

An Interview with

MRS. BERNICE BELL

February 25, 1978

Interviewed by

Daisy M. Greene

Mississippi
Department of Archives and History
and the
Washington County Library System
Oral History Project:
Greenville and Vicinity

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February 25, 1978. This is Daisy Greene interviewing Mrs. Bernice Bell for the Mississippi Department of Archives and the Washington County Library System.

GREENE: Will you give me your maiden name, your mother's maiden name and your father's name?

BELL: My maiden name is Bernice Roper. My mother's maiden name is Rosa Lee Davis. My father's name is Joe Roper.

GREENE: Date and place of birth.

BELL: March 21, 1910, Greenville, Mississippi.

GREENE: Give me a thumb nail sketch of your education.

BELL: I first attended a private school of Mrs. Lubertha Williams. I stayed with her through the primer. I stayed at Number 7 School only three days because Mrs. Lucy Webb, the principal, discovered I was in the wrong zone. I was then sent to Number 5. My first teacher there was Mrs. Connerly. I do not remember her first name, then I had Mrs. Mamie Lee Dent and a teacher from Natchez, Mrs. Moore. In the third grade I transferred to Sacred Heart and stayed there until I finished high school. After that I went to Alcorn College and finished my junior college work. Later I returned to work on my B. S. degree.

GREENE: Let's go back to Mrs. Lubertha Williams

School. Were classes held in a home?

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BELL: Yes, in a home. She had about eight children

in the neighborhood. I think she did this just to help out the working mothers. I do not remember that we paid her.

GREENE: She was a good woman, wasn't she?

BELL: She was.

GREENE: Are you a registered voter?

BELL: I am. Let me tell you about my early years of voting. When I worked at Leland, poll taxes were deducted from the teacher's salary. For that reason I could vote in the federal election, but not in the primary. When I registered to vote here, I had no trouble. Mr. C. E. Cox was the Circuit Clerk.

GREENE: Have you served on a jury?

BELL: No. I was called to jury duty, but it was during the six week's test. My principal, Mr. John T. Warren, saw fit to call the superintendent and had me released to my sorrow.

GREENE: Do you know of people who can put a spell on someone?

BELL: I heard this listening to a child in school. She said, "My grandfather told me a woman threw a spell on him by taking one of his shoes, wrapping it in velvet and putting some nails in it. Because of this, he could not use his leg. He had to use a walking stick until a lady in Arkansas treated him. I don't know what it was, but she gave him something to overpower the spell."

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GREENE: What was the woman's name?

BELL: Carolyn Dyer.

GREENE: When you finished Alcorn in 1930, what else could you have done besides teach?

BELL: I could have gone into the field of dental hygiene. It was just opening in Meharry in 1930. But due to lack of funds I could not go.

GREENE: What jobs were open to black girls besides teaching?

BELL: Not any - that I know of - domestic work. I thought you were speaking of professions. But now blacks work in the banks, the court house - all over.

GREENE: You began teaching in Leland.

BELL: That was quite an experience, Mrs. Greene. The school was named Brisch Junior High after one of the leading citizens in Leland. The condition of the school was good because it was a Rosenwald school. They had just begun to build them. They had outdoor privies. The ability of the principal to handle discipline problems was good. That's how I learned to handle students. One day Mr. Brown came to my room and every one got very, very quiet and I thought if they could get that quiet for him why couldn't I get order? I learned from Mr. Brown how to keep order that day.

GREENE: What was his secret?

BELL: He never made a request twice. If the child said anything back to him he'd say, "I'm waiting."

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GREENE: What was Mr. Brown's first name?

BELL: Robert. He taught science. We didn't have a laboratory so Mr. Brown would go to the white school for test tubes, microscopes, etc. On his way to get material for his afternoon class he had a heart attack on the railroad.

GREENE: Was there a big ceremony for eighth grade graduation in Leland?

BELL: No, because it was a junior high school.

GREENE: When you came to Greenville in 1942, did you find the transfer from primary children to ninth grade children difficult?

BELL: I did, Mrs. Greene. A jump from the fourth grade student to the ninth and tenth grade students was quite a difference.

GREENE: Did you notice a great difference in the achievement of city school children and county children?

BELL: Well, not too much. The children coming from the county hadn't spent as much time in school as our children. Once county students got adjusted, they could keep up with the lesson if they wanted to.

GREENE: In what school did you work?

BELL: In Coleman Juniot High.

GREENE: Coleman spread over a wide area. In which building were you?

BELL: Old Number 7. At first it was hard for me; exchanging classes was new to me. Once I grew accustomed to it, I liked changing classes. Shirting from building to

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building was good exercise. The students could play little games, hit one another and run and get rid of excess steam so that when they reached the class, they could settle down.

GREENE: Name the buildings on campus.

