

- R: Gussie Lee, who will give us her full name. My name is Verdell Robinson, and I am interviewing students who attended Ogden Elementary School in Bland, Florida, for the purpose of securing historical information so that we can then secure a historical plaque to put at that site or some place in the area of the school, where it was. What's your full name?
- L: My full name is Gussie Mae Washington Lee.
- R: Mrs. Lee, what year did you start school at Ogden?
- L: The year had to have been probably 1941 or 1942, because 1936 is the year I was born, and I was going to school when I was six years old.
- R: So, you were born in 1936, and you must have started at school then six years later?
- L: Six years later.
- R: Which would have been 1942.
- L: Yes.
- R: 1942. What year did you stop school at Ogden?
- L: They were not going any further than sixth grade, and I left there in 1947 or 1948.
- R: You went from first through sixth at Ogden School?
- L: At Ogden.
- R: Where did you go when you left Ogden? What school did you go to? Was Ogden still open or did it close? What was the reason you left?
- L: Ogden was still open. The grades didn't go any further than sixth. They were not providing transportation to any other schools in Alachua County for black students. I left there and went to High Springs to live with my aunts. I use the word aunts because I lived with one for the first part of the school term, and another one for the next part of the school term. My daddy's sister, Quincy, I lived with her from [the beginning of school], and we started school in September, September for a month-and-a-half. Then I went to High Springs where a bus was provided for children to go to Douglas, which was Douglas High School, that was just a black school. They would have it first grade through twelfth. I went there in my seventh grade year.
- R: So when you were staying with your dad's sister, they would take you to school?

L: No. There was a bus that I got on there to go. I lived with her because her husband was out of town doing some work, and to be company for her, and he came back in November. I went down to live with momma's sister, Almita Wipeman.

R: But now how did you get to school in Ogden from first through sixth?

L: From first through sixth I walked every day that we went to school. Sometime it was cold. Sometime it was raining. But we went to school every day that we were not working in the field.

R: Was there a white school out there that you know of?

L: Not that I know of. Not at the time when I was first [going to school]. White children were provided with transportation to go to Alachua. To Alachua Elementary/High School. It was both.

R: So they were bussed to school. And were they bussed on the same road that you were walking?

L: Yes. Same road that we were walking on, and they would go by and throw things out at us. Not everyone did that, but that did happen.

R: Things like what?

L: Things like throwing things out of the window like bottles or cans. There wasn't that many cans back in there in the day. They would throw paper balls out.

R: Now, you said that school started in High Springs in September when you were going out there. What month did it open at Ogden and close?

L: About the same time. We would not go to school until after Labor Day. After Labor Day we would go to school, and we would go up until May. That was a farming area. During the time farming was in its high peak so to speak, we were out of school from May, about the middle of May. The end of May we always had our school plays. We always ended with school plays. We would have a play in May, then June, July, and August we would be out. We'd go back in September.

R: It opened in September and it closed in May.

L: Yes.

R: What time of day did school open?

L: School opened at 8:00 a. m., and we were out at 3:00 p. m.. One thing about

being in the farming area, too, I'm adding this. The time was not changed so that it would be dark at a certain time. You know, like we'd have daylight savings.

R: Daylight savings time.

L: We were on Eastern Standard time. We could do as much work in the afternoon and before we left in the morning to get to school when the sun was shining.

R: So you worked in the field in the morning before going to school, and then you walked to school and went to school about 8:00 a. m.?

L: Yes.

R: How long did it take you to walk home?

L: Thirty to forty-five minutes.

R: So you were home every day by 4:00 p.m.?

L: By 4:00 p.m.

R: And then you'd work until the sun went down?

L: We would work until dark.

R: How many were in your family that was walking and going to school and working at that time?

L: When I was sixth grade, there was probably, well more than two of us, three with myself, from my same family. Six through eight years old, there was probably three by the time I was eight, and in the second or third grade. But from the community I was not the only one walking. There were different families.

R: So how many were on the road walking, approximately?

L: There were probably, maybe nine or ten. From time to time there was about a dozen and we were carrying our books. The sand was hot and we would move from one side, especially if our shoes were not appropriate enough.

