

An Interview with

MRS. BERTHA JEFFERSON DISHMAN

December 1, 1977

Interviewed by

Daisy M. Greene

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

AU345

OH 1979.1.047

Interviewee: Bertha J. Dishman

Interviewer: Daisy Greene

Title: An interview with Bertha J. Dishman, December 19, 1977 / interviewed by Daisy Greene

Collection Title: Washington County Oral History Project

Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

December 17, 1977. This is Daisy Greene interviewing Mrs. Bertha Dishman, who lived at 3430 Albemarle Road, Jackson, Mississippi.

Because I have known this interviewee many, many years, we shall conduct this interview in a most informal way. From now on it will simply be Daisy and Bertha.

GREENE: Bertha, give me your full name?

DISHMAN: Daisy, my full name is Bertha Jefferson Dishman.

GREENE: Your mother's maiden name and your father's name, and any interesting material you remember about your parents.

DISHMAN: My mother's full name, Sadie Ann Golden Jefferson. My father's name, George Jefferson. They were two very fine parents and believed in the rearing of their family, their children, and it might be interesting to know that we are descendents of Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States.

GREENE: If you find any information on just how the relationship is, when you go back to Jackson, send it to me and I will add it to your transcript as a postscript.

DISHMAN: I shall certainly do that.

GREENE: Now, the place of your birth.

DISHMAN: At a little town close to Jackson, called

Coffeerville, Mississippi.

GREENE: What was your educational background?

DISHMAN: My educational training, Daisy, came in parts. Campbell College, which is closed; Jackson College for a number of times; Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama; Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia; Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, during which time I was a member of the Glee Club and the One Hundred Choir there. I studied Organ at Sherwood Music School, Chicago, Illinois. I hold certificates in dramatics, public school music, teaching of piano, organ and business education.

GREENE: You and I went to Coleman High School together for our first teaching assignment. Will you describe for me the setup at "Little" Coleman High School when you started working there years ago?

DISHMAN: In reference to my last answer, I also wanted to say that I also hold a Mississippi Teachers' Life Certificate, which I have recently had revalidated, and now, about Coleman High School -- In the little building there were just four rooms. Near the rear was the office of the principal and the principal at that time, was Norman Howard McGhee, a very capable man, dedicated to his teaching and the student body represented about, oh, I should say in the neighborhood of 150 students at times and it was very interesting to note that the teachers during those years had many subjects to handle. They weren't classified as they are now. I taught mathematics,

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algebra, English, history, French, music and sometimes I would take charge of the devotion.

GREENE: Didn't you have music students after school?

DISHMAN: Yes, I did. In order to supplement my salary, I thought it would be wise to try to do something, because at that time I was getting \$70.00 a month and so the principal was very kind in letting me use the piano to teach a few music pupils, and I should say that those students that I had anything to do with certainly made good. I had one boy - I even taught violin - and he played for a church and then some of the piano pupils played for their churches, so I felt very gratified in doing that. In order to show my appreciation I did take what little I had and I think I paid about two payments on the piano the school was buying.

GREENE: At Coleman High School.

DISHMAN: Right.

GREENE: Do you remember the boy's name that you taught?

DISHMAN: No.

GREENE: Can't remember? Okay, One of Armalita Redmond's brothers? I don't remember his name.

Now, how did you come to write the school song?

DISHMAN: Well, I felt an urge to have a school song. Most of the schools had school songs and I just didn't want our school, Coleman High School, to be left out. Therefore, I decided to write one and I wrote it in the tune of Gypsy Love Song. You're surprised perhaps when it dawned on me to write this song,

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I sat down and at one writing I did it, and it came to me to use the tune of Gypsy Love Song. I went to the piano and played it over and it fitted in just very well. Now, perhaps you'd like to hear it:

"All hail to our school,  
The school we love so well!  
Loyal we are to our school.  
We strive to do our best.  
Where'er we may go  
Loyal we are to our school.

Our color, old gold,  
Means to us ambition;  
Purple, the tie that binds  
our hearts.  
Then hail to our school,  
The school we love so well!  
Always, it's Coleman High."

Now you could really get it and understand it better if you could hear it sung.

GREENE: It's a very rousing song. I wish you could hear the student body sing it. The words have been changed: They are no longer purple and gold, our colors old gold. How did that come about?

DISHMAN: That came about through the change of teachers. I believe it was Professor G. P. Maddox who wanted the names of the colors to be changed according to his school, Morehouse College. I believe that's the one.

GREENE: Morehouse is the Alma Mater of Martin Luther King and its colors are maroon and white.

I should have asked you how did you know, or where did you know Professor McGhee?

DISHMAN: I knew Professor McGhee in Jackson, Mississippi when he was a teacher at Campbell College. He was one of my teachers and a very, very fine man was he, and then he became president of Campbell College but now, I'm sorry to say that Campbell College is no longer there. It has been taken over by Jackson State University.

GREENE: It was a private school?

DISHMAN: It was a school operated by the Methodists, A.M.E. Methodist.

