

# **The Center for Columbia River History's Vancouver African American History Project**

## *Students Discovering History*

The students in the Vancouver African American History Project spent the first part of the project doing assigned background reading, attending workshops and listening to speakers, and visiting archives. In the second part of the project, they returned to the archives to research their particular topics, and conducted oral history interviews with community members. Below is the transcript of an interview that student Keri Conway and Project Coordinator Melissa Williams conducted with narrator Fannie Chatman. For more information, please contact Andrea Reidell, [Project Director](#).

Narrator: Fannie Chatman

Interviewer: Keri Conway and Melissa Williams

Location: Portland, Oregon

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Transcriptionist: Melissa Williams

Edited by: Melissa Williams

*[Begin side A, tape 1 of 1]*

KC: This is Kerri Conway. Today is April 26, 2001 and I will be interviewing Fannie Chatman at the Multicultural Senior Center in Portland, Oregon. Fannie, will you please state your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth.

FC: My name is Fannie Chatman and I'm from Shreveport, Louisiana, I was born and raised there. I attended school at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

KC: Can you tell me about your childhood in Louisiana?

FC: I'm the member of a large family; sisters, brothers, mother and father. My father was a minister so we grew up in a religious home. My parents were into education. They really intended that we all go to school, including college. They promoted education and when we would go from one grade to another it was just automatic that we would continue. There was no stopping because you were expected to go so you did go.

KC: Was that different from other families around you?

FC: I didn't know there was a difference until I moved away from it. By the time I realized the difference I had finished college and had come to the Northwest. We were doing a project and one of the girls said, "I won't be able to participate the next time because I've run out of money and I'll have to drop out of school." I thought and then I said, "You mean to tell me that parents don't send kids to school? What do they do?" It was under my impression that you went from one step to another. When you graduated from here you went some place else and it never dawned on me that the kids were responsible for their own education. Not all [kids were], but the ones I came in contact with; that was shocking to me.

KC: Was it hard for you to get your degree?

FC: No.

KC: What types of schooling have you had over the years?

FC: My first degree was a bachelors of science degree in home economics. Coming to the Northwest that wasn't a drop in the bucket because at that time they were not hiring any Blacks at all; then to go

into home economics at the high school levels was impossible. I also went to Portland State University and received a bachelors of science degree in elementary education. I went to University of Portland and received a master's degree in education, and at Oregon State University I have about twenty-nine hours in supervision because I was a team supervisor at one time for the Teacher Corps. Through that I got training at USC in teaching adults because that's what the program was all about.

KC: How old were you when you moved to Vancouver?

FC: Twenty-six.

KC: At the colleges was there a lot of diversity?

FC: Some.

KC: How was Vancouver different from where you grew up in Louisiana?

FC: Deceiving. I found that even though I knew a lot of people who were friendly, underneath there was a trust level and they didn't quite know how to react to me, and it was a new experience for me also. We got along well, but some of it was not genuine. As in all stages of life, you had some good and some bad.

KC: How did that make you feel?

FC. The people I was working with were very kind and they were good listeners so I felt comfortable. At first it was different because I was going to meetings and a lot of times I didn't know the purpose of the

meeting and they just said, "Show up. Come," because there were a lot of people who had never seen Blacks, so they said show up and I did. A few times I was at meetings and didn't know exactly what the meeting was about.

MW: What types of meetings?

FC: During the war time meetings more or less about children, families and getting them placed. There was a lot of social work to do and a lot of days when I left work I'd go out and visit the homes to check on the children and see if there were needs. It was not a part of the job but I did it out of concern and because there was a need for it, and I was asked to do a lot of visiting.

KC: Did people at the school try to help out in the community during the war?

FC: Yes, they did. We had what you call projects- McLoughlin Heights was one, Bagley Downs, Ogden Meadows- and they would have nursery or preschools there for families that worked in the shipyards. They had a high school program too where the buses would come around and pick up the high school kids and take them off. In doing that they gave the parents an opportunity to work in the shipyards, the children were cared for because it was a day and night nursery since the shipyards ran around the clock; day, swing, and night shift they could bring their children there. If the children needed to sleep over they could do that and they could have meals.

One experience we had was really good. Dr. Gaiser's daughter, Peggy, and Betty, who was the daughter of high school principal DeYoung, worked in our nursery school and they brought a lot too

because at that time those girls were in college and it was an experience for them. They could make money toward their school or whatever they wanted to do during the summer and have the experience of working with Black kids. In the nursery schools we did have quite a few of the Black kids, it was mixed, and these girls had a chance to work with them first hand. That was quite an experience on both sides, for the teachers and the kids as well.

