

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 Project Coordinator Melissa Williams conducted with narrator Florine Dufresne. Student Mary Byrd sat in on the interview.

This transcript was extensively edited by Ms. Dufresne and thus differs from the original verbatim transcript. The original transcript is at the Center for Columbia River History office.

For more information about the Vancouver African American History Project, please contact Andrea Reidell, [Project Director](#).

Narrator: Florine Dufresne

Interviewer: Melissa Williams

Location: Vancouver, Washington

Date of first interview: April 11, 2001

Transcriptionist: Melissa Williams

Edited by: Melissa Williams and Florine Dufresne

[Begin side A, tape 1 of 2]

MW: I am Melissa Williams. Today is Wednesday, April 11, 2001 and I will be interviewing Florine Dufresne at her home in Vancouver, Washington. Florine, will you please state your full name, your date of birth, and place of birth.

FD: Florine Dufresne. October 11, 1907. I'm ninety-three years old. I was born in Vancouver, Washington in Hazel Dell.

MW: Will you tell me about your childhood?

FD: Yes. I want to say something about my childhood because I think it's very important that we understand how early children learn prejudice and hatred and disparagement of other people, and by the same token how they absorb the attitudes of their parents that are positive and good. My family was poor but my mother and grandmother had come here from St. Louis, Missouri where the work that my mother did as an attendant in a doctor's office gave her chances to meet many different kinds of people, and she had friends among all of them.

My grandmother, who had been teaching in college in the deep South at the time of Abraham Lincoln, had a background with pastors of what we call now the Christian Church or Disciples of Christ, and Methodists so they were a spiritually guided family. My grandmother married late in life. She had been associated with the anti-slavery movement and was clearly against slavery in the South where she taught. She was also pro-women's issues- voting, women's rights, all of these things that did not make her very popular with people. She was an intellectual person and taught French and painting at the university level.

Because of these family values she had been brought up with, there was no discrimination. Their friends were among what we called Colored people then, and also Jewish and Catholic. They just accepted people for their value as human beings.

I never can remember in my family as I grew up unkind gossip or comments about people. If my mother heard anything about anyone that was unpleasant, it stopped there. One morning a lively next-door neighbor of ours came over and said to my mother, "Mrs. Stone, have you heard..." and she started to say something about Mrs. So-and-so and my mother put her hand up and said "Mrs. Butterfield, I haven't

heard it and please don't tell me because if you do every time I see that person that's what I'm going to think about, so I don't want to hear anything about her." Mrs. Butterfield didn't try again [*laughs*]. That was my mother. She was very careful when we talked about people that we understand everyone has his own problems. I grew up in a family that I'm sure had stereotypes, but there's a difference between a stereotype and rejection of people because of their color or race.

World War II came in a town where we'd had only one person of color that I ever remember seeing, Major White. He is buried out here at the military cemetery I'm quite sure¹. He was respected and walked in all the Fourth of July parades. That was our knowledge of anyone of color, but we were still able to welcome the influx of people from the South. Valree Joshua experienced the rejection and also an effort to segregate the housing. I can remember some very positive good attitudes. Many people came here for jobs in this desperately poor time, after the "Dust Bowl" emigrations. During the war effort when Kaiser was building schools and houses to accommodate the influx of thousands and thousands of people to work in the shipyards, the city grew from 2,500 people into a large city.

My husband and I in 1936 had just founded the Vancouver Funeral Chapel² and he also had been elected coroner. I worked with him on all the music for funeral services. I worked in the office and met people and I can remember only his equal treatment of everybody. He hadn't been brought up in a prejudiced-free home but he had a very sensitive feeling about people. No matter what a person's color or background they received the same courtesy, the same sensitive help that all White people received. At that time I was young and had three children so we were very careful about their attitudes about people.

¹ No man by this name has yet been identified in the Vancouver Barracks Cemetery on Fourth Plain Boulevard.

MW: During the 1940s when all of these people who were not White came to this area, what would you say most White people in Vancouver felt?

FD: They never expressed it to me if they had adverse attitudes. I found that if you take a strong stand where you live that people usually don't share their negative opinions. Kaiser built schools to accommodate the influx of children- schools were integrated.

I talked to a school teacher who told me that the children of color in her school were certainly not wealthy, but their folks were there to work and maybe for the first time had better salaries. The teacher said that the children of color came to school washed, combed, braided, and in bright clean dresses and always wearing underwear and stockings.

