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Interview

with

Cleopatra Goree

November 13, 2004

by Kimberly Hill

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The Southern Oral History Program  
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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

CLEOPATRA GOREE  
November 13, 2004

KIMBERLY HILL: This is Kimberly Hill at the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, Alabama. I'm speaking with Mrs. Cleopatra Goree on November 13, 2004. Thank you for coming again.

CLEOPATRA GOREE: The pleasure is mine.

KH: We're going to talk about school desegregation so I thought I'd ask you about your childhood and how you got interested in becoming a teacher.

CG: Well, that's a long story but I'll be happy to share it with you. I'm a native of Birmingham, Alabama, born, reared, bred, a child of the Depression, a teenager of World War II, and after World War II a college student. When the veterans were returning to the college campus I was a college student then. A young adult during the Cold War between Russia and the United States, the Korean conflict, and finally the civil rights struggle in Birmingham, which is kind of a jump. As a child I walked three miles to school and three miles back. I think that's correct in saying. First grade we learned to do our writing, which was known as the Palmer Panship. That Palmer Panship came from Alex Haley's relatives up in Normal, Alabama and it happened right after Reconstruction. The Palmer Panship was very popular in the black schools. As a child I enjoyed school and life for me during the Great Depression was very vivid in my mind. I had two pennies for lunch each day that was left by my grandfather. I had a mother who did domestic work for, she was a laundry lady and she brought the white people's work home. She washed and ironed for them. And, of course, that was quite a chore because she had to have three rinsing

waters and a big tin tub. Then you had to have the boiling water in a hot pot and then you had to put the clothes on the line and you had to watch for the weather and the rain and the cold. After that then she had to iron at night or in the afternoons. And there she had to put the flat iron, which you are not familiar with or perhaps you've seen in a book or something.

KH: Seen one.

CG: Seen one, well, those flat irons were used by my mother and she placed them on the fireplace and then she would take them off and she would iron at night by the lamplight. We had no electricity. And, of course, as a child I would sit by her ironing board and I would read the nursery rhymes and she would tell me about her childhood days. And then I would sing and that was pretty much my recreational time. So I knew all about Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and the Sleeping Beauty and the Beauty and the Beast, all of the fairy tales, not knowing they were originally from Germany, Mother Goose and all of the fairies. And this very much a part of my rearing and a lot of fun, a lot of dreaming, the nursery rhymes and you learned them and Little Bo Peep and all of the things that children really enjoy. No television, no radio. For recreation during my childhood when I wasn't in the books or sitting beside my mother ironing and singing and hearing about her childhood and my escape to the fairy tales and so forth, during the summer my summer activities were playing playhouse. And this, children don't know anything about. You make believe and we would make the couch out of bricks and then find some kind of piece of cloth and put over it for the little couch and we would make us a stove and the mud pies and all those good things. But I think you would be interested in our dolls. We would take a

Coca-Cola bottle and you had ice that was delivered to the homes and the icebox. There were no refrigerators in the 30s, and especially in my community. Well, the ice was tied with a string and that string had, it was yellow like blonde, but it held ice together and the man would have the stringed ice and he would drop it off at the porch. We'd get the strings off of the ice and it was kind of cord-like and it was blonde and we would stick it down in a Coca-Cola bottle real tight and that would be our doll and we would work on her hair. No face to the doll, nothing but the blonde strings down and we would work on her hair. That was pretty much the playhouse days. At night we would play church. In the summer the boys in the community would be the preacher and I never could sing that well. I thought I could but I was a shouting sister, you know, when we shout like. We had a lot of fun. So my early childhood was exciting, especially exciting because I failed to tell you my mother only made fifty cents for each load of laundry she carried back to the white people. With the two pennies that my grandfather left me for lunch I bought maybe a penny apple and two penny cookies. And so I had two cookies and an apple and then it was three girls I remember very vivid. We would share our lunch together. So one girl had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It was a biscuit her mother fixed. And the other girl had two pennies and she bought the peanuts. So I'd break the cookie half and we'd bite off the apple together and we shared our lunch and we laugh about it sometime now. That's very early childhood. I'm talking about anywhere between first and fourth grade maybe. I think that is pretty much.

Oh, I know what I want to tell you about my precious childhood memories and this is past the age of fourth grade, maybe anywhere between eight and twelve years

old. The downtown commercial business district and that's when Birmingham was really, the downtown areas were very popular. We didn't have the malls and the strips and all of that. And downtown department stores were just marvelous to go in, the perfume, the candies, and the flowers and the white people eating in balconies and black folks standing up looking at it. We had to go down in a basement and the toilet and the basement together we had one little counter for black people and we would order a hot dog, which was five cents, and we would order a drink or a soda pop, maybe is a better word but in Alabama we said we want a drink. But it's soda in a lot of places, you know, terminology is the same. So we would order that and we would push and try to get our hot dog and our ten cents would take care of our lunch. But we had an old stool down there and if you didn't sit at that stool and the bathroom was right up on you and that was for the colored folks, you know. But you'd go and look at the white people eating upstairs and in the mezzanines and the balconies and you'd look and wish. The candy was fragrant and oh, the perfume and the pretty clothes, and so we would go down there and look and my mother believed in very nice clothes for me. But the interesting thing about it, she would have to put them on layaway. Had a very small foot so I had to wear very expensive shoes. I wore the Mother Goose shoes and the Weatherbird shoes, which were expensive for that time, but she would put them in layaway but they would fit perfectly.

You dreamed by looking in the windows and seeing the pretty white dolls and pretty white. At Christmastime she would always take me downtown at Christmas and I was in one department store and they had the electric trains and all of the things mechanical, things and you would see the teddy bears and all of this and Santa Claus.

That was the highlight. The Christmas parade, I never will forget it. I guess I must have been about six or seven years old. Oh, the commercial businesses put on a Christmas parade and all of the pretty white girls and floats and queens and waving and at the end of the parade was Santa Claus and the white school bands. We were standing at the sidewalk and I remember so vividly and a white man pushed us off the sidewalk out of the way. We were standing kind of in front of him and he gave us a push and kind of shoved us back and we had to push back. But it was a resentment, you know, of the blacks folks. You get out of the way. We said absolutely nothing to him.

KH: Was he walking by or did he just push you?

CG: No, he was standing. See you got people standing viewing the parade. The crowd was on the street, yeah. He wasn't walking by but he just shoved my mother and I. That parade was the highlight of my days for years, Christmas parade, as far as I can remember. I looked forward to it. I really did.

I think the other thing I shared with you before, a vivid memory of my childhood days, I must have been anywhere between six and eight years old, was the Klan coming through our community. That was maybe the late 1930s but I'm talking about anywhere between '39 and '40 maybe. They rode through the community and not far from there my community, was where the black man named Aaron had been, what would you call it? His organs had been cut off.

KH: Emasculated.

CG: Emasculated, I think that's the word. The Klan maybe about a mile and a half from us had an initiation and they saw him walking along the road, the hill, the

hilly road not far from us and they caught him. His last name was Aaron. And they had to perform some kind of act to prove they were worthy to be a Klansman and they caught him. The word is castrate. They castrated him and they poured turpentine on his wounds and left him there. And that was their admission to the Klan, so to speak. But they rode through the community and we peeped out of the window. Of course, our lamplights were out in the dark and the Klan were riding and they had a burning cross in the front of, you know, outside of the car and they had on their white robes and their hood hats and things. They didn't bother us as such but the fear tactics. You see what I mean? I don't know why they rode through there. I don't know whether some of the blacks were interested in the Communist party and they met in secret at night. My mother had a friend whose son went to Russia but they would always meet late at night and they would call it the party. I was a little girl and I didn't know what the party meant but now that I'm grown I know they were secret members of the Communist party. So I don't know whether the Klan came through there, you know, to frighten those persons who might have been participating as members of the Communist party.

December 7, 1941 the bombing of Pearl Harbor, I'll never forget it. Was on my way to Sunday school in Birmingham. It was a rainy day. We did not take the newspaper. We did not have a radio so you can see my story is the annals of the poor. But not only was I a part of the Great Depression, this was all of the United States. In Birmingham we had no soup lines but northern people, I learned from them, people my age talk about the soup lines but we didn't have the soup lines. We had enough gardens and maybe fruit or whatever could be grown to take care. My mother didn't



have chickens but some of the neighbors had chickens in the backyard house and they had to outlaw that. Maybe in the late '40s they outlawed chickens and hog pens and cows in the city limits of Birmingham. You had to get out further where you could have your pastures and all of that. But it was a part of my growing up. We pretty much survived off of cornfields. Had a huge lot with nothing but corn grown on it so I ate fried corn, boiled corn, stewed corn, corn pudding, every kind of corn. We just had corn and my mother could cook the most delicious fried corn because she had an art of how she would cut her corn so it wouldn't be whole grain. She had beautiful greens that she grew in the garden, string beans and things like that. So meat was a rarity other than maybe neck bones were five cent a pound, pig ears five cent a pound, croaker fish five cent a pound. But I ate so many neck bones I don't like pluck neck bones today. I don't like any part of the hog other than, I don't eat the pigtails, the pig ears. I eat chitlins. I eat pig feet sometime. Of course, I eat the pork chops, roast. Every part of the pig was used as you must know.