R: What do you mean appropriate enough?

L: Sometimes the bottom was off.

R: No soles on it?

L: No soles on the shoe. If they came lose we would tie them back with a piece of wire. We would pull them off to walk, so that we could be comfortable walking.

R: So you walked on the grass if it was hot?

L: If it was hot.

R: Who were the teachers at the time that you remember?

L: The teachers I remember at the time I was there, was a Louise Hayes. There was Eunita Simmons, not necessarily in this order. There was a Mrs. Ruth Black-Woods. There was a Mr. Feirmon Welch.

R: But those were some teachers that taught during those six years that you were a student there.

L: Yes.

R: Was there a principal or a head teacher?

L: At the time when I was there I can't remember who we would say would be principal because we didn't use that word that much. We just used who was our teacher. The teacher [that was head of the school] was usually the person who'd been there the longest. That's the way we looked at it. If a person was there when I was in fourth grade and was still there when I was in sixth grade, I just sort of looked at that person as being the person that was over the school. But for me to say who it was, I don't really remember all that.

R: How many teachers were there at one time? I know you've mentioned four, but were there four there [at all times]?

L: They were not all there at one time. The most I can remember being there at any one time was two.

R: How many students were in your classroom?

L: In my classroom I don't remember. There were in my grade at sixth [grade] when I left there going to another school, because many children would come in and they didn't stay if they was working on the farm. Like the Freeny's. They would come in, but they would have been gone at sometime. So I don't remember how many children were in my particular class. Fourth, fifth, and sixth [grades] may have been together. We were not sixth grade students here and fourth there. When you got promoted to the sixth grade, there may have been four of us, but I don't remember but two: myself and Shirley Day were the two that I remember the most [when I was] leaving there.

R: So how many students were in the whole school at any one time?

L: The whole school, at any one time, I could probably visualize fifteen or twenty.

R: Fifteen or twenty. That was first through sixth. Were all these students in the same room or were the students divided into two rooms?

L: There was two rooms after awhile. For a little while there was just one, and when it was real cold, we were in only one room because we had one heater.

R: How was the school heated?

L: It was heated with wood. We had a wood heater and a flue pipe that was sitting back in the middle of the school and the flue went out, if you understand what I'm saying. There was a flue pipe that went out through the window.

R: Through the window?

L: There was a window, and we changed it and went through the door at one time. It was to the side of the building. They closed the window up.

R: So that was where the smoke went out through that.

L: You have to visualize with me when I say through the window, that the flue pipe is like a flue on a stove that we would have now, and they had something around one where it wouldn't burn the building down.

R: What about in the summertime, when it was hot?

L: We let the windows up and open the doors.

R: Were there windows all around the building?

L: No, not all over. There was one that was on the side. One on each side, and then there was a door on the side of it. When I first started, if I can remember right, if I'm thinking correctly, there was a door in the back of the building, if you can visualize something going east and west.

R: That's the way the building was sitting?

L: The building was sitting east and west. There was a door on the east side at first, and there was a door at the west side. That's what I remember. There was some renovations that went on some time later where they changed that door and put it on the south side.

R: So they boarded up the other doors?

L: They boarded up the other doors.

R: So it was just one door, but in the beginning it was two doors.

L: Right.

R: One on each end.

L: Yes.

R: That's interesting. Where did you eat lunch?

L: We brought it from home. Lunch boxes at that time was really a little tin can or a paper bag. It was not bread, it was biscuits that momma had made. We would either have an egg sandwich, or we would have not peanut butter, but a jelly sandwich. We would have a bacon sandwich, and we would have water.

R: Was the bacon sandwich, you had bought some bacon from the store?

L: No. Mrs. Robinson, daddy would always kill hogs and we would have smoked meat. The bacon was what we had grown and killed. No market. We killed 'em ourselves and then cured them. We cured them in the smokehouse. We had what we call a smokehouse, and it was cured there.

R: Where did you eat that?