In our place of business we were working with people during very difficult circumstances and I can remember my husband's sympathy and the help he gave to the very limit when they had to arrange transportation for someone who had died. There was never any neglect or pushing them aside, they all received the same quality care. Except for the set of circumstances I'll tell in a moment, that's the way I saw our lives shaping up with regards to race in that time. It was a pleasure to have new faces, new people, and for the first time to know people of color. It was not curiosity, but just a feeling of enrichment to be with them.

MW: Do you recall any businesses turning away Black people?

FD: Yes, I saw that up through the Civil rights Movement. We've walked out of restaurants that refused service to people of color. This is a sensitive story but I want to be sure it's told. From the time I was twelve

²The Vancouver Funeral Chapel was located at 112th E. 12th Street.

years old we had the same family doctor. He was our neighbor, he had gone to school with my oldest sister in high school, and he had been in the service as a Navy doctor. You are familiar with the name because it's Dr. Ralph Lieser. Lieser Road out in the Heights and Lieser School [are named after him because that] is where all the Lieser property was. They had a big farm between that area and the river.

Another doctor who built a new practice in gynecology and obstetrics, a church person and personal friend of ours, didn't accept any women of color in his office. He probably wasn't the only one but he was the only one I knew that just told them flatly, "We don't take care of women of color." My doctor, who was a long way from being a religious man, said he was shocked because he made house calls, and for families that were still too poor to go to the hospital he did home deliveries. He never turned anyone away.

As I said, Dr. Lieser did house calls where some doctors had discontinued house calls. He went out to homes in the Heights where they were segregated, I'm not sure if it was compulsory but they kept in basically divided neighborhoods. He would always go anywhere he was called. He had an African American woman from the South who had four or five children and she had gone to him during this pregnancy because she couldn't afford the hospital. This may have been before Kaiser had developed a hospital and she wanted to deliver the baby at home. She'd had all her children at home.

Dr. Lieser was called when the time came for the baby and he went. It was one of those unfortunate sets of circumstances where she had a baby that was very large, a nine pound baby, and probably in the wrong position. Dr. Lieser was alone and working with the mother. When the baby was born it showed no sign of life.

I visited the mother later and she told me that he worked with her baby for over an hour trying to resuscitate him. I visited her because he

had called me and told me about her. He said, “Florine, could you go and see her?” He knew my faith and he said, “You can say things to her that I don’t know how to say.” He gave me the address and I went to the house and this dear woman was there in bed. She was tearful but touched by the case.

She said “Our doctor worked here for an hour to try to bring life to our son. I saw this White doctor sitting on my bed beside me with tears rolling down his cheeks when he had to give up. In all my life I never could remember a White doctor crying over a lost Black baby.” She said, “It was a wonderful experience. God just blessed us all here.” I felt that this was a picture of Dr. Lieser’s life that was very important.

Dr. Lieser died in 1950; he had a heart problem and I think he was just sixty years old. *The Columbian* wrote an editorial about him saying if there ever were a war hero for this war it was Dr. Ralph Lieser whose concern had no boundaries, and who still made house calls regardless of whether people could pay or not. *The Columbian* said he was just as much a hero as any person that served in the war.

This story meant a great deal to me always because I don’t know many other doctors who were like him, I’m sure there were others; I know of one but it was a little later when we had the Mayor’s³ Commission on Open Housing.⁴ He was Dr. John Soelling and he’s

³ Mayor Ralph E. Carter who was elected in 1952 and 1954.

⁴ Florine writes: “The Kaiser Ship Building Corporation had purchased thousands of acres of farm land along the shore of the Columbia River for its shipbuilding operation and housing during World War II. Now that the war had ended, plans were made to convert the industrial and housing construction to peace-time use. The Vancouver Housing Authority opened the areas to private ownership. Many war time workers opted to return to the areas in the East and South from which they had come.

The mayor, Dr. Ralph Carter, and the City Council of Vancouver became concerned about possible neighborhood or personal rejection of occupation by people of color and that we might develop segregated areas for those who could not afford even medium-priced housing. The Mayor invited a group of Vancouver citizens to form the Mayor’s ‘Commission on Open Housing’ to facilitate the transition. About fifteen concerned citizens met every week to plan a

retired now but he has always worked on behalf of equal rights for people of all colors. That they should have housing to live in that was suitable and that they could afford, and not to shut them out anywhere. So I'm sure there were other doctors like Dr. Lieser, but that was the personal experience I had. In contrast of a doctor who thought first of his business and how he might lose a patient if they had to share a space with a woman of color, which I simply can't conceive of.

MW: You spoke of a commission for open housing, tell me about that. And what other organizations were you in, or did you know people in, that dealt with race?

