

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 Christal Jenkins and Project Coordinator Melissa Williams conducted with narrator Belva Jean Griffin. For more information, please contact Andrea Reidell, [Project Director](#).

Narrator: Jean Griffin

Interviewer: Christal Jenkins and Melissa Williams

Location: Vancouver, Washington

Date: April 30, 2001

Transcriptionist: Melissa Williams

Edited by: Melissa Williams

[Begin side A, tape 1 of 1]

CJ: This is Christal Jenkins and today is April 30, 2001. I will be interviewing Jean Griffin at her home in Vancouver, Washington. Will you please state your name, and when and where you were born.

JG: My name is Belva Jean Griffin. I was born in Holandville, Oklahoma in 1927.

CJ: When did your family move to Vancouver?

JG: My family moved to Vancouver in 1948, but we moved from Oklahoma to Vanport, Oregon in 1944.

CJ: What was that move like?

JG: Well, I tell ya, we came by train and I think it was a three-night, two-day ride. For a week after I got off of the train I still felt like I was moving side to side. It was joyous coming here because my mother needed work to make more money. She had done housework all her life and the pay was bad¹ and the work was hard, so she thought this was really a good opportunity.

CJ: Where did your mother work when she was here?

JG: My mother worked in the shipyards.

CJ: What was that like for your family?

JG: That was good because I think she made seventy-some cents an hour² and they furnished transportation. They had this big thing that didn't look like a regular bus and they called it the cattle bus for some reason. It would pick the workers up, and she

¹ Post-interview, Jean recalled her mother earned fifty cents an hour, or four dollars a day, in Oklahoma domestic work.

² Post-interview, Jean noted her mother made seventy-nine dollars a week.

worked on swing shift, then it would bring them back home and it was so much better than what she had been used to doing.

CJ: How did the shipyards help with the care of the family? Did they provide your meals?

JG: No, the shipyard didn't do it, but the fact that she was making more money and we lived in the project in Vanport meant better times for us. We lived in apartments and I didn't really like it because I had been used to living in a house with my own yard and I would beg my mother, "Let's go back to Oklahoma," because I left school to come out here, my friends were back there. I started going to Roosevelt High School and we had to walk, they didn't have a bus to take us, and Roosevelt was a pretty long ways from Vanport and we'd have to walk in the rain, so I just dropped out of school. My brother kept going and he graduated from Roosevelt.

CJ: How did religion impact your family?

JG: Religion impacted our family in a great way. My mother was always religious even though she didn't always go to church because sometimes that would be the only day she had to rest. I remember even when I was a little girl I would polish my shoes, iron my dress that Saturday, and get up and go to Sunday school and my brother would do the same, especially after we came out here. He was very good at attending Sunday school and church.

My sister, who was older, church wasn't her thing, but she was very good and she was a very religious person. She didn't always find it necessary to go to church.

CJ: What were the Black churches here like in the 1940s?

JG: It was just a place to go and worship. There wasn't anything special going on that I could see. I first started going in Vanport to Reverend Thompson's when I first came here and I played piano for the church. It wasn't anything extraordinary, but it was different from what I had been used to doing in Tulsa.

CJ: How did the churches bring unity amongst the people?

JG: For the people who went to church it was a place to go and worship and to do the things they thought we were supposed to do to be religious, but there were a lot of people who lived in Vanport who didn't go to church. I think a lot of people who had been used to going to church before they came here didn't because a lot of people worked on Sunday, so that made a big difference.

CJ: How did the church itself impact the community around it?

JG: Probably the same way it impacted the community in Oklahoma. There weren't any special things going on, but we'd do different things; bring the kids in for whatever they needed to do to

keep them busy and thinking on the right track. Of course, you didn't have all the problems way back then with kids and drugs and things like you do now. I'm sure that churches always impact people for the good.

CJ: What kinds of resources were made available to the people through the church?

JG: People were doing pretty good back then. They didn't have to have food pantries, they didn't have to distribute clothes and things like that. It was just a place to worship and, of course, the message would impact everybody.

CJ: What affect did segregation have on the church?

JG: Most people who came out here came from the South and they were used to being segregated so it wasn't like they came here and had to be segregated, it was just something that we knew was and we accepted it.

CJ: What activities did the church provide as recreation during the war?

JG: As far as I know there were none.

MW: You spoke about how churches were different in Tulsa than they were here, can you talk about the differences between the churches?

