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William Bethel

William O. Bethel

Black History Research Project of Tampa

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[Transcriber's Note: This is a detailed summary lecture that William Bethel, coach at Middleton High School, gave during the late 1970s, as part of the Black History of Tampa project. Sybil Barnes also spoke at this event, before Mr. Bethel took the stage.]

Mr. Bethel's introduction

Mr. Bethel was not involved with organizing this event; he didn't know about it before "last Monday." Apparently his speaking was also a sudden decision. "There's quite a voyage between 1930 and 1977. And there's even a smaller voyage between the time that I got here in Tampa in 1946." Mr. Bethel has talked with members of almost every family that Dr. Barnes mentioned. This made him realize how long he has been in Tampa.

Regarding the group conducting the Black History of Tampa project: "We've got it made because it's a chronological thing, just put it like that. I'm old and they're younger people." Mr. Bethel is "about as much of a historian as [he] was called a coach."

Mr. Bethel's educational background

Mr. Bethel came from a "super poor" family in Kentucky. He graduated from Tuskegee Institute and was able to go to college on an athletic scholarship. "That's one thing that no one is able to take from the American Negro. We are fragile and noble and not as hostile, you think."

He was very glad to get the scholarship and go to Tuskegee. He became very familiar with Booker T. Washington's descendants. He even dated one of Washington's granddaughters, although he didn't know it at the time. Mr. Bethel was "one of the custodians on a work scholarship," and worked in The Oaks, which was Washington's residence on the campus. It is still a show place, "kept just as it was when he lived there."

Mr. Bethel also had the opportunity to work with George Washington Carver for a year.

How Mr. Bethel came to Tampa

He was on his way to Miami and stopped to visit a friend who also went to Tuskegee, one of the Felder boys. The Felders persuaded him to look into the situation in Tampa because there was no black person in physical education.

C.B. Bryant was the principal of Middleton High School then. Mr. Bethel decided to talk with him, but first went to see what the boys could do. He was told that they were good athletes. He went over to Booker Washington High School, which was the only school at the time that had a basketball court. He played with the kids for two or three days, and then realized that he wouldn't find any better natural talent than they had.

Mr. Bethel went to see C.B. Bryant, who was a "relic" from the old style of principals. "His voice convinced me." He went to see Frank McMyes, who was the supervisor of Negro education. His office was where Brewster Vocational School is now. Mr. Bethel was there for less than ten minutes before he had his name in the contract.

Mr. Bethel wired the Miami school principal to say he wasn't coming. That was thirty-one years ago, when Mr. Bethel was twenty-one. He had planned to stay one year, "but I really got sand in my shoes."

Mr. Bethel started out as Middleton's head coach and athletic director. He was twenty-two when the school year started. He signed a contract for two hundred twenty-four months [*sic*]. "Boy, that was beautiful. I lived like a king."

The Black History of Tampa project

He hopes that some of the teachers he worked with for twenty-four years will be able to help. The people doing the project "are young and energetic." He hopes that they and the coordinator, who will be named later, can come up with something that would be "very presentable" to the public. He didn't know any of the people before last Thursday, "but I am impressed—and we coaches are not easily impressed—with the eagerness and the anxiousness of these people whom I'm about to work with."

Some of the people he knows

He lists some of the people he knows:

Mr. John Green, social studies teacher at Hillsborough High School. He just quit being an assistant coach. He is sixty-six or sixty-seven. Black teachers were not paid on an equal basis with white teachers.

Mr. Michael Rodriguez, "who is one of the greatest musicians that came from anywhere."

He worked closely with these two men, and they are still active. When they started they were in their twenties and were paid fifty dollars a month.

Mr. Bethel's football players

Alton White¹, assistant to the mayor, was a fullback. Andre White, a community action agency equal opportunity man, was an end. Perry Harvey [Jr.]² was his first center. Mitchell William was an end, as was Oscar Johnson, the dean of boys at Hillsborough High School. The Brady boys were also on the football team. Dr. William Andrews was a great kicker “whose daddy wouldn’t let him play; that’s Mr. C. Blythe Andrews.”

Mr. Bethel was involved with all of these people and many others, and didn’t realize what was going on until after he stopped being a coach. They had a banquet for him, and he couldn’t believe it when he saw all of them.

Tampa’s black athletes

Black people in Tampa have always been winners in athletics. Mr. Bethel didn’t start this, he just inherited it, but was able to keep it going and it still continues.

The father of basketball in Tampa was Robert Goldwire. Before him there was no basketball among blacks. Every living older person in Tampa has credited him with it.

Rev. Bennett

Rev. Bennett was one of the people who preceded Mr. Bethel at Middleton. They first met while Mr. Bethel was at Tuskegee; as a freshman, he was statistician for the P.E. department. Rev. Bennett was a coach and brought a basketball team up [to Tuskegee] from Tampa in 1941. Tuskegee was hosting the national basketball tournament for black people, and the Middleton team had won the Florida state championship. He thought it was in Middleton, Florida, since he didn’t know anything about Tampa. Most of the people who were on that team are present for the lecture. That was Mr. Bethel’s first encounter with anyone from Tampa.