FD: That was the first one they had and that was sometime later because it was when the housing authority was redistributing- breaking up the housing authority and selling the property to people who wanted to buy it. There were about fifteen of us who met at Clark College every week under appointment from the mayor of the city who was concerned that the real estate people would refuse to show property to Blacks who wanted to stay here. Many people wanted to go back to the South or wherever they came from, but there were quite a few that had roots here and couldn't see anything they would be happier doing than staying here.

Many people thought, "If these people buy housing here the property's going down in value." So the mayor organized us and we were called the Mayor's Commission on Open Housing and we had a refugee

voluntary assurance to counteract any unfair or prejudicial responses to people of color in the sale of property.

The commission was integrated and diverse, and based on a code of human rights. We maintained a central phone number and volunteer staff. If realtors or individuals rejected buyers or renters for racial or cultural reasons, the matter could be reported to the commission. As much as possible, we responded in teams of two. We were not confrontational but listened to

from Austria named Dr. Fred Apsler. He and his wife were both professors at Clark College, they were Jewish and had escaped Austria and come here. I supposed that was in the early '50s...

[End side A, tape 1 of 2]

[Begin side B, tape 1 of 2]

FD: ... I didn't stay on that commission because by that time I was involved with the youth group in the Heights. We had forty-five junior high and high school students that two Clark College students had helped me organize for the community church because they wanted an integrated church. I think they had one White boy amongst the rest *[laughs]*, but that wasn't because anyone was shut out. It was the fact that New Hope Baptist Church in Portland had been given what had been a tool shed, a big area for repair equipment out there, and remodeled it to make a church. Today it's the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Zion and it's in the Heights.

As far as other organizations, I still taught Sunday school in a Methodists church downtown in the morning, but in the afternoon and evening we had this group of five or six boys that were not eligible for basketball in high school, mostly because they didn't study or work very hard. The group won the church youth group's league every year *[laughs]*. That was not a government or community agency, but it was a very vital part of what I did and what my husband did.

MW: Were you aware of the role of the NAACP when they started here?

complaints, answered questions and appealed to people's good will. During the following four of five years we had many rewarding results."

FD: Yes, I've always been a member. I never could attend meetings because they were on Sunday afternoons and that was our time to be at home, but I've always been a contributing member. Then, of course, several of their members served on the recent human rights project effort to establish a human rights commission here. It would not have legal authority, but would be a mediation group and you've probably seen that in the paper. I've been on the diversity task force of Young Women's Christian Association for the past six or seven years, so I've been involved in groups that are doing similar things.

MW: You mentioned churches, can you tell me about where Blacks went to church in the early 1940s?

FD: There was the Vancouver Avenue Baptist Church [which relocated to Portland, but when it was in Vancouver] it was meeting in this big area that had been the tool shed for the Housing Authority.⁵ Now the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Zion has a large congregation here. Our church has several projects we do with them and we provide scholarships for the Methodist Foundation for the children that go to our summer camps, and also to their own summer camp they hold on Methodist property.

One of our very devout members, his wife- he has died recently- didn't go to the same church. She went to the church called Ways of Healing over somewhere in North Portland and she couldn't give that up for anything. He was a Methodist so he came to our church and

⁵ Florine writes: "Several denominations were allotted space by the Housing Authority. I was involved with starting a youth group in the Vancouver Community Church which met in the Housing Authority Administration Building. The New Hope Baptist Church of Portland formed a congregation in the Heights. The Housing Authority loaned them the space they had used as a tool shed and maintenance shop. This was an active Black Church. They had no youth direction so we invited their youth to join us Sunday evenings and for all activities. New Hope is now a large church in Portland."

presumably he went over to her church, that was Perry Johnigan. People were accepted, we never had anyone turned away.

MW: Can you tell me anything about the public housing neighborhoods that came in?

FD: Well, our commission prevented the segregated type of housing. That didn't keep people from living next to each other and especially if they were people who had not had the privilege of much education. Some were reluctant to give up their own kind of neighborhood. During that time we had no neighborhood that had not been visited. If a person came to us and said, "I tried to rent or buy this house and I was told they didn't want people of color living in this neighborhood," we went in pairs to talk to people. Dr. John Soelling and I were a team and we once called on every person in the neighborhood. We asked them to make their statements and we were very successful, I think, in a number of cases. We also had some interesting experiences out of it.

Talcaset Heights is up north of 39th Street, the nice cottage-type houses. They were built during the war and it was a very pleasant neighborhood. The person who wanted to buy the house there was somebody I knew. He had a family and grew roses. This man lived out in McLoughlin Heights but he had seen the houses up there. He wanted a house with more property for more roses, but ran into the opposition in the neighborhood.