L: That's why I know there was a back door at the back of that building because we sat on the step outside to eat. That was what we called recess. We had outside time. Recess period was right around 12:00 p.m., and we would go out and eat our sandwich, our lunch and come back in.

R: About how long was that lunch period?

L: About an hour. We would have about an hour off for lunch.

R: So everybody brought their food? There was no food prepared at the school?

L: Not when I first started there. Just when I was about to leave, we had commodity food come in. That was probably my fifth grade year, fourth or fifth grade. Then we ate inside. That second room that we had divided there, that was where the food was [prepared]. Pork and beans and rice, primarily that's what we had.

R: Was the food cooked there at the school?

L: They didn't cook. We warmed [it] up there.

R: Oh, the rice was already cooked?

L: The rice we cooked. The pork and beans was in cans already done. There was some meat in cans, like you have the canned meat, and it was already done. But we did not have any meat that we had to cook, like baked chicken and stuff like that we didn't have. We had chicken, but it was canned chicken that was all ready.

R: Did you warm it up on the heater? Or did you have a stove?

L: At that time. Now they put a stove in, a wood stove. When they started bringing commodities.

R: So the teachers and the older students fixed the food?

L: Yes. We didn't ever have a cook. It was primarily a teacher.

R: The recess that you had for lunch, you say was about an hour. Did you do any playing or any activities during that time, or was there another time that you had to go outside to play?

L: No, we didn't have physical ed. time, as what we called it a while after I got to Alachua/High Springs. We didn't have a physical ed. period. But we did have a time during that time that we would play dodgeball. We would play, it was my last year there they put a clay basketball court out there. There was no outside time for that.

R: What about baseball or softball?

L: We had something like that, but I don't remember us with having somebody providing us balls. We had a tobacco stick that we would make our bats out of. You could take a corn cob and make a ball out of it. You would just take it by wrapping twine around the cob until we could make a ball.

R: So it was round? It looked like ball?

L: It was round. It looked like a ball.

R: You all played, you said basketball or had a clay basketball court.

L: We had a clay basketball court.

R: So the girls and the boys played there. Did the girls and the boys play with the

tobacco stick and the ball? Baseball or softball?

L: Whatever games we were getting ourselves into. We all played together.

R: Everybody played.

L: Yes. Sometimes it would be the girls against the boys because we were all about the same size. And it was activities that we played together at home, so we just carried them over from home. We didn't have a physical ed. teacher.

R: And this was done during that lunch period. You didn't go outside again to do that. It wasn't no separate [time]. You ate lunch and you have your recess and you play ball.

L: Right.

R: What about the outhouse? What kind did you have at school?

L: I don't know if I can explain it, but I will do my very best. We had an outhouse that the government had put there. And there was two: one for the boys and one for the girls. One was on the east side of the building and the other one was on the west side. I don't know what they had in there, but there was some kind of chemical that they put in the ground and set the toilet over it. The four walls was something we called the outhouse. To keep it from smelling like the, I guess similar to what they do to port-o-pots now, but it was not quite as upgraded as what we have now.

R: What were they made out of?

L: They were made out of wood. And the bottom was cement where the feces would go. There was some kind of whatever they would put in there to keep the cleaning active.

R: Did they come, whoever the they were, that put them down. I guess the county. Did they ever come out and manage them?

L: I don't remember them ever coming. They put them there and I don't remember them ever coming back. I wasn't up there during the time they came, if they did.

R: Do you remember when they put them there?

L: They were there when I started. When they put the school there, I'm assuming they put them there.

R: Textbooks, that's the next subject. What condition were they in, and do you remember the names of any of them that was used?

L: I remember workbooks, so to speak. We had spelling books. I don't remember any names though. We had stories that we could read, like *See Spot Run*, *This is the House that Jack Built*, *This is the Cat that Lives in the House that Jack Built*. I remember those stories that we were reading from books, and we read those same stories almost every year. We could read that until we were older. Then we were introduced to *See Bing Buck*. That was another one. *Oh How Bing Bucked*.

R: *Through the Green Gates*.

L: *Through the Green Gates*. All that. Those were the books. And we had those same books from one year to the other.

R: Regarding grades you mean?