KH: Yeah, my mom has told me about that.

CG: Nothing is left from that pig. 1941, I think I was talking about December 7, 1941 Sunday school morning and it's raining and everything and all we could hear from people who had radios and our newspaper boys, they were hollering extra, extra, Pearl Harbor has been bombed. United States, be sure to hear President Roosevelt at the fireside chat. My mother and I went to somebody's house with a radio to see what the president was saying. So my best memories and I must have been about thirteen years old, my best memories of that early World War II was the fireside chats. We would go to listen. I didn't know what I was listening to but they said the president's



going to speak and Joe Louis fighting. I dreamed of going to Madison Square Garden to a Joe Louis fight. And the people, we would run to somebody's house to hear Joe Louis is going to fight tonight, Joe Louis is going to fight tonight. So we would run to the people's houses had the radio, going to listen to the fight. And when Joe Louis would knock the man out all up and down our streets the people, you would think it was just a big celebration. Grown people, men, "Oh, did you know Joe Louis won!" All over the neighborhood. That was a good memory and I said if I ever get grown I'm going to Madison Square Garden. I just dreamed of what would Madison Square Garden look like. Whenever our relatives would come from up north, say Harlem or Chicago or those who had migrated, we would run to their house to see them. They'd been up North. Oh, so-and-so is back home. But she lives in New York. She lives in Harlem. They would come back all proper, [saying] "hello." The verbs would have gone every direction and we didn't know. "Oh, how have you been?" Sometimes they'd get proper and say "You dance," you know. She's been up North or he's been up North and they would have stories to tell us. Little did we know that life in Harlem, how rough it was up there for blacks, that it was strictly a ghetto.

KH: So they were just pretending that they had more education?

CG: Well, I think it was kind of a status to talk proper, you know, inasmuch as we were southerners and this was kind of a thing, I live up North and you people down here, you know. But they didn't describe their living conditions. You know, we had no idea that you're in a flat with one bathroom, you know, people going up and down the halls. I didn't learn that until I started studying black history that I learned in the recent years that I've been delving in it. People really fared better in the South than

they did in the North because the remainder of your best schools for blacks, were in the South. After the Civil War they started setting up the Freedman's Bureau and they had people coming from the North, the Episcopalians and Congregationists and the white people came down and sat up schools, colleges. So people from the North would send their children back south to school, to the colleges. Atlanta, for an example, was a college town and colleges sprang up all over the South. So the better class of people really fared better in the South than they did in the North. But yet you had sharecroppers, especially from Mississippi and Alabama, all the people who had been sharecroppers and lived poor like I lived, the North with the invention of the automobile and, you know, Motown and Cleveland you had tires and all of that made, so people migrated north and they fared better but they would live in a ghetto. Life to me, when I did get a chance to go to Chicago I was eighteen years old and I was glad to get back home because I had never seen living conditions like -- my aunt lived on State Street and it was filthy. I was just appalled about living conditions, you know. That's as far north as I had been at that time.

In eighth grade, that's middle school, anywhere between sixth and seventh or eighth grade, I was a pretty popular little girl because I worked in the principal's office and he was very nice to me. And, by the way, that principal was Alma Powell, Colin Powell's wife. Her father was my elementary principal.

KH: Which school is that?

CG: That was Thomas School at the time. Alma perhaps was a baby, she and her sister, or toddlers. I can't remember. I have no idea really on their birth date. Or they might not have been born. I'm not sure but when I saw them, first saw them,

because I was very fond of Mr. Johnson who was their father, they were very pretty little toddlers, the two girls. So I worked in his office and he was very kind to me. When I wouldn't have those two pennies I could go to his office and tell him, Mr. Johnson, will you let me have a nickel for my lunch please? I'll give it back when my mother gets some money. And he would give me the nickel and tell me, no, Cleo, you can have the nickel. So I have beautiful memories of her father because he was so warm and I was a little girl in the office, you know, carrying messages and all that kind of stuff. The next thing, by the time I got to the seventh or eighth grade I didn't have to bother him for a nickel because I worked in the lunchroom and we'd fixed the sandwiches and it was potted meat sandwiches, packages of raisins, packages of raisins like, you know, the little packages of raisins, about the size of the little box of raisins but they were in packages. We fixed a potted meat sandwich or the bologna sandwich and we'd cut them up for the children to come in at recess. The home economics teacher had me as one of those girls who helped fix the sandwiches and work in the lunchroom. And then we had little packages of peanuts about like that. Boy, you talk about, I hate to use the word steal but you talking about somebody taking enough for all the girls who worked in the lunchroom, we were loaded down. We didn't have to pay a penny for the peanuts or a penny for the raisins. Nor did we have to buy the sandwiches because we had enough set aside. So we ate well. I don't think stealing is a good word. We just looked out for ourselves. We really didn't steal but we just took advantage of our working in the lunchroom. So I didn't have to worry about a meal. I didn't worry about the two pennies. I didn't worry about the

nickel from Mr. Johnson because I ate every day. I was one of the girls in the lunchroom.

Ninth grade I'm out of middle school. Senior high school started ninth grade. World War II still going on and I went to what is now Ullman High School. The Ullman building still stands in Birmingham. I don't know how long it's going to stand because it's a part of the University of Alabama Medical Center. They might eventually destroy the building because it is very old. So ninth, tenth grade I'm at Ullman High School and I was fortunate enough to get in the principal's office again because he is the brother-in-law to Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson married his sister and that name is George C. Bell, Ullman High School. And George C. Bell was the only brother that Alma Powell's mother had. She was a Bell before she married and that was her brother. So they were very influential people. They were all educated and all smart people. I say that with pride because they were academicians. They were academicians, the Bells and the Johnsons. They were academicians and they were college graduates with master's degrees in the '40s. So it was quite an experience to work in his office because Mr. Johnson told him about Cleo. Let Cleo work in your office. She can help you. She knows what to do. So again, I'm the little eager beaver in Mr. Bell's office and he became one of the most vital forces in my life. Whenever I talk about anybody, it's two people besides, maybe four people besides my parents that had such an impact on my life today and will always be a part of my memory; parents first, a grandfather and a mother. No father in the house because my father and mother were not together. So a mother worked for white people, a grandfather who was a devout deacon that didn't allow any dancing, no card playing, no going to

the movies, no ballgames, all those things. He took pride in that the deacon and all these things were considered a sin by him so he made me pretty much walk the chalk line on that kind of discipline. I couldn't go to the dances that the other girls went to. If I went I had to "slip" [a.k.a sneak]. I went to a ballgame, had to slip, you know, that kind of thing. But back to the four people that had such an impact on my life, George C. Bell who was the principal of Ullman High School, he was my principal in high school. When I got in college he taught me geography. One of the most dynamic teachers I had ever had. When I came out of college, my second year out of college he gave me a job at Ullman High School. So he was my principal in high school. He was my teacher in college. And he was my boss as a teacher. So he really became a vital force because he was brilliant and a dictator. And he told me dictatorship was the best form of government and we had the most beautiful argument. All of the wit and some of the things I learned from him, I still quote them. And he told me why. He said democracy cannot be perfect because you have too many ideas expressed by the people. So you would never have a form of government that argues and that disagrees because everybody is so free and everybody wants to have a say so. If you have a dictator you have only one voice. He said the advantage of that dictator, if he's a good dictator and if he's good to the people then people enjoy dictatorship. And I thought "so much wisdom." At the time we were having trouble in Haiti with I guess Papa somebody down there. Does that ring a bell?

KH: Papa Doc?

CG: Papa Doc. I was teaching there and he was telling me, we were exchanging ideas and I'd met a girl who had worked with me in Head Start and she

just thought it was nobody like him. And so I thought about what he said if the dictator is good, if the people loved him, if he was good to the people, we'd have pretty much a better government, a perfect government. So we would have our disagreements. I learned a lot of wisdom from him. I think you would have enjoyed him. All the teachers obeyed him. We were no more than the students. When he would yell everybody ran into their own little rat hole, children, teachers, janitors, cooks, everybody obeyed. If we would have a faculty meeting nobody spoke but him. After the faculty meeting was over we left. It wasn't no "I think, I said, I heard."

KH: He just told you?