William C. Smith

William C. Smith was the man who came after Bennett. He was a math teacher; in those days, the coach was just a man on staff who was interested in the boys who were trying to play ball. They had no equipment. Mr. Bethel befriended [Crockett] Farnell, who was coach at Hillsborough at the time,³ and was able to get his old hand me downs.

The 1942 Middleton basketball team

This basketball team [that went to Tuskegee] almost won the national championship in 1942. They lost to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the finals.

Robert Gardner, who is now in personnel at the county school office, was on the team, even though he wasn’t very tall.

Jim Williams was head coach at Florida A&M a few years ago, and is now in human relations at Brandon High.

Ben More is coach at Coleman Junior High.

¹ Alton White has also contributed an interview to the USF Libraries Oral History Program.

² Perry Harvey was later interviewed for the Black History of Tampa project.

³ He later became school superintendant.

Clarence Argo has been a mailman for twenty-five years.

Willie “Gus” Hendricks is supervisor at the chemical plant.

The Felder family

When Mr. Bethel first moved to Tampa he lived with the Felders. They were “what was called subcontractors, as black layers—we would ordinarily call them brick masons, but they are black layers.” There were a whole bunch of Felders, most of them boys, and “you’d be surprised at the buildings that those fellows built here.” They didn’t contract; the contractor made the contracts and they did the work.

The Felder boys were Mitchell, Gordon, Henry, Freddie, Benjamin, Bobby and Billy; the girls were Thelma and Hazel. They built things for years, long before Mr. Bethel came and long after he was with them. Most of them are retired; the younger ones went into other businesses.

People who contributed to the schools

Franklin D. Miles is still at one of the elementary schools; he was named Supervisor of Black Schools.

Mrs. Edgar B. Hamilton was a personal friend of Mr. Bethel’s. She was a principal at Harlem School; she must be ninety by now.

Mr. Lockhart is deceased. [The transcriber could not understand what was said here.]

Mr. Blake, for whom Blake High School was named is deceased. He was from South Carolina.

Fred Smith was supervising principal in Plant City back when they had the “strawberry system.” The black kids only went to school when they didn’t have to pick strawberries. “That was a crazy situation.” Eventually the issue came up that they had to go to school with the rest of the kids. [Crockett] Farnell was superintendent then. The people in east Hillsborough County didn’t want that to happen. “Not only the black kids, the white kids too” [had to pick strawberries?].

Lutrell Bing is the assistant to the superintendent now; he’s still around. He was principal of Glover Elementary School.

Ray Charles

Ray Charles and Mr. Bethel used to walk hand in hand down the streets in Tampa. He sat with him many times “on the stool.” Mr. Bethel does “a little bit of entertainment” himself; “I did and I still do make a joyful noise.”

Ray Charles was originally from Greenville, Florida; he came to Tampa in 1959. His daughter graduated from Middleton High; Mr. Bethel was there and Ray went to her graduation. “In all of his doings he started right here.”

Other black musicians

James Nabby is with the Blue Notes; he came from Tampa and his sister is still here.

Lewis McClain is a good friend of Mr. Bethel's; he is a famous jazz musician.

James Brown started on Central Avenue. In late 1946, Mr. Bethel used to pay a quarter to go in and hear him every night.

B.B. King, the blues king [also played on?] Central Avenue.

Bobby Blue Bland's ex-wife is owner of the ACE Lounge now.

Arthur Price also started in Tampa, although he was born in Pennsylvania. "I know Arthur eats more collard greens and black-eyed peas than I do." He had a tremendous voice.

Cotton Curt was famous when Mr. Bethel arrived. He used to play on Central Avenue a lot. His theme song was "Watermelon Smiling on the Vine," which he played all the time.

Nathaniel Pruce Jackson won the Harvest Moon Ball in New York in 1949. He was also a famous boxer at one time.

Selena Causeau is "tremendous;" she is just getting her start. The younger black people know her.

Bill Robinson is now in Miami Beach with the Quails. Mr. Bethel was his basketball coach.

Charlie Brantley was famous among blacks; his whole family lived in Tampa.

Julian "Cannonball" Adderley started in Tampa. He is a close relative of the Felder family. He and his brother Nat visited them just before he died. They stayed with the Felders and befriended Mr. Bethel.

Bobby Felder, one of the Felder boys, plays at presidential balls and "stuff" all the time. He is a musician in Washington and will come home to Tampa to retire soon, although he is younger than Mr. Bethel.

Judy Bangles went to Middleton while Mr. Bethel was there; she's at the Hawaiian Village now.