BELL: The shop, the small house used for serving lunches, Number 7 or Yerger Junior, and of course Coleman High. The seventh grade was housed in a building that once was a tin-roofed garage.

GREENE: Who kept study hall?

BELL: Mr. Maddox and any teacher who was vacant at that time. Mr. Maddox was the main one, however. He supervised the students in the hall and at the time he taught an algebra class. Let me tell you this about the study hall. Last summer I saw James Chess (now Dr. James Chess). We talked about this incident. Mr. Maddox was standing in the door and everything was quiet. James Chess and his little group - Harper, Paul Black and two other little boys had their heads together. I didn't know what was going on. All of a sudden they came up and grabbed Mr. Maddox. They were going to whip him. It took him by surprise. He had a time getting them off. It was amusing to see him kicking and knocking them off. For some reason he found it funny and did not punish them.

GREENE: That's the first I've heard of that. It's a wonder he didn't punish them.

NOTICE BELL: It's a wonder.

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GREENE: Will you talk about the Homecoming Drive that was so popular at Coleman?

BELL: Mrs. Greene, that was something new at Coleman. Mr. Maddox became principal in 1946. The boys were drifting away from the school. Mr. Maddox had been a coach all along. He thought of something to hold the boys. He patterned after other schools by having a homecoming queen. The class raising the highest amount of money could select the queen. Then the queen could come from the seventh, eighth or ninth grade. The drive was new so it did not register too much. The first girl to be selected as queen was Ethel Rene McBride. Myrtle Mae Foules and a group of girls didn't realize she would be queen and they almost had a fit. The next year the seventh and eighth grades were eliminated, leaving the race for queen to upper classes. The next year the queen came from Mr. Maurice Sisson's class - Polly Anne Terry. For the parade she wore a maroon and white football jacket and a white skirt. For the homecoming game she had a maroon suit with white accessories. That night at the coronation ball she wore a rose pink formal with silver accessories. As Coleman High had no gym, all of its socials were held in Armstrong gym just the street.

When the tenth grade was eliminated that left the queen to come from a junior or senior class.

GREENE: Why were Myrtle Mae and her friends sick when the first queen was chosen?

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BELL: I don't think I'll say. Yes, I think I will. Some day they might read it. The boys began teasing, "Thought you should have been the queen. You're a glamour girl."

GREENE: Suppose a girl's mother was unable to buy a homecoming outfit? What then?

BELL: That was the case with one girl whose name I'll not mention. Her sponsor at the laundry thought that the school should have bought her clothes. That was the only girl that the school bought an outfit for.

Miss Ettae Mae Crawford had a long black velvet evening cape which she loaned the queen for the Coronation.

GREENE: Is it being used now by the Moderne Art and Civic Club girls?

BELL: The debutante of the year uses that same cape. Mrs. Sadie Jackson designed the crown. It was made with gold paper decorated with sequins. You haven't asked me how the money for the Home Coming Drive was raised.

GREENE: I certainly didn't.

BELL: The money was raised in a unique way - groups went out to pick cotton. Each class was given a certain amount to raise, and each child in that class was asked to raise a certain amount. Instead of raffling an item, my class decided to go out and work for the school. I didn't know what they were talking about, what type of work a whole class could do. Moss Mason, one of my students, said,

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"You can come to my father's farm and pick cotton. My father pays \$4.00 a hundred." We went out to his father's farm.

GREENE: How did you come out finance-wise?

BELL: Well, that's the year my class raised \$500.00.

GREENE: Ninth Grade?

BELL: Ninth Grade.

GREENE: Do you think so much activity distracted from the classroom work?

BELL: Not until near the end. Then teachers just gave up trying to teach. They were making flowers for the floats, what else? The children were happy. I remember two boys - Jackson and Willie Charles Williams saying, "We're going to the store. We're going to be late for school. We're going to talk all we want to talk because Mr. Maddox wants that money. But after the drive, we'll have to go into a shell. The children enjoyed it, but the last weeks we could scarcely have good classes.

GREENE: Mr. Winchester Davis told me you helped him with the band at Coleman.

BELL: I did, Mrs. Greene. We had a band without majorettes. He was carrying mail and didn't get to school until 4 o'clock. It was too much for him to take the band and the majorettes. He came to me for help. My first majorettes were Dorothy Goodrich, Demetra Hamilton, Ethel Marie Dixon and Ruth Jones, we called her Baby Ruth. Every day at 2:30 we would practice in the hall. Mrs. Sadie Jackson said

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we wanted more than black skirts and white blouses for Homecoming. So she made maroon and white majorette suits for the girl. Parents bought the white boots.

GREENE: Were there other activities that held the students in school?

Bell: The debating team, the glee club, band, football and basket ball.

GREENE: Who had charge of the shop?

BELL: Mr. George Bacon. His boys looked up to him as a great leader. Many of his students are active in community affairs today.