CG: Yeah, he told us. But in his dictatorship I found it hard to argue with him because he was warm and caring. No parent ever approached us as a teacher before coming to him. He protected his teachers then he would come back and tell us, now I'm going to take the hit for you but you've got to be on your duty. "If you fail, if that child is out of line and you fail, they come to me first and I'm coming to you." Very firm but very fair. One day I was sitting on the hall, the little new teacher, the little bright teacher knows Mr. Bell. I'm eating my lunch out in the hall on hall duty. I called a child to come by. "John, come and carry my tray to the lunchroom please." He saw me. Boy, he hit the ceiling. He said, "What's wrong with you!" I said "Nothing, Mr. Bell, nothing, nothing is wrong with me." "What's wrong with you! People didn't send their children here to serve you. They're not your waiter. I don't want ever to see you sending a tray by a child. Get up and take your own tray! That child is not your servant." I politely got up and carried that tray.

KH: Yeah.



CG: I didn't argue with him and depend on his mood, you know. If he walked in the room and he decided the lights were on he'd click them off. "You're burning daylight." If you didn't have the lights on, [he'd say] "children can't see in the dark." And he told me always erase your board when you get through at that board. I said, "Sir?" "Always erase that board. You don't ever know who's coming behind you and read what you have up there and if it's wrong they're going to criticize you." So you can see the kind of personality I'm dealing with. When I became pregnant and teachers had to stay out a certain length of time, I never had to worry about my job because he was going to go to the board, get me back on my job. And always made me teach. He widened my horizon. I guess that's a good word for it. He finished educating me because he made me teach every social studies. I taught American history, world history. I taught government. I taught economics. I taught American lit. I taught English lit. And then I taught ninth grade grammar. I taught the classics. Wherever he was vacant of a teacher, if he needed a social studies teacher and he didn't have enough he would switch me into the social studies department. If he didn't have enough English teachers then he would switch me into the English department. So having to teach those subjects I learned with the children. You see what I'm saying?

KH: Were those your subjects in college?

CG: I had a major. I was a double major, social science and English, so I had majored in them but it's nothing like having to teach it because you go into depths, then. See and you don't ever want the child to know more than you know. So it, you know, like I said it widened though I was a major. I had that major. That was the



person that had so much influence on me. I loved him. When he died it was like a father having passed I had so much love for him. He had no children. So I just had that endearment. It was a part of my life passing.

And my minister for twenty-seven years in the Baptist church had the same kind of impact on me as far as the Christian religion is concerned. The fundamentals and the doctrines that he taught me laid a basis for my religious beliefs even to this day. And he was as wise in his teaching as Dr. Bell was in his administration. Some of the things taught me, for an example, if I meet you and something about you, we just don't click, just, I don't know. The pastor described it as our spirits don't meet. And I thought it was such, you know, I meet people sometimes and I said, "Oh, Reverend said our spirits don't meet," you know, just somebody.

KH: It's a good phrase.

CG: Yeah, our spirits don't meet and that was from my pastor. Another thing he told me, I was always busy in the church trying to organize this program, do that program, and I cancelled a program and he asked me, "Baby child," I said "yes, sir". "What happened to the program?" I said, "Well, the folks didn't want to do nothing. They just said they didn't want to be in it so I just" He said "Let me tell you this. Listen to me well." I said "Yes, sir." "The best weapon in the world the devil has is discouragement. Once the devil gets you discouraged, he has you won." Said, "Now prayer saying and all that, he might come at you in that direction but once he gets you discouraged, that's the best weapon the devil has to defeat you." And all this kind of wisdom, you know, you can see the impact he had on my life, you know. I ran up to him, I was a little bright teacher, you know. And I was reading this kind of book

where, "Reverend, I was reading a book where Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom and therefore the priest has the keys to the kingdom." That's why they believe God to the priest. He said, "Where have you read?" "I read in a Catholic book. They believe that Peter had the keys to the kingdom so the priest has the keys to the kingdom to go before you. Whatever he looses on earth will be loose and whatever he condemns, you know, that's why you've got to go to the priest to confess." He said "Look a here, baby child." I said, "Yes, sir." "Don't you believe everything you read here. Watch what you read."

And the last thing I'll share with you about my religion and then I'm through with it. I was giving one of those programs and at that time we had different speakers to come in the church, your life, the problems of the community, school, and the church. Speaker on the church, speaker on religion, no, religion, school, and church or community, and I invited a lady in. She was a librarian at one of the public high schools and very fairly and very brilliant in our educational circle. And he called me in after that. He said, "What was her religion?" I said, "I don't know. I think she's Bahai." He said, "Don't ever invite other religious groups in the church. Now I don't want that anymore." And I was so outdone. I said, "Yes, sir." I never argued if I thought they were right but it never dawned on me about her Bahai faith, you know. But he really didn't approve of it. Told me be careful who you invite from now on. Yes, sir.

The last two people, I think I told you about them the other time. They were responsible for me being a teacher. I was at Parker High School then. I had left George Bell and gone to eleventh and twelfth grade at Parker High School. And my

senior year it was time for the president of Alabama State University to find out who was the top student in the whole state of Alabama among colored people, at the time. So he had a test administered to every high school, black high school, in the state of Alabama. It came time for Parker High School students' senior year, that's the senior year of '45, and they were going to give the test at Parker. The math teacher said I did not do well enough in geometry to qualify to take the test for college competition. The head of the English department was a lady named Ollie Wyatt, O-L-L-I-E W-Y-A-T-T-, the head of the English department at Parker High School, a very forceful teacher in American literature and English grammar. The other teacher was Dessie, D-E-S-S-I-E, Harris Ray, head of the social studies division at Parker High School, American history teacher. Both excellent teachers, I would always say that. They're both excellent teachers. They've taught their subject with a passion and understanding and requirements. Both could motivate students through grades. Both were very good motivators, could motivate their students. So they were responsible for me, even though the man, the geometry teacher said I couldn't take it, they insist on my taking the test. So when I took the test to compete with the other students throughout the state and at Parker High School, I came out with a small scholarship. I had scored that high on the test. That carried me to Alabama State College For Teachers at the time, which was far from my dream. I think I told you about I was anticipating going to Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, Alabama, working my way five years through school and I was going to be a dietician.

KH: Yeah, you mentioned that.

CG: I didn't know what a dietician was. I thought it was a big word. I had no idea what I was going to do. But I was just being proper, you know. [sarcastically] "What are you going to do? I'm sending my application off to Tuskegee and I'm going to be a dietician. I'm going to study to be a dietician." But I got the scholarship to Alabama State and it's a teachers college. That was all my mother needed, you know, to get me in the door. I had enough college interest and then I got to college and again I went into the laboratory high school and worked in the school office again and worked my way partly through Alabama State and she paid a small portion. But I was a work student. My sophomore year I got a small scholarship from the AKAs, the undergraduate chapter of the AKAs. And I participated in a drama my freshman year so I pretty much had it made. In college I decided I was going into secondary education, not elementary education. I wasn't interested. In college I was in everything -- Panhellenic council, sorority, student government, Sunday school. You name it, everything happened on campus I was one of them little eager beavers in it. But it was kind of a face saving thing for me because I could not afford to be popular with the boys. I'm an only child. I have a struggling mother who's keeping me there. If I get sent home for being pregnant or if I get sent home for being out too late or being off campus, I've got to go back and face a mother who's working hard and a grandfather who has all of his hopes in me. So my escape for socializing was to be involved. So I'm not one of the little go-go chicks on campus. Of course, I was skinny too. I don't guess the boys looked at me too hard anyway. I wasn't one of them hippy girls, you know. I didn't have the pretty legs and all that so I pretty much drowned myself in activities. I look back at it now and see what I was doing. But I

knew the circumstances and see college days then you had curfews and they didn't play about it. And you signed out everywhere you went. You signed back and you had dorm mothers and I guess you've heard about all that thing. And I don't know whether your parents are old enough to have told you but when we left going home at Thanksgiving break or Christmas break we were well dressed when we got on the train, your best clothes if you had any. And when you went to church you were well dressed, hat if you had to borrow one and you carried your gloves. So that was a part of the etiquette I guess they taught. And I found myself really excited as I was trying to become a teacher, enjoying every minute. Last thing I want to tell you, I can't tell you about all those little ups and downs I had in college and run-ins. But I would like to tell you about one of my integrated arts teachers. She was young, almost as young as the college students. She had just come out and she was flirting with the boys and she was from, I don't know whether she was from -- New Orleans? Might have been from your home state, Texas. I don't know where she was from but I can see her now, little, short, brown skinned young lady, thin. And she was teaching this art class on dressing and colors and she always told me "Red looks good on you, girl." But we were discussing something in class and I'm the bright eyed freshman again talking and I said, "I be so-and-so". "Oh, my Lord, girl, if you said that be, be, be, again, I'm going to scream." Did she burst my bubble? I think I told you about that. So I went to a friend of mine, who's a very brilliant girl, smarter than I was, science major and math major. We were very close friends. I said "Will you please tell me how to use, help me with my English?" And we would go down to the laundry room and she would try to help me straighten out the verbs and all that. But it really kind of got me

on that verb to be. She said, "You be, be, oh, my Lord." And she loud talking in class. But I enjoyed my college career and so I'm a teacher when I finish and taught two years out of town. That was the first time I'd ever been free in my life. I think I told you that. My mother didn't tell me. My granddaddy wasn't there to tell me what time to come home. The dormitory I didn't have to check in and check out. Oh, I was fancy free. I could come in at eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock.