GREENE: Now you lived about the five hundred block on North Theobald when you taught here. Do you remember any of the outstanding people in that area, outstanding blacks?

DISHMAN: I certainly do. I think I'll try to go down the list and just see if I can name some of the most outstanding ones. I will begin with Mrs. Sarah Moyse who taught at Number Two School, and I believe that Number Two School has changed it's name, or is it still Number Two?

GREENE: It's Garrett Hall now.

DISHMAN: Number Two School, which is now Garrett Hall. Mrs. Kate Lewis, who was a teacher at Number Two - they called it then. The swimming pool-- I believe the Greenville Swimming Pool is named for this famous teacher, Mrs. Kate Lewis.

GREENE: Let me interrupt to tell you where that swimming pool is. It is directly west of Coleman High School.

DISHMAN: Thank you.

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Mr. and Mrs. Dave Willis, who were Undertakers; Mrs. Lizzie Coleman, principal of Number Two School. She was a very, very dedicated teacher, so much so and had been in the system so long. She wouldn't give up even when she perhaps felt like staying at home or relaxing, or even getting in the bed, and it so happened that Mrs. Lizzie Coleman died on the job. I recall that it was at graduation time and I was present. The graduates were getting ready to march in and the crowd was assembled for the commencement exercise, and Everybody was quiet and Mrs. Coleman got up, I believe, to give the prayer at the very beginning, or no, she was talking at the very beginning. I looked up and I saw her getting down on her knees. The thought that came to me was that she was getting ready to pray. It happened that one doctor was in the audience and he went to her and found that Mrs. Coleman was passing away, passing out of this world of teaching and duty, to the other world where she would receive some of her rewards for making more people ready to cope with life's problems.

GREENE: Was that Dr. Sisson in the audience?

DISHMAN: Yes, I believe it was. Dr. Sisson, who was a very outstanding doctor here in Greenville at that time.

GREENE: That was Dr. S. N. Sisson, who operated Sisson Clinic on Theobald and O'Hea. Now coming back to Mrs. Sarah Moyses that Bertha just mentioned, To future readers: If you wish to know more about Mrs. Sarah Moyses there is a transcript of her son, Lionel Gant, in the William Alexander

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Percy Library. He and his sister make mention of his mother.

Why, Bertha, did you leave Greenville?

DISHMAN: May I finish giving some of the other names that were --- ?

GREENE: Surely.

DISHMAN: All right, and then I'll tell you. Mr. and Mrs. John Harris. Mr. Harris was a tonsorial artist who owned his shop on Nelson Street; Mr. W. H. Cook and his family. His daughter, Vernanda, was a teacher at Number Two School.

GREENE: You spell that Vernanda, V-e-r-n-a-n-d-a.

DISHMAN: She is now retired. Then, I lived with Professor Norman Howard McGhee and his family. The home is located at the corner of Gloster and Theobald Streets and it was formerly the home of Bishop Edward Lampton of the A.M.E. Church.

GREENE: Weren't there others? Wasn't there a C. A. Johnson in your neighborhood?

DISHMAN: Oh, yes, yes, there was a Mr. C. A. Johnson who was in the field of education also.

GREENE: Oh, now, why did you leave Greenville?

DISHMAN: I left Greenville because, I suppose as every young lady likes to do, she likes to take onto herself a better half and so at that time I left to get married.

GREENE: And you went to Piney Woods to work? Just what did you do there?

DISHMAN: Yes, I went to Piney Woods and at Piney Woods School, Piney Woods, Mississippi, founded by Dr. Lawrence

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C. Jones of Iowa, for underprivileged boys and girls. I was his secretary as well as secretary for the school. I also taught classes, piano, singing and trained quartets to travel throughout the country. In the interest of the school I filled speaking engagements for Dr. Jones and represented him on many occasions when he would have other commitments or was not able to go. Some of the engagements for speaking were in the following places: White House Conference in Washington, D.C., State Teachers Association in Birmingham, Alabama, a church in Mansinoah, Colorado and commencement addresses in a number of places here in Mississippi. I was personally asked to speak at the Heidelberg Hotel before it closed, Sheraton-Blackstone Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, Sheraton-Cadillac Hotel, Detroit, Michigan - all in honor of Dr. Jones, and I spoke at the Jackson-Hilton Hotel in honor of one of the long time members of the Piney Woods staff. I was called upon to speak on several occasions at the Mississippi School for the Blind, and to the inmates at Whitfield one Christmas when the singers also rendered some selections.

GREENE: There was a girl from Greenville named Willie May Lee, who was asked to come to Piney Woods to join a band. What band was that?

DISHMAN: That was what they called The Sweethearts of Rythm Orchestra, and this little girl was a very outstanding member of that band because she was quick to learn how to play an instrument or, I think she learned several instruments, and Willie Mae still remembers those days. I think she is

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active in the field of music today.

GREENE: Was that band supposed to be an international group?