Roy Hamilton, the great singer, married a girl from Tampa. He was here all the time. He made the song "You'll Never Walk Alone" famous.

There are some spiritual groups like the Mighty Clouds of Joy; they started in Tampa.

The person who invented the "Mashed Potato" dance was one of Mr. Bethel's basketball players. His name is Carlton Cole. He became a disc jockey at WTMP, and is now a minister in New York.

Lewis Beecham is still in Tampa. Al Green, the famous singer who later went into the ministry, also started in Tampa.

All of the famous musicians played in Tampa. Count Basie hung around all the time. Duke Ellington was here for a while too, but he didn't start in Tampa.

Jersey Joe Walker was from Tampa. His real name was Carl Cream. His brother is Joe Frazier, the famous boxer. Carl lives about four doors down from Mr. Bethel, and his son Andrew is a basketball player. Joe was there all the time to see his brother, so they are close to Mr. Bethel.

Tampa's black baseball players

When Mr. Bethel came to Tampa there was a team called the Pepicola Giants. The baseball players on that team were "so fantastic it was unbelievable," and many of them are still in Tampa. He has a list of about thirty names. A few of them did get up to the minor leagues, although they were all "over the hill" by the time integration was started.

Integration

Tampa schools were officially integrated in 1964, but athletics didn't really start until 1969. Mr. Bethel's football team played in the first integrated game in the city or county. It was not a mixed team; it was a black school against a white school. Some of the schools were predominantly black and others were predominantly white. In 1964 there was one black kid at Hillsborough High School. Integration in athletics didn't mean mixed teams; it meant a black school with black athletes played against a white school with white athletes.

They played several games against King High School. King won the first; Middleton won all the rest. "It was very emotional."

Mr. Bethel's football players

Eleven boys from his football team made it into professional football: John White (Houston Oilers), James Soney (Buffalo Bills), Israel Lane (Philadelphia Eagles, St. Louis Rams), Carlton Oakes (Oakland Raiders, World Football League), Lloyd Mumfard (Miami Dolphins, Indianapolis Colts), Nathaniel Dawsey (New England Patriots), James Bwins (New York Jets), Robert English (New York Jets), Theodore Washington (Houston Oilers), Andre White (Denver Broncos), and Charlie Water (New York Jets).

Blake High School's football players

Blake was Middleton's adversary. Mr. Bethel knows several boys from Blake who got into professional football, but he is not certain of all of them as "you can keep up with your own more than any others." Earl Edwards (Cleveland Browns, San Francisco 49ers, Buffalo Bills), Rudolph Sims (Canadian League), Willie McMillan (New England Patriots, Seattle Seahawks), Leon McQuay (Canadian League, New York Giants).

Tampa's players

The black community has definitely represented itself well in professional football. The basketball league has been better than football as far as statewide players are concerned. The black boys from the integrated schools are still doing quite well. Mr. Bethel feels that both

Middleton and Blake were represented “quite well” in the city of Tampa and in the National Football League. “We don’t know why, because our best records were in basketball; it’s just one of those things that happens.”

The black Cubans contributed a lot, too. “A lot of the things that they did in athletics and schools were done before I got here.”

Theresa Manuel

Theresa Manuel was the first woman from Tampa to participate in the Olympics, which was the Summer Games in 1948 in London. She was Mr. Bethel’s P.E. teacher, whom he met in college in Tuskegee. She came there during his second year of college. Tuskegee didn’t have a track program, but she was a natural runner. For a long time she was co-holder of one of the women’s hurdling records. “She learned it all there while she was at Tuskegee with us.”

When Theresa Manuel graduated, a few years after Mr. Bethel, she was hired as a P.E. instructor [in Tampa]. She won championships as a basketball coach for Middleton High School while he was there. She is currently girls’ basketball and track coach at Hillsborough High School. “She’s like a sister to me.”

Leon Claxton

[In response to a question] “Leon and I were real close.” Their children went to St. Peter Claver [Catholic School] together. His daughter works at the sheriff’s department. Leon was a master showman with the Royal American Shows for years, the one that the big show at the fair. His wife is still alive; she owns Claxton Manor on Cypress Street, which was the first black hotel in Tampa.

Michael Rodriguez

Michael Rodriguez is a band director for Middleton Junior High. “He’s the man that started it all.” He can do anything with music. He is a “Spanish speaking fellow,” very close to Mr. Bethel. He lives on Seventeenth Street now and is soon marrying an ex-sister in law of Mr. Bethel’s. “I don’t know of any musicians ever come by here that he didn’t have anything to do with. He was really the start of it all, I’m sure.”

Mr. Bethel does not know what preceded him. “He did it in his home, at clubs” like the Watts Sanderson Blue Room and the Old Apollo Bar Room, where all the greats like Duke Ellington and Count Basie played. All of the famous musicians played on Central Avenue. “When I came here, there would always be a pack of people. The room was swaying [with] people dancing.”