KH: Where were you again?

CG: Fayette, Alabama, that's the first year of teaching. Fayette, F-A-Y-E-T-T-E, Alabama, Training School, Fayette County Training School. Again, please note, if you don't read about it, know the connotation of how white people discriminated against us. Black folks went to training schools and industrial schools coming from Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee, and Reconstruction. Black folks were to be trained, not educated. And they were supposed to learn how to work in the industries. White children went to high schools, the liberal arts and all of the things. So I taught at the training school. Loved every minute. Just was so excited. Loved my students. Some of them were right behind me because it was veterans who were returning. Some were older than I was because they were coming out of World War II going back to high school. Ullman High School, I've given you that with George C. Bell so I won't go over that. That was Ullman High School.

KH: I think we'd better go ahead and stop because.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B



CG: I think the last thing I told you was I liked going back to Ullman High School. Are we ready to integrate now?

KH: Okay.

CG: Teaching at Ullman High School from 1952 until 1969; 1969, I was in the massive integration of schools in Birmingham demanded by the federal judge. "All deliberate speed" had come to an end in Birmingham and they demanded desegregation of all schools. And that's 1969, '70 so I was a part of that desegregation or integration, whichever way we want to look at it. I entered Woodlawn High School -- predominately white. At that point perhaps 1969, 1970, after integration it still the ratio should have been eighty-five percent whites and maybe fifteen percent blacks coming in of the school enrollment. The faculty was all white until we got there. I think maybe about twenty of us came in. I'm giving you approximate, maybe twenty at the most.

KH: What percentage of the faculty do you think was black after you came?

CG: Maybe fifteen to twenty percent of the faculty was black. All head of the departments were white. Principal was white. Counselors white. It was a white school. Bandmasters, choir directors, it was a white school. Early 1970s, Angela Davis is in the news. She's the top newsperson after the movement is over and, of course, by then I had been well oriented in the movement, so from the time Dr. King came to Birmingham in 1956 I never missed the opportunity of hearing him and the last speech he made in Birmingham I heard him. That's when he declared that the Vietnam War was wrong. So I was a part of that movement. This is where I came at Ullman I encouraged the children to participate in all of the demonstrations and I



would leave at night and meet them at the churches. I did not walk off of my job but I never held a student back. Couldn't have held them back anyway because they walked out and left us standing in the room all by ourselves. It was one of the most amazing things. I never will forget it. Andy Young and Wyatt T. Walker, all of them were young and cute and they stood out in front of our school. They just crossed their arms like that and every child just broke. Ran out and left us. You couldn't have stopped them if you wanted to. You had maybe one or two sitting in a class. Principal couldn't stop them. Nobody could stop them. And I was very close to my students so I always knew what went on in the jail and the marches and at night I would not go home. I would leave school and go straight to the churches where the movement and all of the action was. So I really was not in the circle but a secondary person I'd say. I'm just one among the crowd who enjoyed. I counted one among the persons who attended mass meetings and a part of every kind of activities other than demonstrations and marching. I marched only once and that was on Easter Sunday. I got in the march that Sunday when Dr. King was arrested. I had left my church and came down here near Sixteenth Street and got in the march. So that was the only time I really marched. But the other times I supported students and kept up with them and encouraged them. They always laugh about it when they see me now. "Mrs. Goree, you always said 'go ahead on.'" You know, one of those things. We still have beautiful memories of that.

By the time I get to Woodlawn in 1970, by this time I'm really black. I'm not partly black. I'm black all the way. I had gone to Miles College, Fisk University, University of South Alabama, and all of this was in black studies so I'm fired up on

blackness. I'm black all the way. I walked in the school and I think I told you and I like to remember it because I walked in with a big afro wig on just like Angela Davis was wearing her hair. I had all of my hair pinned under the wig, you know. At that time I had one of these jackets like the westerners wear with the fringe. You don't see them now, you know. I was trying my best to look like a hippie or way out something. I had a suede vest with all those fringes and that wig on and big earrings and I walked in to the white faculty. No mistake, I'm black coming in, you know. I don't pretend. Didn't fraternize too much with the whites, very respectful during our orientation. So they said they had some rooms under the stadium. The stadium was up high and underneath were the rooms, classrooms they had made down there because this was a huge school, one of the largest high schools in Birmingham, white high schools. They said, "Oh, it is so nice and cool under there. You want a room under there?" And I'm up on third floor looking down and that view, pretty trees and things. I said, "Oh no, I can't go under there. I have an allergy and I'm afraid if I go under there it will react to my medical condition. I'll have to have ventilation or windows." And the most amusing thing, Kim, the teachers, black teachers who accepted that, you know, said we'll go in there. It's nice and cool and everything. No air conditioning was in the school anyway. See the school is not air conditioned so they thought it was cool under there. It was horrible. It was so hot under there those people couldn't hardly breathe. And this is the line that they sold us.

I walked into the room and they [the students] asked, "Where is Miss So-and-So?" I said, "I don't know but I'm your teacher. I don't know Miss So-and-So and I never met her." I don't know who the teachers were. "You going to teach us?" "Oh,

yes, I'm the teacher." So they looked at me and I looked at them and I tuned up, you know. That's all I knew to do, having taught under George Bell, you know, it was no problem. Well, the teachers, the white teachers would go in the lounge between classes and on their breaks. I never went in there because they were all whites and they had all of their little knitting and their little conversations. Plus, Dr. Bell didn't allow us to sit in teachers lounge anyway so going to the lounge meant nothing to me. So I didn't make any attempt to go in there and interfere with their conversations. If I had to go to the restroom in the lounge I might speak if they looked like they wanted to speak. Got along very well with the white students. It wasn't long before no problem at all. And I say that because I guess I liked teaching. No confrontations, they were very nice. I learned to love the students. I learned them just like I did my black students and we became endeared to each other. I finally learned their brothers, sisters, church memberships, origin, whether they had Polish or whether they were Italians or whatever their backgrounds, Germans, you know. I was always interested in Europe anyway, Germans. And I would have a lot of fun. Had a Lebanese. I had an Arab and eventually had a child from Vietnam. I'm going to tell her story before I leave. But to make a long story short, children are beautiful. Love my students. They came to my house and gave me a birthday party and this was all whites, you know. Got along with my black students, you know. Endeared myself as much as I could to them but they were kind of a little hostile. They get in the room, the children say "Oh, it's so hot in here." The black children [would say], "We cold." So I had four windows. I said, "All of y'all who hot sit by these two windows. All of ya'll who cold sit [there]." So two windows were down, two were up. Kept right on teaching.

So uniquely so, how did I really feel early in that school? I could see the hands of segregation moving, discrimination rather than segregation. No black children were encouraged to be in the student council. They had a student council office and it looked like off limits to black children. Long time before they could even become a part of the student council government. Whoever was president of student council government, won president of student council, they presided over all student affairs. They served as the presiding officer, whether it was an auditorium program or whether it was a pep rally or whether it was somewhere the students had to be. The student council president presided and they were white. When blacks finally got elected as student council presidents their presiding was cut off. Now they couldn't preside at a pep rally like the white students had done all the time. They were not allowed to do it. I saw the responsibility of positions gradually diminishing.

KH: Who made that decision?

CG: The sponsor of the student council. See your sponsor is a white lady, you know. They sponsored all the clubs and all the bands, all the choirs. Another thing that really got next to me I saw that gradually, you know, was taken away from black students. In the meanwhile, I have nothing but Red Cross. I don't have any activities, extracurricular activities at the school but a Red Cross for high school students, Red Cross chapter. So who joined my Red Cross? The poor whites and the blacks. See you had a cultural . . . Children I taught were from affluent white people at the time and then the poor whites from a certain area. So the children who joined Red Cross were the poor whites and the black children. So they became a part of my little organization. It wasn't small because kids be hanging out. Sometimes they would be

hanging out of the windows so many of them in the Red Cross meeting, you know. So I had a large membership of Red Cross because that was something all of them felt they could get in and feel free.