JG: The church I went to in Tulsa was a Union Baptist Church and I became a member of that church when I was twelve years old. I had been going for quite a few years and one particular Sunday the pastor taught a message that really got me thinking, and really touched my heart, so when time came for the doors of the church to open I went down and I joined.

Well, the pastors then were concerned about the young people. I remember my first boyfriend, he came to church one night to meet me and walk me home and my pastor was standing there. He saw this guy and I don't think he liked the way the boy looked because he wasn't a school boy, he was probably out of school. The pastor gave me a talk about him, to be careful and be careful who I associated with. One thing, the young and old people who went to church were very faithful and they were interested in the children and young people, and they would let it be known.

MW: Did churches here care for the young like that?

JG: I don't think so. I don't think they really had to because kids weren't wild then, they obeyed their parents and their parents were usually the ones who led the children and the churches didn't have to do it.

CJ: Can you talk about some of the churches that were here back in the day.

JG: I can talk about New Hope Baptist Church because that's the one I first started going to when I moved over here to Vancouver in 1948 from Portland. Reverend Moore was the pastor then and it started as a community church because it was on housing authority property and they didn't allow denominations, so they named it The Community Church. It started in Bagley Downs but they tore Bagley Downs down. I have to say this--Bagley Downs and Burton Homes were projects here in Vancouver, and that's where the Blacks stayed. It was like being segregated because they had Blacks in these two areas. When they decided to close those projects down the Blacks began to move to McLoughlin Heights and I imagine McLoughlin Heights had been lily white.³

When I moved over here I moved to McLoughlin Heights. When they tore it down the church moved to Marshall School, it was off of Andereson and Mill Plain and that's when I joined. After the church left that area, it went to 13th Street where there was a building right there next to the recreation center and the A. M. E. [African Methodist Episcopal] Zion church is there now. There was a warehouse building where the A. M. E. Zion parking lot is now, so the housing authority let New Hope take that building and they remodeled it and that's where they had church for quite a few

³ Post-interview, Jean recalled segregated row housing in McLoughlin Heights when she first moved to Vancouver in 1948.

years. I learned that after they left the school they had another building that they let the people have, that also was a housing authority building. After they left 13th Street they moved to Portland, to Skidmore.

CJ: Could you talk about the recreation center that was near the church.

JG: The kids could come and play games and they just did a lot of different things. I'm sure my boys went there, but I never did go and find out exactly what they did. They would play different games and they had a big yard and probably played badminton and different things.

CJ: What social events do you remember during those times?

JG: You know, I don't recall but I imagine the housing authority has a record of that. Most all the old people who were part of that time are not here anymore, but I'm sure there's somebody who knows.

CJ: When did the A. M. E. Zion Church come to be after the recreation center?

JG: The A. M. E. Zion is there now and I think that's where they first started. A. M. E. Zion started there, but the New Hope Baptist

Church was right there in the next building and when they tore that building down they moved to Portland, to Skidmore. The A. M. E. Zion is altogether different, but I remember those people there were going to open Bible church way off of some street. The family was very talented so they decided to purchase that place and start a church, so that's what they did.

CJ: What were the schools like?

JG: The schools my children attended, I tell ya, some of those teachers had problems. They didn't take any time with the kids if they needed extra help. Children can be dyslexic and I think my youngest son was, but they would just pass him from one grade to the other and he couldn't read. When he was in third grade I asked the teacher what I could do to help him and she said, "No, don't help him because we can give him the help he needs here," but they never did. When he got into eighth grade there was one teacher there, a man, and he took time with my son and he learned how to read well. In those days they didn't teach by phonics, they taught by sight and that was a bad way to do it, now they didn't do that. The teachers weren't very good.

CJ: What years were your sons in school?

JG: From kindergarten to high school.

CJ: Could you give us the years?

JG: My oldest son started school in 1951.

CJ: Could you talk about school for you. You said that because you were walking long distances you chose not to continue. Could you talk about what your schooling was like?

JG: I only went to school for about two weeks after I came to Portland because I didn't know any kids, there were only a handful of Blacks. I'm from the South and I'm used to being around my own people and I wasn't that outgoing. Nobody talked to me and I didn't talk to them. I wasn't that good at making friends, so I just stopped. The kids were mostly Caucasian and I didn't know how to get acquainted and make friends.

CJ: Did your brother ever talk about what school was like for him?