KC: How many schools were around the Vancouver area about the time you moved here.

FC: I have no idea because it was new to me too and getting around to different places was an experience. One thing I experienced in coming out here, which is something I had not faced before, was the fog. At that time it was just so foggy and it'd get foggy early evening into the night and sometimes in the morning. Getting around wasn't that easy because they didn't have cars like they do now. Buses were a problem because you'd have to be out of town at three in the afternoon or you'd get caught there until after six; until that shift went off and the other shift on went on.

MW: How did you learn to get around?

FC: Just through experience and talking to others [to find out] what time you have to catch a bus. Once or twice I was caught in town [*laughs*], and couldn't leave until after six because I didn't catch the bus by three.

KC: You stated in your pre-interview that you were the first Black teacher in Vancouver. That had to be an experience, tell us about that.

FC: It was quite an experience for me, and experience for them. I think I learned a lot from them and they learned a lot from me; just to be around a Black person, to see my reactions and that I'm human, and I laugh when there are things to laugh about. It was the same for me just to work and associate with them. We had ideas that were similar, some that were not, but we didn't have to fight over them. It went quite well.

KC: Did you ever notice any problems between the students.

FC: They were little children, so just children type problems. At that age I just imagine a lot of their aggression they didn't show because the only thing that I could see was that the Blacks were fascinated with the White kids' hair, and the White kids were fascinated with the Black kids' hair, you'd just see them rubbing their hair. As far as any conflict, they were just children.

KC: Were there any problems between the teachers?

FC: I imagine. I didn't know of any personality differences or any great thing that happened that wouldn't happen with anybody. After I was there a few months there was another Black teacher who came- the other Blacks were housekeepers, they were not certified teachers- and everything went fine. In most cases you'd find a lot more Whites than Blacks. For years you could just count the Blacks on one hand. When you're talking about number, the Whites outnumbered the Blacks completely because when I first went to Vancouver there were no Blacks but me.

KC: Did you ever notice any problems at all between members of the community or parents?

FC: I'm sure there were some because parents are going to be fussy about their children, but I never had to settle any differences. We had a supervisor and if there was any conflict of any great nature I'm sure she took care of it, or took it to the right sources.

KC: How long did you teach in Vancouver?

FC: Two years.

KC: Where did you go after Vancouver?

FC: I taught nursery school; kindergarten with Blessed Martin Day Nursery here in Portland.

KC: Why did you move to Portland?

FC: Because the war ended and we decided to live in Portland. We didn't go back to Louisiana.

KC: Why didn't you?

FC: Well, we thought about financial differences. My children [would have been] college-age paying out of state fee; it [would have cost] a great deal of money to move back and get established and get them in school, so that was one of the great things. Everybody was saying, "Well, all of the great schools are here, so why go back [to Louisiana]?" So we

decided to stay, we liked it, the children liked it and they got along fine in school here.

KC: How did you meet your husband?

FC: We were raised in the same town and I met him just going and coming. I went to college planning to come back with a ring on my finger but he was already out of home and the ring was there. We hadn't start dating until I was a junior in high school, but he had been trying to see me when I was about eleven or twelve years old. My senior year in high school we did, but he was in college then, I was with a college boy [laughs].

MW: What year did you move to Vancouver from Louisiana?

FC: 1943. We married and we came out here and this has been our home, we like it. We left Louisiana with the intention of going back but we didn't. We've had some rewarding experiences since we've been here.

MW: Did you have experiences with shipyard work?

FC: No, I never worked in the shipyard. When I came the interview was set up for me to go to the administration building and there Mr. Catterly (?) signed my contract for the school. I must have gone out to the shipyards maybe twice. I went out for the christening of a ship and I think I went out one other time. That just wasn't me, the shipyard wasn't me at all.

MW: Did you know people who worked there?



FC: Yes, I did. I knew quite a few but social life [in Vancouver] at that time was very little. We were not night-clubbers, although I guess people did go to clubs. I remember one night we decided we would go to a dance or something and the children were going to stay over at the nursery all night, but we left the party and came home. We just could not be away from the children. We didn't want them staying the night so we went to the nursery in the middle of the night and picked them up [*laughs*] to take them home with us. Social life wasn't like it is now. If people were partying and going places we didn't know anything about it. I think in Vanport they had a lot of social life and activities, but we were in Vancouver.

MW: Where did you live when you moved to Vancouver?