The head of my department did not like me at all because when the white parents prepared goodies or presents or something for the teachers they would take some to her and they would bring me the same thing. So she really resented me. So I didn't warm up to the faculty. I was polite but I never pushed myself on them. I was standing next to the white director of the girl's choir when I first got there. She was sitting on one side and I was sitting next to her. We just knew each other's name. I don't know whether she really knew my name but I knew she was director of the choir. The boy's choir was performing that day and they sang "The Hallelujah Chorus," and she stood up and she was getting all of the joy out of "he shall reign forever and ever." And I was standing right beside of her and all of a sudden I just felt a resentment. How can you be so holy standing beside me a black woman you don't speak to, you really don't know? I had just that inward feeling at the moment. That was about the only reaction I really had because I knew white people really didn't basically like. Now you had some black teachers who would bring in oh, boxes of doughnuts for the morning for the office staff, or cupcakes, you know. They were doing the little nice things for the office staff. Anybody come in they can have a cupcake. "This is courtesy of Miss So-and-So." I ain't courtesy nobody. No. The children got angry on Martin Luther King's birthday I believe it was and the black children demonstrated out on the front steps and they tried to push them in. Told them to come in and they wouldn't come in. They sang "We Shall Overcome" and all of

that. And they were running up and down the hall and the white teacher looked at me [and said], "Oh, I don't understand what's wrong." I say, "I don't either." That's all I said. I had no comments about telling the students to stop and they were all blacks. I stood right up there and looked at them run up and down the hall. I didn't touch a black child. She thought I was going out there in front of the black teachers [to say] "What's wrong with you all! Come back in here!" Let them run. I told you I was strictly black when I got there. I was a hundred percent black. Some of the encounters are winding down. Some of my encounters with students leveled off. Some of the very students that I thought so much of, A students, when they finished high school and they saw me in public it was just "hi, hello." And I never will forget two little Lebanese, both of them were Lebanese families here in Birmingham. That was the one I told you about I was teaching about the Middle Passage, how they treated blacks on the Middle Passage, sat them on the top of the boat. Bring them up out of the bottom and strip them naked and poured lemon oil on them and they coming out of all of that, can't get the word out.

KH: Feces.

CG: Feces, thank you for the word. You heard me trying to get it out. Feces and all that they wash them down and throw them back down there. I said even at that they had them in chains. And if they could get their hands loose they would grab some of those overseers and choke them to death. I said they resented slavery even on the Middle Passage. Some of them jumped overboard. So I was teaching it very vivid and one girl told me, well, I don't see why that was so bad. They were used to being naked in the country they came from. Of course, I said, "Dear, you must have seen



too many Tarzan pictures. You have the wrong view of the media or books or something has messed you up. No, if you go back and study the history of Africa you'll find they're a high civilization." And I said, "What was the purpose of stripping a person naked anyway?" I said, "Suppose somebody walked in here in this room right now and we're sitting in this class and they walked in and put a gun on us and said every one of you strip naked. What would you do?" I said, "I know what I'd do. I'd start at my shoes and I'd come on up." I said, "A person with a gun controls you. And that's why they kept guns." I said, "The masters slept with guns under their beds, under their pillows or down beside their beds, the gun controls. Without the guns they could not have held them." Well, you know, they squirmed, they screeched. Oh, I had a ball teaching. You can gather that because I really had, oh, "Who contributed most to the American Revolutionary War? Samuel Adams, Ben Franklin, George Washington, or the black soldiers?" "We ain't never heard nothing about the black soldiers." "Well, they fought in the war." People in the New England states that were in the war they were going back home when they got tired of fighting. They didn't make any money anyway. And the slave masters sent the blacks, their slaves, to fight and they got the little money. The slaves didn't get any money. George Washington needed manpower and when the people in the North, those New England soldiers started deserting him, he didn't care what color they were. So the black soldiers definitely filled in a gap for the need of manpower. Can a war be fought without men? Samuel Adams was the instigator of the war. Had it not been for him I don't think we'd had an American Revolution. Benjamin Franklin was a diplomat in France and George Washington was the leader and the black soldiers became the



manpower. Who contributed most? You can't fight a war without people. You can imagine the white children just turning and squirming. I had a ball. I would give points for looking at *Roots*. "Well, my mother said we got to go out to a steak dinner tonight but I'm going to stay at home, Mrs. Goree. I'm going to see it if you're going to give me the points." I went downstairs. I went in my bedroom. They looked at *Roots* all the way because they wanted the grade. So it was quite a challenge.

The last thing I want to tell you is three episodes I had I will remember and I hope you will send me the tape back because I need to record it. One was, one, two, three, four and I'm through. One of the incidents I remember very vividly was a girl, the same girl, two things she told me and she was one of my favorite white students. Had no problem with her. I was teaching about Hubert Humphrey's death. I said, "You know white people always say it's a good nigger somewhere. I said but we have our sayings too. We say some good white folks. Hubert Humphrey was a good white man." Hubert Humphrey was dead at the time. I said Hubert Humphrey was a good white man and he was a senator and he did much for the civil rights struggle at the time. "My daddy said, Mrs. Goree, if he had his way he would have taken his gun and shot in the television during his funeral." I said "Oh, really?" I said, "Well, I guess your daddy had a right. It was his television and his gun if he wanted to shoot." That's the way I ended it. Same girl came back and told me, "You know, Mrs. Goree, we were up in Memphis. We went to Memphis over the weekend." "Ya'll did, you did?" "Yeah, we saw them black folks standing out there at the Lorraine Motel and that motel where Dr. King was shot and my daddy told me 'Ooh, they standing out there, I guess they expect him to resurrect from the dead or come back again the way

they're standing up looking at that motel." I said, "Maybe they were looking for him to come back." I said, "The same thing happened when y'all went to Graceland. I figured y'all might be looking for Elvis Presley to come back again too."

KH: [Laughter] How did she react to that?

CG: Nothing more was said. I wanted to say Robin, tell your daddy that. I wanted to say Robin, tell your daddy that. Talking about the black folks was looking up at the Lorraine Motel and then her dad. I said I guess that's the same thing happens when you go to Graceland. People around there, I guess they're looking for him to come back too.

The other episode I want to tell you about, one, two, three. I was teaching a class in Reconstruction and the birth of the Klan, you know, Tennessee and then Indiana, two places where you had the resurrection. Started in Tennessee and then they rebirthed in Indiana after World War I. So I was talking about the rebirth of the Klan and the purpose of the Klan and so forth and a girl left a Klan paper on my desk. And I knew who the student was. She was a white girl. I knew she left it there. I let it stay right there. I looked at it, glanced through and see what they were talking about and I just let it stay there for a while. Then one day when her class came in I said somebody accidentally left this paper on my desk. I don't know what they want me to do with it. And I threw it in the wastebasket. So that was my Klan episode. That was Klan one episode. Klan two episode, I was teaching, I think I told you that one. I was teaching about the Klan. This was another class, another year maybe. I said you know what, I said a Klan, that's something else. I said I was going to the mall the other day and a white woman was standing up there with all that white thing and a

white dunce cap on her head or whatever that thing is. And I said she was standing out there in the middle of the thing with her flag and collection of something, bucket of something. I said I could have understood it but she was an ugly white woman. And when I called that white woman ugly the class went into stitches. I said, "That was an *ugly* white woman." I didn't say woman. I said, "She was an *ugly* white woman." After the class here comes a little shy boy walking up to me. "Mrs. Goree." I said, "Yes, Don." "I didn't like what you said about the Klan." I said, "You didn't like it." "No ma'am, I didn't like what you said about the Klan." I said, "What?" "I'm a member of the Klan." I said, "You are?" "Yes ma'am, we go up in the mountains up there in north Alabama and we practice target shooting. Every weekend or every other weekend we go up there." I said, "You do?" I said, "Well, that's nice." I said, "I want to tell you the Klan have a right to United States law as long as they do not harm individuals, do not violate the law. Every organization has a right to exist and the Klan has a right to exist." I said, "Now you know I don't have any problem with that." Child! That was the first time I had backed down from a white student and the last time. I backed down from that little boy when he told me they went up in the mountains shooting on the weekends and he was a part of it. I did not want them coming to my house burning that cross in front of my door. I patted him on his shoulder and told him you know, I said you know, "I have no problem with you. You've got a perfect right to be a member of anything you want. This is a free country." Holy smokes, I did not challenge him. I bet you that. I didn't bother him because I could see that child getting his little Klan folks coming down to my house finding out where I lived and just burn a cross in front of my door. Crazy folks, you

see. They're not over with it because after that they killed a boy down in Mobile. I done forgot when it was but I was at Woodlawn High School from 1969 until 1989 so I was there a long time.