L: And when it came to spelling, we had different books for like a first grade speller, second grade speller, a third grade speller. The books got harder for reading after a while. So that's that. Even though it was *This is the House that Jack Built*, that may have been in the second year of the book. There was one, *Tar Baby*, I remember. I can see that picture now of that rabbit striking the tar baby with his paws. I can see that picture, but for me to know exactly.

R: You think it was the same book, but it just got further in it with another grade?

L: I can't really say whether that was the same book. I just know that we read that book until we could almost tell that story without even [looking at the book]. But I didn't have that book when I was in the first grade. But over when I got to second grade there was another one that had a little more words in it. So we got going to *See Spot Run*, *Oh How Spot Can Run*, to *This is the House*. We got four words going now.

R: What condition were the books in? All of the information was there?

L: All the information was there. There were dirty pages in it.

R: But nothing torn out?

L: None torn out when we first started with them.

R: And the backs?

L: The backs were not on all of them, but the inside, and both backs may have been

off, but the story was there in the book, so we could use that. Naturally after using it awhile, we couldn't use them anymore.

R: So you had spelling books, reading books?

L: And workbooks for math.

R: What about history?

L: We had a globe for history. Geography is what they called it. The globe is what we used primarily. We didn't have a book per say, I didn't, on geography. But the globe was always sitting in the corner, and when we got ready to study history or go to geography, we'd go and turn that globe to see what state was next to our state, and what was the capital. We dealt with the capitals of states.

R: The names of the states and their capitals?

L: Yes.

R: What kind of school activities were held at the end of the school year? I heard you say something about that earlier, so tell me about that.

L: Yes. The school activities at the end of the year, it was just a fun time for us. We had to act like the character that was in the play. Our teacher would always choose a play that they wanted. They would read it first and say ok this is what we're gonna do. Mrs. Katie Mae Black was a music person who was related to Mrs. Ruth Black-Woods.

R: So Mrs. Katie Mae was not a teacher?

L: She was not a teacher. She was the music person that Mrs. Ruth Black-Woods knew. When we had our closing ceremony, and it may have been the last one that I was in at Ogden. It was something called "Deep in the Forest, Dancing in the Dale." I can remember when we didn't have music she said, well, get you a stick, and hit on the table. It was like, deep in the forest, dancing in the dale, and the children were out there acting like they were deep in the forest, and the scene was and the school was decorated in such a way that it was a forest. Playing in the forest, ringing fairy bells. So it was just good. I remember that and I think that's probably my sixth grade year from leaving Ogden.

R: Did families come out?

L: Yes, they did. They came out. That is the one time of the year that we could bet on seeing our parents come out to see what we were doing.

R: What time of day was the play?

L: Early evening.

R: Was it after school?

L: It was after school hours.

R: Was it dark?

L: Not really dark. It might have been at 6:00 p. m. since there was time change, so it was not getting dark early. But it was not during the school day when we were having classes until 3:00 p. m.

R: You said that was about the only time that the parents came out. So, did you have anything like PTA?

L: No.

R: Anything like that the parents and teachers got together?

L: No. At the time, when I was in school, they didn't wait until a conference was called. If something was happening with us the parent knew about it almost by the time that we got home. There was always that one-to-one with parent and teacher that they could stop by. If they had to make a special trip, they would come to them [to talk] about something that they were concerned about the child.

R: If the parents knew about it by the time you got home, did you have a telephone?

L: No, we didn't have any telephone. They [the teachers] made sure that they went to the house. They visited the parents in the community. Everybody was like one family. The parents, in our day, did not let the teacher be the one that was wrong. If the teacher said you did it, you did it.

R: So it wasn't like the teacher was visiting, and came to our house, but if there was a problem. If you had done something, then the teacher told the parents that you did it.

L: We really didn't want to see them coming, because we knew we had done that. We knew that we were going to be disciplined for it. The teacher had already disciplined for it.

R: Did you have one of those occasions?

L: No, I didn't.

R: What is the most memorable event that happened to you at Ogden School?