Dr. John Soelling and I called there, and I was alone once when he couldn't come. We called on every person. We were not confrontational, we listened to their stories, we answered the argument that the property value would go down. We explained to them it went down because the White people would all move out and then it would become a segregated piece of property, and then prices went down so the people who could

not afford better would move in, it was just a process. Realtors used the process and would turn around and sell the house to a Black family regardless of whether people could take care of it or not.

I went to a house that was in a cul-de-sac and met a real pleasant woman who was a member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church downtown, which was also very open, it has always been an integrated church. She said, "I've been expecting you. I just feel so bad about this because I know you're right and any other attitude is wrong," but she said, "I'm so afraid to take a stand." Finally, she did and the man got his house, got his roses all planted, and I went back and talked with her again and she said, "You've all been so nice about this. You're right, but I feel so guilty because I keep wishing it hadn't happened here." This is the difference between taking a stance that you know is right and being glad you've done it [*laughs*], rather than feeling guilty about it. I think he's died since then, but the place always looked nice, it was always cared for and I can't think of any instance where people were sorry [he moved in].

Two years ago Jamie Pittman was one of the Eight Women of Achievement of the Young Women's Christian Association, and Jamie was one of the little girls [whose family wanted to move into a White neighborhood]; she was eleven years old when we made that call in her neighborhood. They were a lovely family, two children and a mother and father. Her neighbor had come here during the wartime to work and she came out of North Dakota and in all her life she had never seen a person of color, but she heard the stories that people told about Hudson's Bay High School and she was afraid for her children. She was scared to send them to school because she had been told the Black students all carried knives.

We had a chance to talk with her, she said, "I can see I didn't have anything to be afraid of at all," and she pulled back all her- I call them fantasies- the kinds of mischievous stories people tell. Kids tell them

and scatter it around, it gives them a weapon to use against people. That's the kind of work we did. We really came out of that experience with Black families able to buy homes and some of them still have those homes and some have gone on to other places, but I've always felt it was successful. It was a person-to-person meeting, we met with everybody personally.

MW: What years were you and your group active in doing this?

FD: I would say that was probably about six years that that particular commission worked. The other one, the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights, just broke up gradually because after the State Commission on Human Rights formed it looked as if there wasn't any place for two of these commissions. Now, of course, we see the growth of our community and the vast number of immigrants we have here.

From that period of time we have the terrible blot on us about the treatment of Japanese. It was even worse because many of those people were born here, American citizens born in this country that were disenfranchised. My third daughter went to Hough School in first grade, six years old, and she came home after about two weeks and she said, "I have a boyfriend," and I said, "Oh, wonderful. What is his name?" "Martin Hasagawa," and he was the cutest kid [*laughs*], he was just beautiful.

All of her classmates' families went down and saw that whole group of Japanese friends leaving; most of them lived here all their lives and were American-born citizens, and hopefully we'll never do such a thing again. It was beyond all belief, and then the government lied and said, "We're doing it so the Japanese won't be attacked." It was just a way to confiscate their property- vengeance- and they're still fighting over how

they can make up for it, but they can never make up for it except to see that it doesn't happen again.

I've lived through all these different experiences and I have every hope that eventually there won't be anybody left to hate. They'll always be someone to do the hating. Now it's the homosexuals and gay community who have their kids in school that have to endure the persecution and that's a shame.

MW: You said the group you had lasted about six years. What year did it begin?

FD: It was in early 1950. In fact, if you want to get that information, call the housing authority and ask them what year they began the transition because that transition took place over a long period of time. People buying, selling, remodeling, and if you've driven through that area out there you've seen those houses are beautiful. As far as I know there was no problem, but it was a community effort and it should have been much more. We have a long way to go, but it's required to be faithful to the things we're called to do. You can't do it all and you can't force people to change their minds, but we should never stop trying.

MW: You mentioned something interesting about schools, about rumors, specifically with Hudson's Bay High School. What else do you know about school and school atmosphere here?

FD: We had only one high school⁶ and I can't remember ever hearing of any violent confrontations or anything. My daughter, who lives in Honolulu, graduated in 1946 from Vancouver High School and they had a Black student who had come here with his family. He was very well

⁶ Vancouver High School

liked. There have always been families that wanted to keep their children under some kind of control on graduation night, so we had a party that was open; they could invite anybody they wanted to and it lasted all night. We had it right here in these rooms [*referring to the rooms of her home*].