Last episode I had with a student and this one is the one I think I told you about I've got to tell it wherever I go. Vietnam War was over, migration and people coming in on the boat, migrating fast. Here comes a whole Vietnam family in the vicinity where I was teaching. The school is almost black then but we had two students, I had the oldest daughter and then there was a younger daughter. Ann was the oldest girl's name and the name was so long they gave her a short name. I think their names were, I can't recall the English names they received. It was something like Wooten maybe, a short name. And the head of the history department, not the one that really disliked me, this was another white woman head of the history department. I eventually got to be head of the history department before I retired. I had three white heads and I was the fourth head of the department. I was the first black head of the history department. I retired as head of the history department. But anyway, I was head of the history department when this child, no, I wasn't because the lady came and asked me, the head of my department came and asked me, said, "Miss Goree, we have a little girl from Vietnam and she needs credit for American history where she can graduate on time. Will you teach her American history on your off period?" I said yes, I'll be happy to. So Ann and I, I was just kind of like tutoring her because in my off period she didn't have a class. And we sat there and I taught her American history and she told me about her homeland. She sang her national anthem. She told me how they got out of Vietnam, how her uncle was a pilot in South Vietnam and how they

had to run and leave everything. And she longed to go back. She was lonely. She told me about her grandmother who couldn't speak English and her mother. Her father and her uncle, her uncle had been a pilot and her father had been a professor or something. But they lived well in South Vietnam. And Ann and I just learned to love each other. And I told her about the importance of learning English, you know, and the Constitution. I taught American history the best I could, especially government. Most of the history was on government. Rather than history of the country itself it was government. And I would say you're going to learn to love this country and she was like any other person would be, having to leave their homeland. It just wasn't fascinating to her because it was such a difference, you know. I gave her her grade and I just enjoyed meeting her family. When my mother was in the hospital I looked up her father and her uncle, her uncle's cousin. It was about five or six Vietnamese came in the room where my mother was and they brought her flowers and told her they loved Mrs. Goree and Mrs. Goree was so good to Ann. My mother looked and said "Woo, where all those people came from, all them foreigners coming here?" I said, "That's Ann's father. That's Mr. Nguyen." Mr. Nguyen, that's the name they used, Nguyen. I said that's Mr. Nguyen. Well, Ann finished Woodlawn and she went into secretarial science and business school. Teresa finished Woodlawn and she became a nun. That was her sister. I see her sometime on TV. She went into that nun thing where you don't come out. You don't go out in the community. She's in the nun convent. That's the good word.

KH: Convent.

CG: Yeah, she's in a convent. So one day I decided I wanted to call Ann. I hadn't heard from the Nguyens. I hadn't seen Mr. Nguyen since my mother died and I was going to call Ann and I looked up every Nguyen in the phone book until I found her. I said, "Ann." "Yes." I said, "This is Mrs. Goree." "I do not know you anymore." I said "Ann, this is Mrs. Goree, you know, Mrs. Goree who taught you." "I do not talk to you anymore." I said, "How's your mother?" "Fine." "How's your daddy?" "Fine." I say, "You don't talk to me anymore?" "No. I'm getting ready to go to San Francisco and marry. I'm moving to San Francisco." I said, "Well, how's Teresa and Pete?" "Fine." I said, "All right, Ann, I wish you well." And boy, did my girls, my family fell out at me. Said, "I guess Ann found out you were black and you know you're black, now Ann has nothing to do with black folks, here?" Told me I do not talk to you anymore. I do not talk to you anymore.

KH: Do you think she has more race prejudice now or that she learned it since she left school?

CG: I don't know. In San Francisco I dare not say but it shows you how discrimination creeps in on foreigners. And all of that warmth in the family and all of that and how we just, she sang her anthem to me and I'm teaching her the Star Spangled Banner and the Pledge of Allegiance, all the little things that you teach, you know, in government and American history, getting her ready for her hopefully her citizenship papers. I have no idea. Care less, no hard feelings. When you're black, you're black. Don't ever forget it. You know, just of them things. I always see myself as a teacher but I'm black first and I always was the black teacher, you know.

• No hard feelings. I accept it.



Last one I had and I just loved her to death and I've got to find her mother. Her father was a pilot. They were Iranians and they used the word, Gloria would always say Iranians. And I would say "eye-ray-nians," you know. But they were from Iran and her father was the pilot for the shah of Iran. And when he had to leave the country they ousted him, her father [was] the pilot of the plane. They came to Alabama and Gloria said we got money. So I had to teach her. It was three of them, the mother and the father, and they were Bahais and I went to all of the Bahai religious affairs because Gloria invited me and Gloria when my -- who died? I think it was when my mother died -- when my mother died, she came and brought me cake and flowers. Of course, their last name was Kavans. The Kavans knew me and so I learned quite a bit about Bahai things and life to Gloria, no discrimination but it was just a joy to teach her. All three of them became doctors. Last I heard from Gloria she was getting ready to go to med school. I said, "Gloria, when you going to get married?" "I don't know. I just don't know." I said, "You looking for an Iranian?" "No, I want to marry a white man. I want to marry a white man." I said, "Ooh, yes ma'am." I said, "Well, that's right. This is a free country." I didn't check her on it but white is right. All my experience with foreigners I end up hearing that they want to become Americanized with white people, you know. The sad thing about Gloria, the last I heard about the family, I have a friend who's Bahai and I tease him all the time about being Bahai. How in the world, man, you're going to die and go to hell, you know, one of those things. But last he told me about Gloria's family that her father had been killed. They hunted him down.

KH: People from Iran?



CG: Yeah, some of the Iranians who still had it in for him. You know that was at the time when Carter, I mean you read about it when Carter had trouble and they held people hostage over there. So this is left over from that and their resentment for him. So some of them Iranians found him. They eventually killed him. But I met her mother and father and Gloria said, "We got money. We got plenty of money, Mrs. Goree. My father was a pilot for the shah." And you know the shah turned Iran into, Americanized it, you know, western civilization took off all Islam's, the things were all replaced and all of that you know. I hope I'm using the right word. Yeah, he was a shah?

KH: I think that's the right word.

CG: Yeah and wasn't they the ones who took over Khomeini? He's the religious leader you know. He took over after Komeni.

KH: I don't know.

CG: Yeah. So my experience teaching, I have no regrets. Taught on college level after I retired from Woodlawn. I guess if I get to heaven and I can't teach, I don't know. George Bell said I'll turn around. [Laughter] "Goree, if you get to heaven and you can't teach you're going to turn around." I said I might do that. So the joy of teaching and the joy of living in the United States, all of my bitterness is gone now. I think I told you I had to go to Russia before I got converted.

KH: I don't think you did tell me that.

CG: I didn't tell you that?

KH: Un-uh.

CG: My blackness was watered down, my blackness, some of my militancy and my resentment of white folks was really watered down when I went to the Soviet Union. I went into Russia by myself. I missed my tour. I was on a tour. I was at the University of Alabama-Birmingham getting my master's degree and they had a tour going to Russia, my history class. So I thought I could get on this tour and get a better grade in history and won't have to do the term paper. So I'm going to take advantage of going to Russia. There were only two blacks on that tour. That didn't mean anything. I hate that only, you know, should have been more but we were maybe the only two in the class. They said we're leaving at, we had orientation and oh, I was ready. They really did a good job of preparing us to go into Russia because Dr. Smith, he loved to make tours to Russia. That was my professor. So he had us oriented and ready to go and I had the itinerary and the plane leaves Birmingham at twelve o'clock PM. Be at the municipal airport at twelve o'clock PM. I'm standing up at Woodlawn High School at twelve o'clock teaching and I'm going to catch the plane out that night. Lo and behold, twelve o'clock PM is twelve noon. Everybody on the plane gone but me. And my daughter, oh, you have your master's degree and you don't know the difference between PM and AM. But anybody said PM to you [you think] night automatically.

KH: They should say noon.