GREENE: Did the students contribute to any community drives?

BELL: The Community Fund and The Education Foundation. Each child brought a donation. They worked hard because the winning class would be honored at our chapel program.

GREENE: Were you connected with May Day Activities?

BELL: We had the wrapping of the May Pole at our first May Day Celebration. The children had never seen one before. I never shall forget the square dance my class had. Do you remember the boy who danced out of his shoe?

GREENE: I do remember; I do remember.

BELL: That was one of the Wilson boys. There are no longer as many activities as Coleman used to have.

GREENE: Do you think the students are missing something vital to their welfare?

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BELL: Yes, Mrs. Greene, that's why I voted to have another high school. The white child nor the black child could not identify themselves. You can use just so many students in activities.

GREENE: You mentioned the black student and the white student. Did you work after the schools were integrated?

BELL: Yes, I did.

GREENE: How did the students compare, Black and White?

BELL: The first step on the first day was to have students get acquainted with each other. This went off fine. Both groups were trying to show how intelligent they were. From that first class meeting they found out it was a challenge because the Whites had believed they were superior over the Black students.

The students were grouped according to their scholastic abilities. There were as many Blacks as Whites in the top group. In order to keep their grades up it took hard work. This group learned they could share ideas which brought about team studying, therefore the Whites learned how to respect the Blacks. Not so in some other groups. They were still on the defensive. Their grades were low, both Black and White, and like an empty barrel they made a lot of noise.

All of the problems were from the below average group, Mrs. Greene, if you let a white student be excused,

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you had to let a black one go, or you would be branded with this, "Whitie". Not too many of our Blacks were taught respect for authority at home but the majority of the Whites were.

Integration was good in some areas, because it was proven that Blacks were not going to hold the Whites back as far as their scholastic abilities were concerned. So there wasn't much difference in white and black students coming from the same environment.

(End of Tape 1, Side 1)

BELL: When I decided to retire, I thought to myself, "after working all these years, no one is saying anything about an affair." The next day I saw a streamer across the hall saying "Bernice Bell's Day." Mr. Roy Huddleston, Mrs. Elliot Harbison and the principal, Mr. Robert Warnock, and Mrs. Pearl Duncan presented me with an orchid. I was elated. When we went to the auditorium, I thought we were to have a regular assembly program. Instead, Mrs. Daisy Greene said, "This is your life, Bernice Bell. Will you please stand?" I did not know whether to cry or laugh. Friends from the community were there. My cousin - brother was ill and was not expected to be present. I recognized his shoes under the curtain. Seeing him I had to fight back tears to hold him up. It was a day that I'll never forget. The students showered me with gifts and pictures. The pictures I still have. My homeroom gave me a fishing rod which I use and enjoy.

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GREENE: How many years have you been retired?

BELL: Five.

GREENE: You just sit and rock and watch T.B. ?

What is retirement like?

BELL: No, you'd think I had a job.

GREENE: You worked for the Council on Aging.

BELL: I worked six months. I was a Senior Companion.

I had three people to visit - there was no work to be done. I'd write letters, answer the 'phone, just keep them company. The younger members in their families were not interested in what happened fifty years ago. The program is a success because it had people with the patience to sit and listen.

GREENE: Then from what you say the program is more than paper work. It is a real service.

BELL: Yes.

GREENE: Did you do volunteer work with the nutrition program?

BELL: Three years. I enjoyed the program. I saw many people I'd forgotten about - people who knew me when I was small.

GREENE: Did you see improvement in the people?

BELL: Yes. One woman came to the nutrition site on crutches at first. After three weeks she did not need the crutches.

GREENE: Where were meals served? Was it integrated?

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Now they are served by the V.F.W. When the V.F.W. made its report to national headquarters it mentioned that the amount they spent on extra utility bill was considered a public service.

GREENE: Are you a member of the Greenville Travel Club?

BELL: I am.

GREENE: What's its project?

BELL: We are entertaining former Greenvillians from all parts of the country this summer. We call it Homecoming. We are hoping that Greenville will open its doors and welcome them. Last year the Club gave a \$500.00 scholarship to a young lady who did not have enough money to enter school. It has also contributed to the improvement of Live Oak Cemetery.

GREENE: Who organized the Greenville-Chicago Club, Inc. which is the parent to the Greenville Travel Club?

BELL: Willie Tump Davis, Winchester Davis's brother, and my cousin.

GREENE: Are you involved in other Community activities?

BELL: I am presently a member of the following: Moderne Art and Civic Club, Greenville's Retired Teachers Club, the Alcorn Club, League of Women Voters, Church Women United and I serve on the Advisory Board for Sixty Plus and Council on Aging at South Delta Planning and Development District, Inc. I am a member of St. Matthew A.M.E. Church, a Trustee and Sunday School Teacher.

(End of Interview)
(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

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