

Odelle Johnson Collins (OC)

Attended 1944 – 1951; later taught in County

School Memories

Going into the auditorium every morning and saying bible verse and repeating the pledge; couldn't leave without saying bible verse. Then to individual classrooms every morning – that's the way the day started.

Religion played a role but not such a big role. All had to go to church. Had devotions, had to know a bible verse. Churches played a role but not such a big role. Certain things you were taught. How to have positive attitudes, how to listen and speak. Those were the things that kept us going. We had to have work ethics – everybody did. So many of us went in those conditions, grew up, knew at least where we were going. Those were the things that kept us going. Had to have work ethics. Everything based on your family, being together as one. Tight knit community.

Neighbors not as close as when we grew up.

Grew up on 600 block of Jefferson. During that time a majority of men worked for PRR and ferries. So we were all close and we were close knit and so that made a difference.

Cape Charles Elementary School laid that foundation for all of us. Regardless to how far your parents went to school you knew that you had to go to school and your focus was on becoming something else besides what that your mother or father was. Your employment would be different. And they kept before you that education was the most important thing. If you don't have an education then there's nowhere you're going to go. You can't move forward see because first of all we were in the segregation era so we didn't have the books, we didn't have things that they had in the other school in Cape Charles but we had teachers that told us and taught us about decision making, what you have to do, you have to read, you have to know how to do math, you have to know some history. You know it was a constant thing all the time from primer if you could write your name and do whatever. I didn't go to primer I went straight to first grade. So once you got there and you got in those classrooms those teachers and we had to be in class for 2 or 3 grades. I was in Ms Ames from 1st grade to 3rd, then I went next room which was Ms Joynes and she had 4th and 5th and then we had 6th and 7th Mr Brag. So the school was small, close knit. Everybody knew everybody. We all together and it just makes a difference than it is today. We just learned so much.

We were taught how to sit at a table. You went home. At home everybody had to eat dinner together. We had our breakfast at home. Parents fed you before you went to school. Then you had your lunch... Just interesting and it was the best thing that I know we could have had was that one little school in Cape Charles that taught us so much.

Segregation

The only thing that affected.. we did not have the books but it made us push harder. We were determined that we were going to do something and be somebody because our parents kept their force. Also and when you went to church, you had to go to sunday school and vacation bible school and the same things were taught to you constantly. So you knew that ... you finish high school ...

you go to college or technical trade. You're going to leave here. Most kids left here and went to the city, to NY or NJ or MD and wherever they went they took up nursing or got into some business of their own and just did excellent. This is what happened. Some of us stayed here or went to school and came back and taught right here. So some of those same habits we took to our kids when we were teaching.

Integration

The difference I guess today than then. Being integrated you just had... you knew segregation was there. But you had to press harder because ... we had a feeling that ... we are not going to let them push us back. So we had that thought all the time that you are not going to .. we are going to make it regardless. So I came up during the main time in the 50s when everything was going on, in the 60s and 50s concerning segregation and whatever.

We couldn't go ... like you couldn't go to Savages drug store. You couldn't go there. You could get your prescriptions. My mother's from across the Bay, my father from Westpoint [?]. He worked for the PRR so a lot of our prescriptions were got on the other [side] because you couldn't go to Savages drug store, you couldn't go anywhere. You had the beach , I'm used to the water. But we could not go to the beach, we had one little area of the Cape Charles beach and that was on the Washington Avenue just beyond the end where the old ferries used to come in, and that's as far as we could go. Then we couldn't have the same things in our school as they had at Cape Charles high school. So that's the difference in the names because Cape Charles High School has always been called Cape Charles High School altho it went from grades 1st thru 12th. But the school over the hump was always Cape Charles Elementary. That's what it was called then. I still have my diploma from Cape Charles Elementary School. But I didn't feel like finding it.

But it was different, quite different ... and we enjoyed it, we enjoyed ourselves. It was great, we loved it. After Cape Charles Elementary I went to Northampton County High School. See we couldn't go to Cape Charles High School because it was you know segregated so we couldn't go to Cape Charles High School not when I came, so we had [to] come out to the county; we were bussed. One bus came to Cape Charles it would take us to the county [school] that was in Machipongo ... then they built a new county high school because at first we had an old building that was given to us by a home that was built for European Americans, and they didn't use it or they didn't have enough kids to use it, so they gave us that and it was just a brick building 3 stories, basement, 1st floor and 2nd floor and then we had some little huts [?] outside that were used, and then just in 1953 they built the high school, just like the high school in Eastville. They were built [at] the same time.

You had that feeling of not wanted, but once we got there our parents still kept their thinking for us that [you] are going to have to make it on your own and you are going to have to prove that you are going to be better than they think. So we had that force on all the time. So once we went to high school out here that was home to us again. So we had been taught what to do and how to act and what to say and it continued at the high school. So we still had no problem. Oh yes, the religious aspect continued up at the high school.