L: The basketball game that when we got in sixth grade and we were practicing. I am not a person that is as coordinated as I ought to be anyway. I was practicing basketball and I jumped up with my mouth opened and bit my tongue almost in two. Blood was gushing out, I bite my tongue and I will never forget that. That is the most memorable, that I can remember.

R: Did you have to have sutures in it?

L: Sutures.

R: What did you do?

L: We rinsed it out with warm salty water. I kept it closed for as long as I could. And I couldn't eat for a while. What did I do, I drank a lot of water. That is what happened, that is what I remember.

R: What do you think about the education that you got at Ogden? How do you judge your education there? I guess you have to have it compared to something, maybe the education of today.

L: The education that I got at Ogden, I think, was the foundation of my life. The reading, even though we had to read the same book and the same story many times, I think that helped me to comprehend a lot. The math problems that we had and the time the teachers, even though they were not master degree teachers, took to understand the student and what the student's ability was. When I compare that to what I see today, I don't see the teachers taking the time with the students to really say that this child is not capable of doing what this child does, at the speed that this child does it. We try to push them all at the same speed and we can't do that. In our day, when I was back at Ogden, there was some slow-learners there, but the teachers took time with those children. [They didn't] push them to the side. Those of us that could move full ahead, we knew a little more, they call them mentors now, but we could sit with students and help them with their lessons, and not think that we were better than they were. We thought that we were doing something helpful to them. I don't see that much happening with our students today. The teachers were concerned. That is why they were going and telling the parents about school. They were concerned about your education. Education is what was going to get us from being at a school like Ogden where we had no books except books that came second-hand, to getting books.

R: You think that the repetition of reading over and over and over was the learning style that was used, and the workbooks with the math [gave] you a foundation as good as any elementary school student?

L: I sure do.

R: You kind of answered this one when you said that the teachers would tell the parents and the parents would then re-discipline you. How did your parents view education?

L: My parents viewed education as an important step to getting our family from point A to point B in the society of tomorrow. I remember Daddy saying so many times that you have to have a better education than I have. The education that I have, a fourth grade education, you have to have a better education to dig a hole to put this post in. We were farmers, and that has come to pass. They have machines to do the same thing that men were doing in days of old.

R: He was a wise man.

L: Yes, he was. He was really a philosopher. One of the best that there has been.

R: Did you ever hear him ever say that you are going to need a twelfth grade education to work in these white peoples' houses.

L: Yes I remember him saying that, initiative was what always instilled in me as one of his children. He would say, you know, and he would tell a story about someone going to look for a job and stepping over the broom to go clean up. I remember him saying that when they all went into the master's house and they were interviewing them, and they got to the last person. The master had put the broom down intentionally to see, that was how she was going to determine which person she was going to hire. When all these others had come in with big words and a lot of things to say, and they had a twelfth grade education. This other person came in and had little education, maybe the sixth grade education, he had a name he called me. He would say when this sixth grade education person walked in and picked the broom up and then went to be interviewed, she would say, you got the job and she had never interviewed her. I never shall forget. He pointed out what that meant to him, you don't have to be told everything to do. Now this person would see things that needed to be done and go ahead and do it. That was education to me.

R: What sort of values did you see your teachers having?

L: Spiritual values, there was a religious kind of tone at the school. Now we say not to do that. The religious tone not only in the school, but in our setting in our house, is what kept everything in line. The discipline, do unto others was said, don't be stealing, respect your elders. We were taught to respect all people, whether they were black or white.

R: That is my last question. Do you have a summary statement you want to make?

L: I am so in favor of this project. I would like the people to know where the people in Bland, those that attended Ogden School, even though it is not visibly there now, I would like for it always to be remembered as the foundation of the people who support, wherever they are, whether they be in Jacksonville or Colorado or Orlando, they got their values from a foundation that was built on justice, built on treating everybody right. Built on education, and built on love that we have for each other.

R: Thank you. If that is your last statement, then I appreciate your doing this interview and it was enlightening for me as the interviewer. So, Mrs. Gussie Mae Washington Lee, I think that is what you go by, thank you so much.

L: You are quite welcome and thank you for your time.

[End of Interview.]