JG: He liked it, he went ahead and graduated. My sister and brother came out here before my mother and I did, and I suppose he had made friends with some of the kids in Vanport and he knew them and they went to that school too. Maybe boys are not like girls but I just felt left out and I hated walking in the rain. When I first came here I didn't want to go anywhere because it was raining and they said, "Well, if you don't go when it's raining you gonna be in all winter," but I didn't like it. I wasn't used to it raining *all* the

time. The day we got here it was raining and it didn't stop, because we came in October and that's when the rainy season starts.

I remember one time when I was sitting in school there were a few flakes of snow. I don't think those kids had ever seen snow before because they got up and ran to the window and looked, so we always said the people from the South brought the snow to Portland. After that it would snow and snow; we haven't had any big snows in quite a while but it does snow here.

CJ: What did you do since you weren't in school?

JG: I babysat. One of my mother's friends and her husband needed a babysitter so I sat with this little boy and they gave me five dollars a week, which was a lot of money to me. I took piano lessons and practiced. I didn't stop learning, I've always liked to learn and do things. As a matter of fact, I went and got my G.E.D. later and I've taken a lot of classes at Clark College.

CJ: So piano lessons and things like that were made available to African Americans during that time? Were there African American instructors for those classes?

JG: When I was in Oklahoma I was in Paul Lawrence Dunbar Elementary School and it was a nice school, a big place. We had something we didn't have in our own homes, inside toilets, and

that was nice. I was in the third grade and this one friend of mine said, "You know, Ms. Rhodes across the street gives piano lessons for free." The state was paying for her to teach any kids who wanted to take lessons. That suited me fine. I went there that very evening and started taking free piano lessons because I'd always wanted to play piano.

I remember when I was in a Catholic school in Oklahoma, I must have been about five years old, we had these wooden buildings all over and when recess came we couldn't stay in the schoolroom, no matter how cold it was we had to go outside. Some of the older kids would make fires and we'd stand around and get warm. One particular day I saw all of these kids standing around somebody who was playing the piano so I went down there to see who it was. One of the older girls, she must have been about eight or nine, was playing and that really impressed me and I decided right then I wanted to play piano.

I don't know if it was because of all the attention she was getting or what, but I loved the piano so when I got a chance I started taking lessons for free. I didn't even have a piano but later my aunt, who lived about a block from us, got one and I would practice on her piano. Pretty soon the lady stopped giving lessons because the state stopped paying for her to give them. But whenever my mother had fifty cents I would go take a lesson.

CJ: Did you put your babysitting money towards piano lessons?

JG: Yeah. As a matter of fact, we rented a piano. Piano rental was cheap then, I think it was only ten dollars a month so then I could practice. It's hard to really get to know anything if you don't have anything to work with, so I would practice piano all the time. Then I went to a lady in Portland and started paying for my lessons for a while, and she said, "You have a really good touch," and I did some classicals and I also played for the church. I've always played for a church, even in Oklahoma. I would take turns with another girl playing for the Sunday school there because when we got to church the first thirty minutes was singing. One Sunday she would play and the next Sunday I would play and that was a good experience for me.

MW: You said you were uncomfortable in school, partly because there were so many White kids there. What do you know about how other Black students felt about that?

JG: It's really hard to tell because I didn't go there that long. Because I was from a segregated school that was probably a normal feeling for me, but it didn't affect my brother that way and he was from a segregated school too. I think a lot of Black children might feel a little inferior because you go to those schools and they tell you what you can't be and what you shouldn't be- they used to. Maybe some kid would say, "I want to be a doctor," and maybe the teacher would say, "If I were you I would think about being a carpenter." Black parents have to lead the way and tell their kids

what they can do, that they can do anything they set their minds to and I'm sure a lot of parents started doing that.

MW: Can you tell us some of your most vivid memories about Vanport?

JG: Besides the fact that I hated it? We had a two bedroom apartment and a bunch of us were staying there just like in the South where people were bunched up together; maybe they had ten kids in the family and only two rooms. They had recreation centers; that was good because I wasn't used to being able to go to the recreation center to play things and mingle with other kids. I guess they had recreation centers in all the projects, Vancouver and Portland. I liked that. I liked the churches out here.