Community

In Cape Charles for 2 or 3 years ... you see they didn't have a lunch [room]. The school only had 4 classrooms but we only used 3. We only had 3 teachers and a principal and the principal was a

teacher also. So yes those 3 rooms and those 3 teachers and we had that 1 room where these people would come in and fix lunch. And they made sandwiches and that type thing and I think that might have gone on for 3 or 4 years that I was there. And that was ... something the parents did. There wasn't anything else besides that that anyone else did. The parents got together and decided to do that.

And then instead of us having to walk to school there were a couple of years where the parents got together and I can't remember whose bus it was but it feel like you had to pay 10 cents or whatever to ride the bus to school because the weather whatever and what not. And those parents they kept the force and you know we had reading.

I like non-fiction books.

Culture wise we were totally different from now. Comparing us as children to the children [now]. We were exposed to a lot. We were exposed to plays. We went to .. not big museums but had things; we knew what a museum was. It was pictures and they showed us different sculptures and what not. And then when we went to high school we then had art and music. We had a choir, a small thing, so those things at the elementary level just helped us, prepared us, for the high school whereas today .. they are not interested in going to see a play ... not interested in photography. As far as going to a museum... Just a play at school, they just don't have that. So the cultural things are not there. Those are things we had to do. And the community was like that. I know when we were coming along the parents would even have classical music for them. Some of the neighbors who had been to college - I remember one man was a long shoreman and that's what he would do with us. We had to go to him on Sunday evenings and he would have all this classical music, different instruments -- violin, violas and that type of thing.

Parents and teachers don't have the time to teach behavioral skills, how to go out, how to act on a field trip. Parents are not the same. Now you can't spank. Kids know what they can do now...we couldn't tell our teachers that I'll go home and tell my moma and she's gonna come back – couldn't do that. Cause all they have to do is let your mother know. If you said something like that you're in trouble so you're not going to talk back to the teacher. You're not going to do that. Respect was there but today..respect is gone, is lost. A lot is from the home and a lot is from the classroom.

School grounds: Well, first of all we had recess and I think that every child needs to have some time in the day for free time. This helps them to grow, this helps them to know how to mix with others. You know you have to have time to teach kids how to be a team player. Kids just don't have that anymore. They have recess so they say and it has to be a certain way. During that time we had recess we played outdoors; that's all we had we played basketball out there. At recess we played ball, games, hopscotch, marbles all those things at recess. My favorite games were hopscotch and basketball. We had a number of games I can't even remember all those games, all those activities. I remember May Day big time. It was big time then. Wrapped the May pole. Everybody had to dress and we had to have blue skirts and white tops. Boys had pants and white tops. And that was a big day, big time. And the High School would have the home coming and they would come on in town and parades would go around by the Cape Charles cemetery. Come by the school and stop. That was a big thing for us to see that. So that kept motivating you. Oh boy I have got to get to that level so that I can do those things...They had floats at that time. Nowadays kids just throw something together. We took time and pride to put the float together. And we got into that because the High School was allowed to come by Cape Charles Elementary School and stop and let us see and they kept on going into town. So that made a big difference to us. We always had something to look

forward to. It sticks with you all your life. We had fun. Kids today are grown up so fast. I taught at Birds Nest School. During that time we'd take kids on field trips every day, every month. It was something kids looked forward to. Hey Miss Collins do you remember we went to Fort Eustis; you remember that was the first time we had ever been on a train. Do you remember we went to NASA and all these questions. Kids now don't go on these field trips. These are things that they need to go back to because it helps you to grow. I always think back to Cape Charles Elementary School and move on. A great foundation was laid, a great foundation for us. We had small classes then. We had 2 girls then the rest were boys. The 6th and 7th there wasn't but 25 kids in the whole classroom. The teacher had a chance to you and there wasn't any discipline. You have 1 or 2 boys who would want to try something and that was it. Women adult teachers. There were strong teachers. Alice Ames pulling kids' ears and I remember she always wore a long skirt and lace up shoes and polkadot dresses in the spring. And she'd always tell us how she'd go home and take a nap every day after school. And she kept before us every day we had to do the same practice exercises just 2 or 3 minutes and she worked more with us than she worked the other class. And Miss Joynes the same. They were just great ... My 6th and 7th grade teacher he was the same way. We had to go to the library and like I said the principal's office and the library was the same place. So you had to go into the principal's office to get to the library. And he would be in class so you had to go to the library. You went there on your own most of the time. And we also had nurses coming in. There was another room. There were 4 classrooms, an office, and then across the hall another small room and that's where the parents had those sandwiches and whatnot for lunch and also nurses would come give us different shots and all that would be done right there in the school. And the only shot that we didn't get at the school was the polio shot and that was done at a barber shop, an old barber shop out in Cape Charles where Samples Barbershop was before the new one they built on Jefferson Ave. So everything was done at the elementary level. Whatever shots we needed they would give them to us right there. Vaccination.

