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 Carlos Delcid conducted with narrator Williard Nettle, Jr. For more information, please contact Andrea Reidell, Project Director.

Narrator: Willard Nettles, Jr.

Interviewer: Carlos Delcid

Location: Vancouver, Washington

Date: March 28, 2001

Transcriptionist: Melissa Williams

Edited by: Melissa Williams

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

CD: My name is Carlos Delcid. Today is March 28, 2001 and I'm at Fort Vancouver High School [Vancouver, Washington] interviewing Willard Nettles. Mr. Nettles will you please state your full name, date of birth, and place of birth.

WN: Willard Nettles, Jr. Born in Hooks, Texas on January 17, 1944.

CD: Can you tell me a little about your childhood?

WN: I was born in Texas and lived there a little less than a year. My parents moved to the Northwest, stopping in Eugene, Oregon where we lived with relatives and my father worked on the railroad. Then we came

farther north to Vancouver and lived here with relatives that had moved here ahead of us. My father worked at the shipyard, that's when shipbuilding was a booming industry down on the waterfront where Beaches and McMenamins [restaurants] are now. The shipyard employed a lot of people who were immigrants and migrants from other parts of the country. My parents came from Texas and a lot of people who worked in the shipyards came from the South.

Then we moved back to Texas, I think I was about four or five, and I went to my first and only segregated combination elementary/high school. I remember the teachers were allowed to whip you with a switch [a thin tree branch or rod] if you misbehaved, which I did. We stayed there in Texas for a short period of time and then we moved back to Vancouver around 1946 or '47, and we've been living here ever since.

CD: Moving back and forth, did it have any affect on you?

WN: Not really because I was so young, I was in the first grade. They didn't have kindergarten in Texas and I started in the first grade when I should have been in kindergarten, so when I got established in the school district here in Vancouver I was a year younger than most of the kids in my class. My senior year at Hudson's Bay High School I was sixteen years old, until January of my senior year at which time I turned seventeen. So I was one of probably three youngest seniors to graduate in 1961 from Hudson's Bay.

CD: How did that make you feel?

WN: I didn't see it as a major difference. I think the only area was my physical development. As you know, children develop at certain stages in their lives and [the fact that] most of the boys were a year, some two

years, older in maturity meant they were bigger and stronger that I was. I was not a real big person when I was a sophomore in high school. I was on the wrestling team and wrestlers have to monitor their weight, when I was a sophomore I think I was 5'9" and I weighed about 120 pounds. That was be the only major affect that being the youngest in my class had. As far as everything else, academics, it didn't seem to affect anything at all.

CD: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

WN: I have five younger brothers, I have three younger sisters, and one older sister, which totals ten children and both my mom and dad are still alive. There were twelve of us all together in the same household.

CD: Did you enjoy having a big family?

WN: For the most part. We had the usual sibling fights, but for the most part we got along well and we worked together. We had to get along because we had to live in the same household and it wasn't a very big house. We had to share bedrooms and share beds so it was important that we got along.

CD: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother?

WN: It's really kind of ironic, but my mother was born in a place, I believe, called Killdear, Texas, which is about thirty miles east of Hooks, Texas. She had a fourth grade education and she married my father at age fifteen and had her first child at fifteen. She's seventy-five years old today and she's six feet tall, that's where I get my height from, my father's a short guy, about 5'8". I would say my mother was my

inspiration in getting involved in athletics and being a competitor and finishing college.

She worked- domestic work, housecleaning- and she was probably the first influence on me as far as working. She used to go with us out to the fields where we'd pick strawberries, beans, and she would go with us and make sure we did our work, so she was the biggest influence on my work ethic. She was also the first one to by me my first sport jacket and that was by her going downtown and asking one of the merchants to allow her to open up a charge account in my name so I could get a sport jacket for my ninth grade going-away party.

CD: How was your social life in school?

WN: Growing up in Vancouver which back then was, and still is, predominantly White I had a lot of good friends of both colors. We would hang out on weekends after school but for the most part my close associates were Black people. I had a lot of cousins around the area and at that point in time most of the Black people lived in one general area. We were kind of segregated, even though we were in the North we still had segregation. As a matter of fact, the area of this town that I grew up in is right on top of the hill by the big water tower and I watched that water tower get built when I was a kid. Our house was only about two houses away coming towards the hill, on Divine Road.

Our social life was basically getting together with my cousins on weekends, we'd play marbles, we'd run up and down the green belt to Burnt Bridge Creek, we'd catch crawfish, we'd play kid games, hide and seek. We had a game we used to call "Strut Miss Lucy" where we'd line up girls on one side and boys on the other, it was kind of a dance and that was one of our socialization tools back then.