My daughters invited him so he was here for the party. I can't remember if there were more with him or if he came alone. His name was John and I'm sure that he played basketball and he was an all-around fun student. Later, he joined the Army so it would had to have been while there was still an occupying force in Europe and during the service he had lost a leg from a bomb explosion. Later on I heard he had died and I don't know who to ask, but I can remember him coming that night just like anybody else would.

I've seen the days when one of our Jewish students had troubles and a Black first-time president of the student body at Vancouver High School defended him, and then the students of the Trapadero Club just sat right back on their heels. This student was a person who was just so loved and you can't imagine anyone accosting him or naming unpleasant comments because he was Jewish. So, it's been here and it will be until there are enough people who are willing to stand up and say, "You know, you're talking about people that I like, and they're my friends." I can't see it being enough change, not if Israel and the Arabs can't quit killing each other, or the Chinese and Americans can't stop spying on each other.

MW: We'd like to know what social activities were going on during the '40s in Vancouver.

FD: There were dances, there was the Red Cross. They had a club for servicemen and people in the community that got together; it was an

active club that was down in the area of what is now Officer's Row⁷. That area always had activities not only for enlisted people, but other people that could get together. I wasn't there, but I can't remember any incidents that would have made news, of course, they were always supervised by military personnel or people that volunteered. [There was] dancing and entertainment, and I think they were very careful about liquor in places like that. That was a bit out of my line because we weren't military.

We had one terrible tragedy when the dormitories caught on fire. Those were all wooden buildings. They were big dormitories, two or three stories, and it was during an hour when a shift had not changed and I believe there were fourteen people that were burned to death. I was really involved in that because I was taking notes for the coroner's office and it was a terrible disaster. My husband had to help people with the identifications and sometimes those identifications could only be made by the contents of the stomach; they could tell what shift the person worked by what he had for lunch.

[End side B, tape 1 of 2]

[Begin side A, tape 2 of 2]

MW: Do you remember any night clubs, or...?

FD: No, *[laughs]* I was not [a club goer], but as I say I can't recall any problems. I'm sure they had the clubs and night clubs, and they may have been restricted but it was something we didn't participate in. To me, it seemed that the whole war enterprise involving different racial and color backgrounds showed a cooperating spirit. We were here to help

⁷ The Vancouver National Historic Reserve

win a war and every worker was respected, but that doesn't mean we didn't eventually have problems.

The experience has enriched our community. The whole diverse concept of people living harmoniously has advanced, so even when we see room for improvement we can't overlook the good that people have done. Of every race and color there have been people who have been willing to expend themselves to help each other, but sometimes all we see is the negative, the big stories.

Our church has been involved with all kinds of groups and helped with projects and I realize that fifty years ago we weren't doing any of that, but we are now. We have lots of volunteers that are working on bringing people together.

MW: Is there anything you'd like to add?

FD: I think I've covered what I know. [*Looking through written notes*] It seems to me we just need more consistent concern, we can't ever give up until we've done it. As long as there are people who don't have enough food or adequate housing. Habitat for Humanity is making progress all over the county by helping people.

I think something I might like to add is from a missionary who was a boy in our church, 15 years old. It was during the Vietnam War and this young man and four or five of his friends were in outspoken opposition to the war, which you don't find high school kids that involved with. He went on and he is a journalist and photographer over much of South America and parts of Africa, his name is Paul Jeffrey. He's a member of our church and we had seen the opposition in our church as a child, because he and his friends took a stand against the war. Some people have forgotten it, but there are some of us who will always remember what he did.

He's a close personal friend and I heard him just a few months ago talking about Hurricane Mitch. He was in Honduras with his wife as missionaries all through that hurricane and he said there was just a narrow road left above the water level and just enough room for a truck to drive. This big white truck from a strict evangelical group drove down this road and the people barely had room to walk. They had the truck windows open and were throwing out these big white garbage sacks full of clothing and food they'd collected, but when some of the sacks hit the ground they burst.

They were tossing these bags out and the people asked Paul, "What are they doing?" and he said, "I'm going to find out." He stopped them and asked, "What are you folks doing?" They said, "We brought this food and clothing for these people." Paul told them, "The people are over here. Why aren't you out there giving them a hand?" "Oh, we don't want to be exposed to some of the disease and sickness that's probably here," they replied. So Paul said, "Get off the bus and help pick this stuff up and give a hand- you don't do things for people, you do things with them." That's what it's all about, so that was his expression, "Get off the bus," you work with people.

MW: Thank you, Florine.

FD: Nice to meet you.

[End of interview]