FC: Bagley Downs on west Windler (?). It's kind of interesting to drive back over there and go some places, but most of them I don't recognize. Fourth Plain Village- I know we used to go through Fourth Plain going to Bagley Downs, but the area has grown up so now I wouldn't know it. When Bagley Downs closed we moved to McLoughlin Heights.

MW: Do you recall what year Bagley Downs closed?

FC: It must have been '45 or '46, it was along the end of the war when the shipyards closed. Bagley Downs was one of the last ones to close. It must have been maybe '45 because we moved to Portland in '46 and I was working for Blessed Martin, then I stopped and worked for Portland Public Schools and that's where I retired from.

KC: Where did your children go to school?

FC: My son and daughter went to Highland, it was Highland but it's Martin Luther King now. My son spent one year at Jefferson High, and Roosevelt in North Portland. My daughter graduated from Pacific University in Forest Grove. My son attended Reed College for three years and graduated from Portland State, then got a master's degree from the University of Portland. My son now is an engineer for IBM in San Jose. My daughter's teaching in a Portland Public School.

KC: What activities in the community were you involved in during the war?

FC: None except for meetings and that type of thing because there were no activities going on that I knew of. The shipyard was the main thing at that time in Vancouver, and if there were any activities going on we were not included. We would go to church and that was just about it and not too many church organizations would even meet at night, they were day meetings. You worked during the day and that was just about it. The shipyard was really the main focus that I could see was going on.

When I left Louisiana I left a highly social life and it was all different when I came here. There was no social life that I know of here, no clubs, no anything. Those of us who came from the South and from other places brought a lot of that with us- clubs, sororities, organizations- some things that had never been heard of out here. We were the pioneers of a lot of the organizations that have come to the Northwest. I missed the social life because that's what I was born and raised in. I don't know what else the people did out here.

KC: Was the church the most common place that people went to for social gathering?

FC: I think they went more or less for service because I can't think of too many social gatherings they had. There was the morning service and that was just about it. There were no sororities, there were no clubs, there was no anything. The children I dealt with were small, except for the high school kids, and I didn't know of high school kids having any great things because transportation played one part. They'd pick them up and take them to school but how would they get places at night?

KC: How long were you a teacher?

FC: A total of thirty-six years.

KC: Besides teaching, what else did you do?

FC: That's it.

KC: Now what activities are you involved in?

FC: Mostly Bridge now, that's just about it and we're slowing down with that. We attended the Nationals and all of the others. Three or four times a year we travel with that, and it's a lot of fun but as the days go by and you get older and older you don't do a lot of traveling, so we're putting that down now. But we still like Bridge because it keeps the mind active and you need an outlet, something to do.

I've never had cats before [*laughs*] so I think about raising some cats [*laughs*]. If you could see my deck- we have these cats who've just took up with us and the other day I had to pick them all up, get them spayed and their shots. About five cats in all. They need a home and food.

MW: What has your church experience been?

FC: I've been a Sunday school teacher, and now I'm a vacation Bible school teacher; mostly teaching. Teaching's more or less been my life and almost anything that has teaching as part then that's the role I play. Aside from that, just attendance.

MW: What churches have you attended?

FC: I've attended Catholic and a Methodist because my husband's Methodist. I've attended all, but I'm actually Baptist.

MW: Was there a Baptist church in Vancouver?

FC: I would say there were more congregational churches where they just brought everybody together and you worshiped in your own way. I don't think of any specific denomination at that time. I'm sure they have it all organized now and you go where you want. They would use a community building where someone would come in and give whatever message they had and people would just go.

There were all kinds of denominations and you had this one service at like eleven o'clock in the morning, no night services or anything. If you were going to church I think you just went. Come to think of it, what did they do at night? There was no night church. I think [the shipyard schedules] started the whole thing about just having church in the day time because when I grew up we had Sunday school, morning service, BYPU, and night service. In Vancouver we just had the one morning service at eleven o'clock. I'm trying to think of if they had an afternoon because of the people on swing shift, I don't know. I know they didn't

have it at night because hardly anything was open at night. Stores closed at five or six o'clock in the evening and that was it.

MW: Can you tell us about living in Bagley Downs? What was that like?

FC: You could just hear people walking all night long, it seemed like they were walking on gravel but it was different because I had not been used to apartment life.

*[End side A, tape 1 of 1]*

*[Begin side B, tape 1 of 1]*

FC: ... I'd never had an experience with coal or wood or anything like that and trying to get a fire started. We were trying to get a fire started and [neighbors] said, "You have to have kindling wood." "Well, what is kindling wood? How do you use this stuff?" The slack that came off of the coal would get on your clothes and everything and you could not get that stuff off. [The fire would] either be too hot because the fire's too big, or it wouldn't start at all. Then [I had to] try to cook on that.