Probably the thing I remember most was the Vanport flood. I really didn't wish for the flood, but I was glad it got rid of Vanport because I didn't like it. I remember most of the apartments were segregated. We had roaches and then one apartment we moved into had bed bugs. The churches were in housing authority buildings. The people were really nice in general. There was a lot going on that wasn't right, you know, people were from the South and they weren't used to having money and doing things but they got here and there were nightclubs in Portland.

Some people worked really hard and spent their money as they went, then there were others who worked hard and saved and went back to where they came from and lived pretty good at that

time. I remember it was a good place to come and work and get the kind of wages that most Black people weren't used to.

CJ: You talked about the bed bugs and the roaches. Were the housing conditions the same for the Whites as they were for the Blacks?

JG: At one time, just like here in Vancouver, they were segregated. There were a lot of poor Whites who came here too and maybe they had bed bugs and roaches too, but they didn't want to live with Black people. I remember one time I got on the bus to go to Portland and I sat beside this lady and she jumped up and got another seat. But see, we were used to all of that. It hurt my feelings, this was supposed to be the North, but I realized there were a lot of people from the South here and they brought their same Southern feelings.

[End side A, tape 1; Begin side B]

CJ: The housing was segregated, the schools were integrated, and the churches were segregated. How did you manage that difference?

JG: It could have affected me, but maybe that's one reason I stopped going to school. When I was in Oklahoma I was pretty smart *[laughs]*, but you get with White kids and they had had

books read to them from babyhood and all of these different things; you begin to feel sort of inferior and they let you know. You hear that Blacks are so far behind Whites and then you begin to believe it.

CJ: Did you end up building relationships with people in your housing community?

JG: Oh yeah, I knew a lot of people there. The ones who went to church with me, yeah I had a lot of friends.

CJ: Are there any other thoughts or comments you have about Vanport or about churches, or any of the topics we've discussed?

JG: I think the fact that we came out here was really a blessing because my mother lived to be almost ninety-three and if she had been back in Oklahoma it would have been different. People back there had to work until they died, even if they take little carts and pick up scrap. Now, I don't know how it became after '44, after I left, but out here she paid into Social Security that was there for her when she got to be old enough. We bought this home together after I got my divorce and we were able to help each other. I had a nice job, I worked at Nabisco for twenty-eight years, so we just helped each other. Although I wanted to go back to Oklahoma when I was younger I'm glad she didn't because I went back in

1996 and I went to this little house that we had lived in and it's still almost the same as it was.

When she first built that house it was one room, a fourteen-by-fourteen, and we had four in the family because my father died when I was two years old, my brother was six months, and my sister was four. My mother had to take care of us and she never did marry because she didn't want to have a step-father over her daughters. I tell ya, I don't see how my mother made it because we had this old coal stove and she'd have to get up in the mornings in the cold and make the fire and get off to work so she could get the White people's kids off to school.

Sometimes she'd make a hoeecake with the coal stove because we didn't have an oven. It's biscuit bread you make by putting the skillet on top of the stove and you cook it in there and flip it after it browns on the underside. So, some days we would have hoeecake and we would have molasses, then she'd have to go get their kids off and she had to work there until she did the job. Sometimes my mother would go out and wash and iron for about a dollar and a quarter a day, and clothes were starched then, you had to sprinkle them and iron them.

Sometimes she'd look over into the basket [and think], "Well, gee, I only have three more pieces and then I can go home and take care of my kids and feed them," we were really little then. Then when she'd get on the last piece here'd come this woman with another bundle of clothes and my mother couldn't say, "Well, I just won't do them," because in order to get paid she had to stay and

do them. Sometimes my mother would get home at nine o'clock at night and she would wake us up with a quart of sweet milk and a loaf of bread. We'd get our bread and pour the milk on and that would be our dinner.

She had to walk two blocks to the bus line, and back then women didn't wear pants and sometimes it'd be so cold. Some of the coldest days I've ever seen was when the sun was so bright and it would be windy and cold. My mother went through all of that and I always told her I could never have done that. She had three kids to raise and she really did it too. She and my aunt always stayed close together. My aunt was almost ninety-two when she died, my mother's oldest sister was ninety-seven, my mother's older brother was eighty-nine, and the youngest brother died the day before he was ninety. So I always say hard work won't kill you because they had long lives, and I take that same attitude too. It pays to do what you have to do, because a lot of people nowadays don't even work that hard but they don't take care of their kids. But it was a blessing that we came out here during the war and she decided to stay.