DISHMAN: It was and it was supposed to represent public relations for the interest of Piney Woods School. It did draw many friends and visitors to the school.

GREENE: What nationality was Willie Mae Lee?

DISHMAN: She was from -- She was mixed with -- She was Chinese.

GREENE: Chinese and black.

DISHMAN: Chinese and black.

GREENE: How is it that Dr. Lawrence C. Jones was chosen to appear on This is Your Life Program?

DISHMAN: One of the teachers and co-workers there had been viewing the TV program, This is Your Life, and decided why not try to get our president, Dr. Jones, on? And, so, she immediately got in touch with the headquarters and they were glad to respond to her request and asked her to send all types of material that she could about the school. She did and they got him out there. They told him that some Club wanted him to speak. He was very famous in going to speak at Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis Clubs, high schools, etc. That's the way he got out there and that's what he thought he was going out there to do, to speak at a Club. He spoke, and after speaking, they fooled him onto this place --

GREENE: Television station.

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DISHMAN: Television station, yes, and had him on, and he was ever more shocked -- If you had seen it, seen his face, you would have known how shocked he was. Hollywood -- That was Hollywood.

GREENE: How financially successful was the program?

DISHMAN: Well, Ralph Edwards, who was the instigator -- in charge of it -- appealed to the television audience to send just one dollar to Dr. Jones' Piney Woods School, Piney Woods, Mississippi in order to build an endowment fund because he had questioned him about how would the school keep going, and he decided that that was the thing to do. He appealed for funds, by just one dollar, and he would say, "Friends, send just one dollar." And, many of them put the dollar in the mail that night. The mail accumulated so much until Dr. Jones had to call on the people of the Deposit Guaranty Bank to help count the money. So the tellers of the Deposit Guaranty National Bank assembled in a room during their vacant time to open the letters and count the money. The money amounted to over the one million dollars, which he had asked for.

GREENE: The tellers would come from Jackson to Piney Woods to count the money?

DISHMAN: They didn't come to Piney Woods, they stayed in the bank and had the money there at the bank to count it.

GREENE: Now, before I ask about your retirement, I should have asked you to name some of the teachers who were at

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Coleman High School when you taught there.

DISHMAN: Well, of course, I think I mentioned it before, Mr. Norman Howard McGhee and there was a Miss Reid and my good friend Mrs. Daisy Greene. She was Miss Daisy Miller, now she's Mrs. Daisy Greene.

GREENE: Now, what did this Miss Lillian Reid teach?

DISHMAN: She taught Home Economics.

GREENE: I want to ask you this too -- Do you remember any students from those early days in Little Coleman High School who have done exceptionally well?

DISHMAN: Some of the students who have done exceptionally well come before me as three little sisters, to begin with: Leola, Alma and Trandalia Jones. They were three little sisters whose mother died when they were very young, were left totally in the hands of a father. He really reared those children properly and they were all ambitious, wanted to get an education, wanted to do something in life. Leola is retired now from Homer G. Phillips in St. Louis. She gave anesthetics to those who were preparing for operations and Alma, the middle sister, is working among the mentally disturbed patients somewhere in the East. Trandalia, the youngest - very, very tiny - is -- Oh, she taught nutrition at Meharry Medical College at one time. She also taught in one of the islands in the West Indies. I don't know what she is doing now. Anybody who hears anything about three little girls who had a struggle in growing up, with a father taking care of

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must say that those children did a wonderful job, toward the humanitarian work.

GREENE: I notice that you have a program from the 1939 Commencement from Coleman High School. You may not know who is still living in Greenville. In the Class Roll we have M. C. Barnes. He is one of the leading postmen down at the main post office; Ruben Morris is practicing medicine on the coast; Napoleon Johnson is a tile setter here in Greenville, quite a successful one, and Miss Pearl Othelia McGhee is the daughter of Professor McGee. This is a valuable memento of the old days, isn't it?

GREENE: Now, Bertha, what brings you back to Greenville?

DISHMAN: Well, I was invited by the Greenville Retired Teachers' Association to a Christmas party and I am guest of Mrs. Daisy Greene. The Greenville Retired Teachers' Association has for its president, Mrs. Jessie Lee McBride, Mrs. Daisy Greene, secretary and Mrs. Vernanda Williams, treasurer.

GREENE: And, what part are you taking in the party?

DISHMAN: Well, I am told I am to recite " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas." (Laughter)

GREENE: I am sure we will all enjoy it.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

FINAL by V.B.

1/23-1978

Interviewer's note: February 7, 1978.

The following information was written by Mrs. Bertha Jefferson Dishman on February 5, 1978:

"Thomas Jefferson's nephew was Edwin Jefferson, and this Edwin was the father of Nelson Jefferson. Nelson Jefferson was the father of George Samuel Jefferson, and George Samuel Jefferson was the father of Bertha Jefferson Dishman.

From this you can see that Edwin Jefferson was my great grandfather, and he was the nephew of the President, Thomas Jefferson."

*Bertha Jefferson*

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