I had some White friends whose houses I'd visit and we'd spend the night together back and forth; some that I would go working in the fields with. In terms of relationships, race-mixing back then was not well received by the public on either side. If you were a Black boy you basically hung around with a Black girl. There was one couple when I was in school that crossed the boundary and nobody said anything about it publicly, but there was discussion. It wasn't a major issue, but before I got out of high school things started to change, slowly but gradually. I don't remember going to any White kids' parties, all the parties I went to were Black kids'. Even though I had White friends in junior high and high school interracial party mixing was not in style, I didn't start to experience that much until my early years in college, which was the mid-'60s. Up until that time it was pretty much Blacks with Blacks and Whites with Whites in my geographical location, Vancouver, Washington and Portland, Oregon. You could still have a meaningful dialogue with somebody outside of your race, but as far as relationships went you kind of stayed within your race.

CD: How did that make you feel?

WN: I didn't feel deprived of anything as long as there was somebody to talk to or consider as your potential girlfriend, and those girls existed. We knew that racism existed because once you get to a certain age you have to acknowledge the existence of certain things and today's no different. You have to acknowledge there are certain people who are racist and they will share that with you, and you don't know where you're going to find them but you have to be sensitive enough, or aware enough, to know when you're experiencing it.
Just like if somebody was trying to say something to make you feel less than good about yourself, you know what it feels like if somebody says it,

or if somebody looks at you a certain way, you know what that certain look looks like. That's what you have to learn how to deal with, it's a survival skill. If someone confronts you you have one or two ways to deal with it, either you meet it head on or you ignore it. My position's always been to deal with everything rationally and with reason. I've had very few physical confrontations with people about race.

CD: With your father working in the shipyards, did you watch the houses being built in the housing projects?

WN: My father was working in the shipyards, he was a carpenter there. Some of the houses we lived in are still around today, they're rectangular and very plain. Some are down off of Burton Road, they've been remodeled a little bit but I can still recognize them. They were real thin-walled houses, they had windows that you unlatched and pushed out. I remembered we could climb out of the windows because they weren't very high above the ground and it was kind of a fun thing to do during the summer.

All the houses looked pretty much the same. Some were single-family homes, some were duplexes. Ours was a three-bedroom house, and there were some duplexes that were long and on each end was a one- or two-bedroom unit. Not that every house looked the same but we lived in a ghetto. It was predominantly Black people but there were some White people around the area too, like up here on 13th Street which is called Idaho Street now.

If you go up Divine Road, you're at the top of the hill and there's the water tower. Well, on this side of the street and this side of the street and down about three blocks were all Black people. Then after that a few White families sprinkled in and a few Black families. We had a high concentration [of Blacks] and then a mixed concentration. That was

kind of the later stages. Early on I think most of the Black people were on the east end of The Heights, up around Garrison Square, which at that time was called 2nd and 3rd Streets.

CD: With so many people working in the shipyards and moving into the housing, was there a waiting list?

WN: No, because at that time they needed workers so they didn't care what color they were, during war color was kind of put aside for a while. That's why people came up here, because there were jobs so there was no waiting list, you got a job. There were probably segregated work crews and I can't really speak to that because I was too young to work in the shipyards, but what I've heard from my parents I think there was segregation in the work force- Black crews with White foreman telling them what to do. No one had to wait, you just went to work.

CD: What about the houses, who got the houses first?

WN: Housing wasn't a problem either. The rentals were all controlled by the Vancouver Housing Authority. I didn't know of anyone who owned their own home, everybody rented, kind of like the low-income housing now. The housing authority office used to be right over close to Health Experience [an athletic club], they had an office over there and you could go and rent push lawnmowers. You didn't gave to rent them you could lease them, there was no charge. We'd go do that and we'd not only mow our own lawn but we'd go out and try to make money mowing other people's lawns too.

Everybody had houses and those people who couldn't get houses usually moved in with their relatives until a house was available. When we first moved out here we stayed with another family or another family

stayed with us; it was just people helping people until they got on their feet. I don't think there was a real shortage of housing at that point in time.

CD: When all the houses were built and made available, if a White person went to get a house and a Black person went to get the house too, who would get the house?

WN: What I hear you asking me is was there racism? Yes. There was racism and there's racism now, although it may not look the same as it looked twenty-five or thirty years ago. I got married in August of 1964. Before we got married my wife and I went out looking for apartments here in Vancouver, the same buildings exist today. We'd see a sign, "Vacancy," and we really didn't care too much about where we stayed since we didn't plan to stay there very long since I was in between going back to school and working in the summer. I'd go to a place that had a vacancy sign hanging out front and as soon as they saw the color of my skin they told me they just rented it, and that happened often; I did finally find a place but that practice was around in 1964 and it's still around now. I think it's a lot less today, but notice [you don't see a] blend of economic types- when I say that I mean people who are classified as lower, middle, and upper income- living in the same complex. What do you see? All low income, or all middle-income, there's no mixture, there's no blend. There are apartment owners renting to people of all races nowadays, but they rent so only certain people can live there. I couldn't afford an apartment that cost $1,200 a month but some people can, now who's going to do that? The rich people. You're not going to find a whole bunch of Mexicans, Black people, or Russians living in those units. Who's going to be living there? White people, or whoever can afford that kind of place.