We had a great curriculum. We had math, reading, social studies, spelling – I still can't spell – science and the teachers taught all these subjects. We didn't have somebody teaching math, somebody teaching science. Once you get to the 5th and 6th grade level you can see the difference in the teaching because some were better in math, some in social studies or whatever..But they still taught us what we needed to know. We had lectures on how to sit at a table, what to do once you go out , what type clothes you wear to certain functions. All that was part of the morals that we were taught and that was something we had to listen to and have. Not part of today's curriculum, not at all. And a lot of kids need that and we needed that back then. We were all in Cape Charles but we didn't necessarily know how to dress for this occasion or that occasion. Some of us did. Most of us lived ok; we weren't hungry. We were poor but we weren't hungry. Most of our parents worked for PRR or the Ferry Corp so there jobs for African Americans during that time, and some farmed and then kids worked in the summer. Some of us worked some of us didn't. But you had that going to your parents telling you you can't get out of here without work, you have to work. So I think most of the kids I went to school with left, either went to college or else they went to one of the cities got good jobs, took up a trade or even some of them finished college [where] their parents couldn't afford to send them or they went away. But as we all say now when we get together we knew we need to work and that's the difference; the kids now don't understand you have to work for what you want.

I didn't want to teach at first ... I did not go to college to teach... [I had] experience at a lab in Norfolk. The hospital in Accomack did not hire Af Am, so I couldn't get a job. So what I did, I had to have a job, I had to work. So I got a job teaching, but I had to go to school and get my certificate, my teaching certificate. So what they let us do was to teach and then take the classes here in the

county. So I took the classes; I wasn't the only one, lots of us. We had to take all these classes, it wasn't many, I think it was 12 hours we had to do in education to become teachers or to keep our job. We had 3 years to do it so it wasn't bad. So that's how I got into teaching. But I loved it, loved my little 7th and 8th graders. 7th and 8th math and science... but they were good little children. But Cape Charles Elementary laid the foundation.

Q: Was there training for the teachers you had at Cape Charles Elementary School?

Yes, because Cape Charles Elementary was part of the County. I know some teachers that taught there... Alice Brown she taught there...and those teachers had the same opportunity to do as we did. I don't think the school ever had but 3 teachers and 4 rooms but never had a teacher in that 4th room...I don't understand that.

Q: What do you think was the impact of the school's closing in 1966 when all the schools consolidated in Northampton County. How did that impact the AFAM community with integration?

Oh the impact – the key is the impact was bad, but as far as the community there was not one single thing that went on. That was a smooth transition.

Q: Tell me about the impact on the kids.

Some of the kids just didn't want to go, like they were at the High School and then they didn't want the Cape Charles kids to come out here so that was the main thing that happened during that time and they were just resentful of having to move from the [Cape Charles] High School... [or] from Northampton County High School [the Af Am school] to Northampton High [the integrated school]. They were resentful, they didn't want to do that. I mean they didn't become arrogant I mean act nasty, but just they hated the fact that they were gonna leave because at that time they had to go to Northampton High. At first they didn't have to. In 1969 they had to go. 1966 it was by choice. By 1969 they had no choice.

Q: So between 1966 and 1969 integration was not enforced?

No, you had a choice. If you didn't want to go to Northampton High you could stay at the County High and the last graduating class at the County High was 1970. and that's when everything had to change. So that made a difference even with the teachers. Because I had to leave Hare Valley because Hare Valley became a primary school and I went to Birds Nest. Birds Nest was another great school far as I'm concerned. Once I went there there was only 7th graders there. There was 4 classes of 7th graders there and that was it; there was no one else there ..So that was a great school to me. And the same things were taught there to those kids for those 10 years that we were there as was taught to me at Cape Charles Elementary. We had everything. Yes, it was an integrated school. This was when they integrated. See the 6th to 9th they integrated and that's when I went to Birds Nest. At one time we had enough kids for 5 teachers. That was 1 of the 10 years that we were there. We had 80 students because the students we had there and Hare Valley were students from Exmore and Wardtown and that area, the northern part of the county. So that's the way that was. And we had that opportunity with those kids to do the same as I was taught in Cape Charles Elementary. So it really impacted those students a lot, a whole lot cause we didn't have but 4 teachers and we didn't have big classrooms we might have had 25, 26 kids in a classroom and that was it because we didn't have but 80 ... some years we didn't have but 70 little kids and when we got the year we had 5 teachers we had 99 kids, 99 students. Yes, that was a breeze, I loved it. And we took them on field

trips once a month and to places that they couldn't have gone otherwise. They knew nothing about the trains, that's why we took them to Ft. Eustis because Ft. Eustis gave train rides to kids who never had. And we took them to NY. We had chaperons, parents went with us.. and they went to Philadelphia, DC , Botanical Gardens. I mean these are places we took those kids every year. And we had no problem getting money. They paid their own, parents paid for them to go and when we went the whole school, 2 bus loads – 2 Trailway bus loads we would take and it made such a difference of... impression of those kids. It really did, they were just lovely. Mrs bell [also] worked at Hare Valley.

Looked at pictures of husbands family, grandchildren, god children

Interview recorded Jan. 22, 2014