CG: Yeah, should have said noon. But that PM if you aren't thinking carefully PM really, with us PM means night. Evening, noon, evening, morning, noon, and evening or morning, noon, and night, you know, and that PM just really threw me off. So I said, I called the tour company, I missed the tour leaving

Birmingham such-and-such tour number. I'd like to have my money back. We do not refund money. We will guide you and you will catch up with your tour. We will tell the people and we will guide you all the way in til you meet them. So I went into Russia alone, by myself, nobody looking like me, on that flight through Fin Air. Last person I saw black was in New York. I got on Fin Air that was going through Helsinki, Finland. Got into Finland and it's the same day. All them white folks in Helsinki going skiing and walking their dogs. I'm looking around, ain't nothing looking like me but me. Lost, suitcases looked like I was coming from outer space, had so many suitcases, coats, prepared for the cold weather in Russia. Caught the trolley, got off at the ( ) motel in Helsinki. Sat down there, went to the desk. I'm doing flight out of here at midnight. I'm sorry the plane doesn't leave on Sunday out of here going to Russia. We have no flight going out on Sunday. You will have to catch the train. It's Sunday. You go to this station and get in the train station and it's just like a carnival there. All them people from Helsinki, found one girl could speak English and she came up and told me where the things are, you know, where to put my luggage, the lockers were. So I locked up my luggage and my coats and things in the locker and sat in the train station, read a little bit, looked around. Only English speaking people were the people at the desk, you know, where the tickets were being sold. Your train doesn't leave til twelve o'clock midnight. I got to sit in Helsinki til twelve o'clock at night. By that time here come a gypsy, old gypsy, white man or whatever them gypsies look like, and he followed me everywhere I went. He just gazed at me. I went downstairs for some refreshments and looked up he was standing there. I sat down here I looked on the back he was sitting over there. He followed me

everywhere and I was scared to death. I don't know why that man followed me. Last time I saw him was twelve o'clock at midnight, I was getting on the train and I don't know which way he went when I got on the train. Got on the train twelve o'clock at night on that train and girl, they were still in their uniforms then. The Soviet Union, Nixon had just gone over there to open it up, you know, and everything. They still had on their uniforms and they put me in something looked like I guess it was supposed to have been a private little coach but it was one little bed in there and they had Army blankets on it and old dark curtains and a little dim light and here they coming in checking my bags and I was scared to death. My parents and my husband didn't know where I was, children didn't know where I was, and I'm going all the way in by myself. And they couldn't speak English and I just opened the suitcase and handed it to them. They were searching your bags. Got up that morning, tried to sleep, couldn't sleep, the time I saw daylight and I heard the people talking, they had a little place on the train and very crude train, you could stand on the outside. I saw the people out there, the Russian people out there skating and children were everywhere so somebody said school was out. I got off in Leningrad and they said, "Oh, Cleopatra, we've been waiting on you. Your tour group is in hotel, Hotel Victoria or hotel something." It wasn't no Victoria. They don't have Victoria Russia. Hotel Leningrad maybe, it was a Russian name but I was in the city of Leningrad. Got to the counter there I asked for the tour. They're out to lunch. Still by myself, they're out to lunch. I recognized some of the places going over the river and all of the things that I had learned about for orientation. I recognized them so I sat up there, there I was with them deep red curtains and a bathroom tub you step up in and you know in Europe

they had toilets to flush you pull the string. Don't drink the water in Russia. My water was getting low I had in my suitcase. Had waste half of that. Don't brush your teeth with the water because they have a parasite there. I'm sitting there just waiting. Went back downstairs and I asked has this tour group gotten back in from lunch yet. No, they're at hotel such-and-such a place.

KH: You were in the wrong hotel?

CG: Wrong hotel. I finally caught up with them and all of them were "Oh, Cleopatra, we're so glad, girl, where have you been!" I said, "Don't ask me no questions, no questions, no questions. I'm tired." We're on our way to Katherine's Palace. I threw down my suitcase and luggage and things and I went on to Katherine's Palace. By that time I had lost my camera so somebody had to take me back and find my camera. Left it at the hotel. I was so exhausted. They said we are going to a Russian circus tonight. I said good night. I don't want to see no circus. Just let me rest. But I got in Katherine's Palace and I was so exhausted. Look like I just wanted to throw up I was so tired. When I got back, very interesting tour. I really enjoyed every minute of it. But when I got back, I got to Russia I saw how the people lived there. Very excellent tour of Moscow and Leningrad and had the food, no salads. Closest thing I came to a salad was some green onions chopped, a lot of, oh, I can't think of the kind of food but the food that you wrap and you cut it and all this cream run out. They had a lot of heavy cream. Chicken, what you call it? Chicken, it's a French name for it.

KH: I can't think of it right now.

CG: It's kind of like a croquette but it's chicken.

KH: And it has cream inside?

CG: Yeah. You know what I'm talking about. It's a French name for it. My daughter would know the name. Hey, when I forget I make other people forget. But some kind of old soup they had out of I don't know what it was. The food was terrible. I'll say again if I ever go to Europe I would carry peanut butter and jelly or some cheese or something. Everything was rich and the shopping there was terrible. You had to get in three lines to shop. It was quite an experience. I think the thing that really convinced me I saw the white women out there shoveling that snow. They were shoveling snow like men on trucks, not eighteen wheelers but the huge dumping trucks and they were wrapped up in their boots and out there shoveling snow. I said now look, if them white women here shovel snow in Russia what would they do for me and black? I don't want no part. They treat white folks like this shoveling snow, I don't have to shovel no snow in Birmingham. Lord, have mercy, look at them. Then you get on the elevator and they didn't know what soap and deodorant.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

KH: You were talking about leading the Red Cross Club and you said that only poor white and black students were in it. Do you think that the affluent white students didn't want to join anything with a black teacher as the sponsor?

CG: It wasn't so much my sponsorship as much as it was identity of being accepted by their peers. When I had to be the head of the history department the school was gradually turning black. I never did get really fully get the smartest children because they were honors society people and I had children that came to me



as freshmen and sophomores and once they got in the honors society they dropped the Red Cross. So they were always not really, it was not my sponsorship as much as it was identity purpose. But children who worked in Red Cross, they loved it because it gave them a chance to participate in some kind of school activity. Being head of the history department I really, really got a chance to elevate all students so to speak. Twice I was able to use white students in my auditorium programs. I had Martin Luther King birthday. I had a Red Cross program. I had United Way program. I had black history, Martin Luther King birthday, Red Cross, and United Way. So I had four assembly programs every year and it was to the point that students in order to get on the stage everybody wanted to be in a program. I took the stage, and again I go back to George Bell. He said the stage was built for children. It was a learning tool for students. Therefore, he had very few guest speakers. He did not allow teachers on the stage at all. He said it was not for you to showcase as a teacher. It was for the students so he promoted students. And I had that same concept. So children who never had the advantage of being on an auditorium program were able to participate. I had two students when I had a black history program talking about the, I had two white boys who said they didn't mind it and they spoke as the senators, one senator and a man in the house of representatives that fought so hard for the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments, Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens, Sumner.

KH: Charles Sumner.

CG: Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens, I had two students to speak for them as champions of the rights in American and the addition of thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments. So I used them. I can see their faces now. I had another

boy. I think I told you about that. Somebody had to always sing on one of my programs and, of course, the best soloist would sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" for the black history program and Martin King's birthday. Always on Martin King's birthday or black history it was "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Lift Every Voice and Sing." On one of the programs I had to use "The Star Spangled Banner" so I asked a white boy in the choir would he sing. I said, "Now, the stipulation is you must sing vocal," a cappella, that's a better word. "You must sing a cappella. I don't want any music. And you must sing all of the verses to The Star Spangled Banner." "I'll be glad to do it, Mrs. Goree." So he was white. Wherever he is today he knows I remember the day he stood on the stage and sang all three verses of The Star Spangled Banner and he was white. So if you wanted to participate now I didn't have any problem. But if you didn't I didn't force white students on the program.

My United Way program I enjoyed that better than anything because I used [to have] even some special ed. students there. I had three students who had hearing problems that could not hear. They used sign language but I had them to speak in sign language and somebody interpret what they said. So they were on the stage. And one of my coworkers teases me. "Mrs. Goree, you got the blind, the lame, the crippled, and everybody on that program." I said, "You shut up. They're little children's programs." So we had a huge program for United Way. And I just, one of my hearing impaired students was drowned and I saw it in the paper and I just had a fit. I always carried his picture in my purse because he just won my heart and he couldn't hear. But just he loved me and I loved him. Now how I managed -- see they had an interpreter in the classroom with them and she was a warm person. She was a white

lady and her son had a hearing problem and he had gone to, what's that school specialized for the blind? Is it in Washington? They just had it here in the institute. I can't remember anything. You'll know the name. That's that special school well known.

KH: Maybe you'll think of it later.

CG: Well known school for the blind, very popular, one of the oldest so she wanted to encourage these children to go too but she had no success. But Ronnie was just my heart. The other boy was a playboy. He couldn't hear but boy, did he pimp when he walked and the girls liked him and he was just a charmer. And I think they, you know, learn to read lips too to a certain extent so that was a joy.

Ask me, I have taught a little bit of everything. Taught Head Start too so, name it, I've just been teaching. I didn't do but forty years, just forty years. That was from Head Start to college level. Sure did. Anything else you want to ask me?

KH: Well, I was thinking about how you had such strong relationships with your principals in school and then at Ullman. Did you have any relationship with the principal at Woodlawn?

