from the white.

CLE: Where did your mother teach?

TC: The first Jarboesville school.

CLE: The first?

TC: Um hmm [yes], the first Jarboesville. I went to the second [chuckle], but --And in the parochial school, all the nuns were blacks and they had separate orders, too. So, you know, I'm not excluding segregation from the Catholics. It was very much separate that way there, too. But, I say this: The teachers at Jarboesville were dedicated people. I mean, when you finish writing something' [laughter] 500 times, you had to know it! Or if it was a punishment, the teachers would stay after with a student who seemed behind. They would follow through. They just seemed so interested in the students. I know the teachers are today, but it seem like their schedule is such that it -- There are certain

demands from the principal. So much paperwork and things to do that I don't think they get to be with the parent and the child as much as they should.

CLE: Did your teachers at Jarboesville make home visits?

TC: Not that I know of. They maybe did to students that were, like, behind or whatever, but I do know -- Let's see. We didn't have a phone. We didn't have television. My mother had a piano. She loved music and she played -- She would play the piano and that was our source of recreation. But, she got back. She let my mother know what happened that day. And in that day and time, everybody looked out after each other. If you did something or went to the store or got off the bus and shouldn't 'a got off at the store, when the neighbors got talking and they would let the other neighbor know. And, it was great! I didn't think it was great at that time, but [chuckle]--

CLE: They didn't need a telephone.

TC: Yeah. No, no. You really didn't. People left their houses open and everything. So, it's -

CLE: Would you remember any particular incidents at school, at Jarboesville? Anything that comes to your memory that stands out in light of the things happening?

TC: Well as I said, the one I got spanked! [laughter]

CLE: When you got spanked.

TC: That was my only time to ever got spanked because I never got spanked at home hardly, you know! But, I remember we had plays, plays at school. Seemed like we very seldom saw the principal. I -- Just in comparison to the parochial school, seemed like the principal, Father McKenna came around often, but we didn't -- to visit the classrooms. I don't think they did a lot of that. I guess, you know, he met with his teachers and all to see what was gonna on but, to make himself visible, let's say like Dr. Walthour did when she was at Carver! [laughter] She was always visible in the classroom. You know, she knew everybody by name, just about.

But, I know there's something I want to say. I'll think of it later.

CLE: You were at Jarboesville during the War. Were there any aspects of the War that impinged on you at school? Were you very aware of what was going on at the Base or things in the world as a little kid at school?

TC: I do know there was -- Before they destroyed the school, I do know that, you know, there were planes going over. And even back in the woods where we lived, you know, this was so new. But to us at that time, hey! It was just so good to look up in the sky and see the plane going because we were kids. But other than that, I scarcely remember three men in a suit and they were talking to my father. And before they finished, he was, like, almost crying. He was almost in tears because when you're relocated, that changes everything. That changes everything. But, they worked hard. They were well known with the schools and principals to find out what they could do to get what was needed.

CLE: Any special memories at St. Peter's or Cardinal Gibbons?

TC: [chuckle] We had -- We had plays at St. Peter's and Cardinal Gibbons. And as I go in there today, we had CCD in there downstairs because they're remodeling upstairs, and the platform is gone where they used to do all the plays and everything. And at Cardinal Gibbons, [chuckle] we had plays, but we always used the stage. We'd come over to St. Peter's and use, use their stage.

We had -- We had to wait because the bus that took us up the county to what I'll call Lexington Park had to take a group of students in the Ridge area first and then go. And I guess, I guess because I think of my father and my mother often and how thankful I am for them, but I could look out the window at Cardinal Gibbon's. Cardinal Gibbons had a basement, a second floor and a third floor because my sister, my stepsister was a boarding student there. So, I would be on the second floor in --I'll say the senior's classroom and I could look out that window and, and see my father. Right at that time, they hadn't built a house where Father McKenna had helped him, where he bought this land. But, I could see him trying to make a road, like, with a scythe or whatever they call

a swing, trying to make a road. And, I would look at that and I think about that a lot today, though it isn't related --

CLE: But, it is.

TC: To schoolwork.

CLE: [inaudible]

TC: Yes. Um hmm. It was.

CLE: How did you sister happen to be a boarder?

TC: Okay. Dorothy, Dot. I guess it was because, see, Cardinal Gibbons was a boarding school before it was -- then it became a school where students came and left.

CLE: A day school?

TC: A day school, yes, and she lived there. I had some history on her when she was there because she was just asking me. I said, "I want this history." She said, "Well, I went to school there. That's all." I said, "But it's more to it than that." But, I think when it first opened it was a boarding school. And, there was some other people that's still alive -- some of my mother's students who were boarding students there also.

The resources in the school were very limited at Jarboesville. Very limited, but then it seemed, seemed --

CLE: Did you have chalkboards on the wall to write on? Were there big boards?

TC: Ah, yeah. There was one board. I remember at Jarboesville. It was one board in front of the classroom. I do remember that, and that they were -- They had chalk boards at --

CLE: Were there maps?

TC: No. Maps, maps and overhead machines and things of that nature -- No.

CLE: Were there any pictures of famous people?

TC: Hmm? I do believe there was a flag and there was a picture of George Washington. I remember that, but there were no black pictures. You know, when I go into schools to sub, especially in the History class, you expect that. And, it's much better today. Could

still be better, but it's much better than it used to be.

CLE: Did any of your children attend segregated school? In St. Mary's, they desegregated beginning in 1965 and through 1967 with the final desegregation, but you were in New Jersey for some of those years.

TC: I'm trying to think. '65 --My children -- I'll say this. I don't know if I'm answering the question or not. My children went to St. Michael's. I think Andre, my oldest, went to St. Peter's for maybe a year and then they closed it.

CLE: They closed it in 1966.

TC: 1966. Okay. I can't the years straight for all of them, but then his -- I know from 3rd Grade on, they went to St. Michael's. I guess it was forced integration, but they were -- They were mistreated there. I didn't feel they were treated justly there by the nuns and some of the students called them names that were inappropriate.

CLE: So, it didn't go smoothly in the Catholic schools either.

TC: No, no. It did not. It did not go smoothly.

CLE: The resources and fact of segregation were extremely difficult in the black schools. Were there some things that good in those schools that were lost with the end of segregation?

TC: Yeah, the caring. I think -- I think the black teachers really cared that the black students really need this. They really needed to get everything they could, learn as much as they could. And some -- But, other teachers -- I know, I'll say with my kids, when you would approach them about things that were going on or about their homework or for example, why they got a bad grade on something and maybe I wasn't notified, and I constantly had to let them know that I really wanted them to do their very best because without education, it's like a lost person more or less. I couldn't overemphasize that to them. Some of them -- I felt some of them really -- Well, I won't say didn't care, but I just think some of them didn't have the interest. And then, some of them were overwhelmed that you had a parent that, really wanted to know that the student was learning what they

needed to learn.

CLE: Do you think -- So, it was not easy for the children and it wasn't easy for the parents either?

TC: Oh no. It wasn't easy for the parents. They all -- You know, I remember my father said there was a place in Scotland, but it was like a -- You know, he said, "I won't make any money. I'll just work. I'll live -- We'll live in a small building in the back of the house and everything I'll do will go for food for you and for upkeep of the children and that type of thing." He wouldn't get any pay, and he says, "I," you know, he says, "You know, that's something like slavery," and he didn't want --He says, "We" He says, "I"--

[End of Side 1, Tape 1 of 1; Side 2 is blank]