The next thing was going to the grocery store. You could buy a lot of things but you had to go and get it; that was unusual because we used to order our stuff and they'd deliver it to your house, or you'd turn on the gas burner and there's the heat and you could cook. That was different. You're used to taking a bath in a tub and now we had showers, and what do you do for children? You can't put children in the shower so we got a big container, put it in the bottom of the shower, and the children got in there.

These are the kinds of things you just manufactured yourself. It was quite different. When I was going to come to the Northwest and they

said “apartments” I thought I’d be in a duplex. My imagination was there with paved streets. I never dreamed I would have to go and bring in groceries, go get kindling wood, go and bring in ice. Later on you could get deliveries, you'd pay them a dollar or two extra, but you still had to go and get it all lined up for them to bring it to you, you couldn't get on the phone and order. There was no phone service but we finally got a phone in Vancouver. Going to the doctor, that was unheard of. In Louisiana the doctor visited your house or you took an ambulance to go to the hospital. It was quite different.

MW: Was the housing segregated?

FC: No. I guess they had a place almost picked out for me because they knew where I was going to be placed, but I guess they asked where people wanted to live. We had a place just around the corner from the school where we were working right in Bagley Downs so it didn't make any difference with us. The only thing was, it was an upstairs apartment and I wanted downstairs so we just dropped right down [*laughs*] and that was it. The people that were above us and next door were very nice. The people above us were from Maryland and they knew all about coal and slack, and kindling and they really did help in trying to do these fires. I know you've never had the experience of using coal, but that's the way they did it in these big cities.

KC: Where did you live when you moved to Portland?

FC: We got an apartment on north Ross and was right by where the Memorial Coliseum and the Rose Garden are now; I think they've cut that little street out. We stayed there about six months and then we

decided we definitely were going to stay in Portland so we bought a home.

FC: What were the differences between Portland and Vancouver?

FC: Lots of difference because we had more Blacks coming in, more segregation signs going up, "We cater to Whites only." We had places that would turn you down if you would go and it was so different. It was a bigger city- more Blacks, Whites, and everybody. That's where the difference came in and that's where the organizations came in. A lot of the places you'd sit in and then you'd see the sign "We cater to Whites only." A lot of the places you could go and they would serve you if you were with White people but if you went in alone no service. That's when I think they organized the Urban League, NAACP, and different organizations that would come in to help the situation.

Then we got a lot of service organizations, and then the churches, different groups, social workers all worked with people to get us where we are today. You will still find that even though everything seems to be fine on the surface it is deceiving because you may think different than what really is. It seems alright on the surface when it really isn't and we found a lot of that to be. Sometimes in the South people knew where they stood, because at one point you would know "Blacks here, Whites there;" now that's all changing because of transportation and places are getting closer together. Here it seems like it's alright for Blacks to be here but it really isn't. Transportation has brought people, ideas, customs, everything closer together so now you'll find you can't tell what definite things go here and what's there. It's changing all over.

MW: I'm curious to know how you heard about Vancouver's need for teachers.

FC: I didn't. By accident. During war time the men either had to go to war or get into defense work. At that time my husband was principal of a school so he decided we'd see what defense work was like. He went down to talk with defense work representatives that would come in and talk about a particular area of defense. He went to this particular meeting and just by accident he had a cousin who lived in Oregon who came through; she was making a tour of the South and she stopped in Shreveport. During her visit there she visited with us.

My husband was saying, "Oh, I went down and talked with them about defense work. Tell me all about it," because we'd feared defense work because people left home and said they had no place to live, the housing was bad, no food. She told him there was plenty of housing out here, there was plenty of food but you had to get up and go get it. The housing situation was a crunch but she lived there and she worked for people who had a house or something in the back so she could stay on their premises.

She said, "If you're go into defense work they have places you can stay, the projects," and she went through all that and told us about it. He said, "I think I'll look into it," so he did and they told him that they had housing. He asked about education because our children were going to be brought up through the schools too, that's the only way we knew. They told him all about it and he thought he'd give it a try so he did and they gave him an idea because I knew I wasn't going to work in the shipyards, so he found out how to get to the administration building.