MW: What do you recall about segregated businesses in this area?

JG: I remember Alcoa didn't hire Blacks and Crown Zellerbach out in Camas didn't hire Blacks for a long time. People just wouldn't hire you. You could go put your application in and you just couldn't get a job. A lot of people picked strawberries, beans,

raspberries; I think that was really good, though, because it was a learning experience for young kids, you could take your children out there and they could pick.

I remember when everybody had to move from The Heights-- you couldn't get a house anywhere because people wouldn't rent to you. My sister called somebody who had a house near Clark College. She called and asked if there was a house for rent and the person said, "Yes." I remember I went with my sister and brother-in-law to see it, and he parked the car and we began to get out but the man came to the door, looked, and shook his head.

I remember when we got ready to move from The Heights there was a house over on the west side, near Kauffman Avenue. I didn't like the place, it had a dirt basement, it was just an old bad-looking house. We called the people who were in charge of it and they said, "Well, we'll have to call the owner to see if we can rent it." They called us back in a few days and the man said no because he didn't want to rent to Blacks. It was the same way for getting jobs. They wanted us to leave the area. You couldn't buy land or a house and that's the way it was.

MW: What about getting service in businesses like restaurants?

JG: You know Waddles restaurant had a sign "We cater to White business only." Even the hotels and things did it on the sly. After they made a law and people could get sued for discriminating all of that stopped. But people didn't want to rent to Blacks because

they said Blacks are dirty. When we left our home up in The Heights I went back there for a sewing board I'd left, and the people were in the house getting ready to tear it down, so I asked for my board. A man said, "Did you live here?" I said, "Yeah," and he said, "You know, you really left this house nice," and we did. We'd cleaned it up before we left, but the way he talked you could tell Blacks and Whites left their houses really bad. That's the idea they had, that Black people were dirty and all of that, but I tell ya, since I've been around here I've noticed Black people are clean compared to some other people I see.

MW: You mentioned nightclubs in Portland. Do you know what people in Vancouver did for fun?

JG: There was a lot of travel between Vancouver and Portland. Years ago they had a few nightclubs over here. One was way down off of Garrison down near where Nature's store is. There was a Black man who had a night club there but I never did go, I heard about it. There were even some Black businesses. I remember Mr. Johnson had a radio and TV repair shop. But things didn't last that long because a lot of people were moving to Portland and there were hardly any Black people to patronize him.

MW: Do you recall housing discrimination in Bagley Downs? If so, do you know if that was mandated by law, or if it was just how people happened to live?

JG: I think it was probably the housing authority. Just like when you get a job some people might say to the management, "I don't want to work with that person," so they will take the person's feelings into consideration, and maybe it was the same way about the housing. Maybe there were people who stated they didn't want to live around Blacks so the Blacks lived in Bagley Downs and Burton Homes and the Whites lived in The Heights.

For something like that to occur you know it has to be from the management. People expressed that they didn't want to be with Blacks. You know, way back then, even out here, Black people's word, regardless of how much education they had, wasn't given the same weight that a White person's word would. I'm really glad things are the way they are now because you see Black experts on TV and all people will sit up and listen. They don't do like they used to, "That's just a Black person saying that. That's no good." Now White people listen, look at Oprah, look at all of these experts. Things have really changed and it's a lot better and I like it this way.

MW: Why did you decide to stay in Vancouver?

JG: After the flood we moved over on Larabee, that was close to where the Rose Garden is now and they wanted to put up the Memorial Coliseum so they bought out all those houses around there. Of course, that house was just temporary anyway, we were

there because we didn't have any place else to go. The city decided they wanted to put the people from Vanport into trailers, they had trailers located way out somewhere, probably in St. Johns. We decided we didn't want to live in a trailer so that's when we decided to move over here and I'm glad we did. I love it here.

CJ: Do you have any final things you want to comment about?

JG: I would like to say this: Vancouver has really changed and the people have changed. I think the country has changed because it's not near like it used to be. Black people have a chance to progress, live in nice homes, have good jobs, get an education if they so desire, go to college, be whatever they want to be. Now they know they don't have to go take up housekeeping because that's the job they're no doubt going to get when they graduate from high school. Things have really changed and it's for the good of people of all races, and the good of the country.

CJ: Thank you so much for your interview.

JG: I hope I said something [*laughs*] that you can use. I really enjoyed giving it.

[*End of interview*]