CG: Yes, had a very good relationship with the last one, no, one of them especially. He was about my age group and he was from the old school. The other two were younger and they were just there because they were young enough for me to have taught them. And I think the other white principals kind of resented my authoritative [attitude], you know, telling folks what to do. See, I was kind of an elder figure over them and I would make suggestions and young white principals, I'm the principal. "You don't tell me." But my very favorite principal, I had a very good

relationship with him. He was very kind to me. In other words, Kim, I think the Lord really sent me to that school because [without] the kindness eventually shown by the principal and the office staff, I couldn't have survived. I had an ailing mother. My youngest daughter was ill and then my husband was ill. So I'm in and out of school and especially with my mother. She took ill at home and I had to leave the classroom right then. No words were said. They were so understanding. If I would leave the hospital coming to school, if I was late, no reprimand. They made my work just beautiful, you know, as far as having illness in a family. Very gracious, very kind, never called me in for anything I didn't do. The only thing I come short of one time and I apologized to him because I knew what George Bell had taught me. His name was Homer Wesley, my favorite white principal, Homer.

KH: When was he at Woodlawn?

CG: Woodlawn, yeah.

KH: Was this in the '80s?

CG: '80s, yeah, '70s through '80s, late '70s and '80s. The last two were young. One, the second one maybe, he used me to do some writing and then after he, no, he used me to recommend him for a job because he had been a coach. "Mrs. Goree, will you write a letter for me to become principal?" I wrote it and everything and then when he got ready to recommend somebody for evaluation he found another teacher. He didn't use me as head of the department. But in the meanwhile I was one of the teachers had recommended him to become a principal.

But Mr. Wesley, Home Wesley was just a jewel to work for. Only had to reprimand me once. During the holidays the parents would entertain. The PTA would

bring refreshments all day long for the students. I mean the teachers, the faculty. And this was when school was predominately white. All the white ladies would come in. They had the little things and all the teachers would come down anytime during the day because they had refreshments. I decided to leave out during a class period. Before I could get to the teachers lounge to get my refreshments a black boy had jumped on a white boy and mopped the hall with him out of my classroom, fight. And don't you know I knew better? George Bell told me never to leave the classroom. My black principal had told us all, you know, brainwashed me. I knew better than to leave that classroom and I took that chance and he called me in. And I didn't tell him I went for refreshments. I told him I really had an emergency. I had to use the restroom. It was an emergency otherwise I would have been in the classroom. I bet I didn't leave a classroom after that. Never leave a classroom filled with children unless you have to because you never know what's going to happen. But that black boy mopped that, jumped on that white boy before I could get down there good. But I never did tell him I was going down there for refreshments. I just told him it was an emergency and I apologized for it because I was very much aware that I shouldn't have left that classroom. If I made a mistake, I have always been willing to accept discipline, you know. If I'm right I stand up and tell you I'm right but if I'm wrong I'm not going to challenge you, not my superior, you know. I'm not going to challenge authority. But if I'm right I'll tell you and still I learned with age not to be rebellious against it. In a nice way, I'll tell you what I want you to know. Only if somebody carried me to the principal -- there's a boy, he was Jewish. Last name was Levine. That's a Jewish name. Great big old huge, big fat, he said I discriminated against him. I told Mr.

Wesley it's nothing wrong with that boy but he doesn't want to get his lessons. I said I have no discrimination. I don't know anything about discriminating against Jews. I said, "By the way, Mr. Wesley, has anyone else come down and told you I have discriminated against them, or he or she, him or her? Has anyone told you I discriminated against him or her? I don't discriminate against, I teach." I told him, "There's wrong but he don't want to get his lessons. I apologize that he thinks I'm discriminating against him." He was through with it. He didn't say anymore. He just called me in because the boy went to him. And you know, white people are white people. I told him there's nothing wrong but he don't want to get his lessons and that was all that was wrong with him. Maybe he didn't like black folks. I didn't know but I didn't go in to know, to say he had resentment against me or something like that, I didn't even go that route, you know.

Life has been good, you know, regular white folks, it's all right. I don't hate white people. I really don't. I think there's some good people everywhere but I know they're white just like they know I'm black. They would never feel what we feel. It's impossible. They don't know anything about discrimination until somebody discriminate against them and they holler. They couldn't be black a week. But still we are fighting towards acceptance and that's just a reality. I don't know whether we're going to have to be bitter about it but right now history has just reversed itself.

KH: Do you think that desegregation helped to make acceptance more likely?

CG: I think desegregation was good for us because it took us out of the frame of "I can't do, I can't go." Now that's an advantage. But acceptance, I'm not sure, because even on your college campuses that's why people are still talking about



affirmative action. Social acceptance is just a hard thing. People like their own kind. You can be accepted and you can find genuine people, you know. It's still a personal thing. But I wouldn't want to go back to segregation, not at all. I'm very happy that we have come this far in the United States that we are not discriminated against by law. Now social acceptance and economics, religion, that's a private thing. Not but so far you're going to get. You can join a white church. If too many black people join they're just gone. They just can't take it. And they can join our church. They can stay long as they want to stay. But it's just something about social settings. So I think they accept you according to your abilities maybe. I think they do. They accept your ability and your character. But frankly speaking I think we have to stay a step ahead of them. We have to be just a little better. We can't afford to do the things they do and get by because they're in the majority. They don't have to take the insults. And if they're discriminated against, they can go somewhere else. They even have a freedom of movement more than we have. Look how long I've been in Birmingham all of my life. How many people you meet, whites, have been here, there, and everywhere? Maybe you've traveled a little more than I did because did you tell me your parents were in service?

KH: My parents were in the Air Force.

CG: You got a chance to maybe travel just a little, be exposed and not make it in one place such a long length of time.

KH: In the early part of my life, yeah.

CG: Settling down now that your parents are retired so you can kind of establish home. But see we didn't have that advantage. Black people were pretty

much caught up. Wherever their jobs were they stayed, but not so with them. Look at the life of white people when you watch the life of certain people and they've quit school and they went here, they went there. They are so free. They are free. They have no inhibitions. You can't jump up and say I'm going to New York tomorrow. You've got to be very daring, strong. You need some connections, some kind of base, somebody to connect with. They go and they don't know anybody. They don't have to know anybody. They're white. And that's the reality of our country, you know. It's a reality. I'm not happy with the past, the way we were treated. I'm not by any sense happy with it. But then since I'm not as bitter as I was I know that economics is more important than anything in the history of mankind I think. The distribution of wealth determines the history of a country, how wealth is distributed. And I just feel like, you know, the basis of slavery was economics and I'm not going to turn loose of that laboring force. That's economics. I'm not going to let go of it. Economics and we're still limited as far as the economy. They aren't going to let us get but so far in the economics system right now. You make millions of dollars and you still can't do what some people. You can't buy here. You can't buy there. Condoleezza Rice is talking about she wants to become a baseball or some kind of commissioner. It remains to be seen whether they let her in. You're talking about money.

KH: And she's Condoleezza Rice.

CG: Yeah, un-huh, yes she is, she's Condoleezza Rice. I think Oprah has beat the deal so far as acceptance. Now Oprah is accepted. I don't know how long it's going to last. And then white people believe that. They have accepted one or two. That doesn't mean the race is accepted. Sidney Poitier had to learn that. Lena Horne

had to go all the way back and renew herself because she saw so much discrimination. She had the talent. She had the beauty. She had everything America looked for but she had black blood in her. She couldn't do what Doris Day and all them folks did. But now Oprah, I guess she's accepted. She's a billionaire, you know, and they just love her. They loved her until she made "Beloved."

KH: Yeah, or "The Color Purple."

CG: I think they went to see "Color Purple" but that "Beloved" you know that's where the, what is that book? Beloved where the slave girl . . .

KH: She killed her baby to keep her from going back into slavery.

CG: And the girl came back. I don't know what the picture was about. I heard my daughter read "Beloved." They say the lady who writes, she's a confusing writer anyway, but you know, Oprah made that picture and white America did not respond to that picture at all. I don't know why they didn't. I think "Color Purple" went over much better. But you see, what you call it, Oprah didn't make that picture. Steve, what's his name?

KH: Steven Spielberg.

CG: Spielberg, that's a Spielberg production. Yeah, sure did. So I think maybe money make you accepted. I think they've treated her as royal as anybody could have been treated on that anniversary, her fiftieth birthday.

KH: It was something.

CG: Un-huh, it was beauty at the height. I mean she was treated like royal, Princess Di or somebody, you know. I don't know but Oprah knows, she knows how to just throw that charming personality on people. And I really can't give my true

feelings on tape, you know, about it all. But I don't know, I think social acceptance is something that's individual. You've got, you know, white kids dating black kids and all that stuff. It has been down through the years but it wasn't socially accepted. Now I don't think people even turn around to look at it. Then I'm not too sure about that because the skinheads raising and what's these other people, skinheads and Aryan, Aryan something they're coming back. I think that's pretty much what I'm anxious to talk about. Any more questions?

KH: No, ma'am. Thank you very much.

CG: You have been an excellent interviewer and you've laughed at me and my foolishness.

KH: No, that's not foolishness.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED JANUARY, 2005 BY CATHY MANN