When he got here he did what he had to do and then found the administration building and talked with them. They said when I got here to come in and make an appointment. So that's the way we got in touch, his cousin just happened through. We came out and they put us up in what they called Hudson House, that was great. A real nice white



building [*laughs*], and when we got to Bagley Downs it was a little different [*laughs*], but Bagley was alright and some people thought they were great. I was looking for something different. That's the way we got to the Northwest and we live here, and my children live here, except my son's in San Jose.

KC: You worked for the Vancouver Housing Authority?

FC: Yes, I did, I worked there two years. I forgot that [*laughs*]. That was when the war first ended. They closed Bagley Downs and one of the supervisors of Bagley Downs remained because they hadn't closed down everything yet. Leo Randall, he was the greatest star. He graduated from the University of Oregon, he was a great football player, I guess. I was his secretary at Vancouver Housing Authority. When they closed Bagley Downs they had moved him to the place they have up there now, and he asked me to come be his secretary because the administration put him in [two places] and he needed a secretary. So I worked for the housing administration for two years and I liked that. That was the first time I'd worked for the government and worked there until they closed down just about [all the projects] because of the end of the war.

MW: Why did you like that work?

FC: Well, because there was no pressure and I was more or less in charge of the total building because he had two buildings, that's why he needed the secretary. I made his appointments and all of that. The hours were good, and they would have good days. When you worked that branch of the government, after you worked so many days you must take off two days or one day and I liked that. Every once in a while you'd get a day off [*laughs*]. It was pleasant, he was nice to work with.

KC: What did your husband do after the shipyards closed?

FC: He started working for the Urban League. Well, first he worked for the railroad for twenty years or so, he was a car inspector. He left the shipyards and went to the Urban League. The Urban League and University of Portland combined, and the University of Portland and Portland Public Schools combined, all of this was after the shipyard days.

KC: Did you get involved with the Urban League?

FC: Yes. I was a member of the Urban League Guild and a member of the Urban League, naturally a lot of my activities went that way because he was working for them.

MW: What kinds of things did the Urban League do?

FC: Oh, they sponsored job opportunities, fair employment, housing, all kinds of things like that. My husband was director of Educational Youth Incentive and they have quite a program. One of the programs he set up at the University of Portland they've been trying to start up again is called A Family Away From Home and that's where they place students with families. That seemed to work out really well, that was his program with the Urban League. Jobs, students loans, [he worked with] all those kinds of things. He has done some work with Portland State University too, but I don't know to what extent and that was not regular employment, he was just a very active person.

KC: Have you ever gone back to Louisiana?

FC: Yeah, I went back there two, three years ago. It's different. You always think of where you were raised as being home and I still call it home. They said, "Well, you've been in Portland longer than you have any place else. Why do you still call it home?" It is home to me, but it's so different. Going back for a visit is just heavenly, you see everybody- of course, everybody's almost gone now for age or sickness, and some have moved away. When you go back everything is just great, but they say once you *live* back all the glamour and everything leaves, but it's nice to go back to visit. After I've been anywhere two or three days I'm ready to come home.

KC: What was it like growing up in Louisiana during that time?

FC: It was fine for me and I enjoyed every bit of it. We didn't have opportunities like the girls do now. Now, some as soon as they reach eighteen are ready to move out, but where were we going? More or less you thought in terms of working to make a living. Most girls at that time married out of home, they didn't marry out of apartment or live with the person first. You lived with your parents and then when you were of age, and you were in love, and you wanted to get married then you got married and that's the way you got out of the home.

The girls now have so many more things that they can do, but the only thing we could hope for was a way to make good money, a decent living, and now you see the girls who are eighteen and even younger that that are moving out. Now they have a lot of types of work they can do, they're a lot more independent as far as jobs are concerned. Back then we were limited, and if you moved out of the home where would you go? [Laughs] If you married at eighteen your husband had to have a job, he couldn't just sit down, so what are you going to do? The expectation is

different. In our case you just went on to school, that was it. If you're not going to school it's odd because the thing to do is to go from one grade to another, and we weren't expected to do anything but go to school in my situation. You did the expected.

KC: Is there anything else you can tell us about Vancouver or Portland during the 1940s?

FC: It seems to me that so many people that I came in contact with were really interested in knowing and living with each other in a prosperous way. Naturally, a lot of people came out with the intentions of going back where they came from and they were trying to make all the money they could. Women and men working day and night, I thought sometimes to the extreme, but it seems like they were focusing on trying to establish a community where people could live together and get along. That seemed to be the focus at that time.

KC: Thank you so much.

FC: I hope it's helpful. I hope you really have success with your project and I would be interested in knowing how it comes out.

*[End of interview]*