The [apartment discrimination] back then wasn't because of money, it was just because they didn't want to have a Black person in their complex. I wasn't going to places that I couldn't afford, I went to places I could afford and they just didn't want me there. At that time, and even now, there's a certain stigma attached to renting to a Black person, it gives the whole place a bad name. Even in the sale of houses real estate people would have certain areas of town they would take them to, "Black people can buy here. Mexicans can buy here. The White people buy over there." That was then and to a certain extent, today also, it hasn't changed totally, they're just not so blatant about it. Laws have changed so people can be punished financially for violating a person's civil rights, so they're not so out in the open with it as they used to be but racism in housing is still and issue today.

CD: With the houses being built so fast were they well built for people to live in under those conditions?

WN: Well, here's what happened. When they started tearing down the old houses up in The Heights it was like a ghost town, everybody moved out. The housing authority gave everybody a notice, "By this day you'll have to vacate the premises." A lot of Black people that used to live in Vancouver moved to Portland. My cousins were part of that exodus and lot of other people I grew up with decided to move to Portland. That meant all the Black people who decided to stay had to find existing housing, there wasn't any new housing built to accommodate us.

I don't know what you know about real estate trends. When a new neighborhood gets old the people who inhabited that neighborhood move to yet a newer neighborhood, and who moves into the old neighborhood? Poor people, and that's what started happening. If you look at the process today, who are the newest immigrants we have in this city?

Russians, Hispanics, and Asians, and where do they live? They live in places that used to be the new housing.

Thunderbird Village, that used to be an elite place. I remember when it was built and you didn't find any Black people down there, no Russians, no Mexicans, all White people, that was the upper-crust of apartments, brand new. Who lives there now? Mexicans, Russians, Black folks. Thunderbird Village is now almost low income housing. These apartments are just off of Grand Boulevard, they're gray. There's a little road, I think it's 13th and Grand. If you're coming over Grand going down toward Fred Meyer's there's a little road that goes around the back side of it and there are apartments over on the left, I forget the name, I used to live there. It had an indoor swimming pool, weight room, that was not low income housing but it is now. The new got old, the people who lived there before moved up, and the people who are coming in moved in. It's kind of like a trickle up- as you move up, you move out. The same thing happens today.

So when all those Heights houses were torn down the White people were occupying the permanent houses that were already built. I'll tell you where the cutoff line was. If you left the top of the hill on Divine Road and turned right, then walked towards town on 13th Street, the dividing line was at King School and there were permanent houses from there on west.

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

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

WN: ... but those [permanent] houses had porches, different windows, they looked different, they weren't all the same style. We'd go up there and that 13th Street Market has been there ever since I was a kid. The

McGee family used to have a butcher shop in there where you could buy sliced bologna, ham, chickens and there was a little mini market, not like it is now. Well, guess what happened? The same thing that happens in home real estate, who owns it now? Koreans, it's an Asian market now, a White man owned it before.

WN: I'm fifty-seven years old, and I grew up here in Vancouver. I went through grade school, junior high school, Hudson's Bay High School, Clark College, and graduated from Lewis and Clark College in Portland. In all my years of going through the Vancouver School District none of my teachers made me feel different, none of them made me feel like "I'm teaching a Black kid." The kids on the other hand- I got called nigger a couple of times from some of my classmates, those who were stupid enough to do it, and that was only about one or two kids in high school.

I've got my fortieth class reunion coming up and the same kid who called me a nigger, I saw him five years ago and in high school he was bigger than I was, but he's not now. He looked up, smiled and shook my hand, "Hi, Willard, how are you?" All of my teachers, with the exception of one, did not make me feel like I was different. In the classroom it was equality because you had the same text book as everybody else, you got the same assignment, you did the work, you got a grade and nobody graded me based on the fact that I was Black, short, tall. It was just based on the quality of my work. That's one of the things I like about education.

I have a different opinion now that I'm a teacher because I worry about some of the teachers today, but I hope what I experienced as a student here in Vancouver is the same experience you're getting as a student. I'm not so sure this is happening because as a teacher I still sense some real strong vibrations of racism and I hope it's not coming to the kids like it's coming to me. But see, the teachers back then were a

little different than the teachers now. Those teachers back then, a lot of them grew up here. A lot of today's teachers came here from some place else. That's why I'm saying you never know who these people are when they come from places like Wenatchee, Washington or Roseburg, Oregon where they don't see very many Black people, Hispanics, very many anything except White people. Those are usually the people who have the greatest amount of difficulty making adjustments being around a lot of Mexicans, Black people, and Russians and not being bothered by it. If you've lived an isolated life it's tough for you to come into a very culturally diverse school and feel comfortable.

Lastly, I really think Vancouver has been an okay place to raise a family and grow up, but we do have problems just like any place else. We have problems dealing with race, and as we speak the Vancouver City Council is considering establishing a local human rights commission. Why? Because a lot of hate groups have decided to set up camp in Vancouver, Washington. Why do hate groups come to Vancouver? Because it's predominantly White and they feel like they have a lot of supporters here, so that's something else you need to factor in. Everything you see is not what is, there's a lot of other stuff going on underneath the surface that you don't know about.

CD: Thank you.

WN: Okay, Carlos.

[*End of interview*]