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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
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[Transcriber's Note: Interview starts mid-sentence.]

Dorothy York: —in school, even junior high school, dark complexion girls just did not get a chance at (inaudible). Fair girls, girls with long hair, wavy hair, that type of thing, it was just something that was (inaudible) and it was really, in older times, in slavery, and I felt it very keenly. We had the system wherein it depended upon what family that someone gave a vehicle or passport to that person's (inaudible) and I have always felt that to become a teacher I want to be able to somewhat exonerate some of the asinine orientation that had been somewhat embedded in (inaudible).

This is one of the nature of things that I would say that blacks have (inaudible) the color barrier that we ourselves enforce upon each other—and we are concerned mainly about Tampa, because Tampa, I would say, gave the overtone of the country—I imagine the South in particular, because just as we had in some areas of the South, who has been of a certain hue to the long concerned churches. That was an overtone here, not so much for the churches as it were in the educational arena. I've always felt very, very strongly.

Otis Anthony: That was very slowly in the sororities and fraternities—

DY: Of course, because in the late forties [1940s], in the early forties [1940s]—I dare not name the institutions in the South—black girls just didn't have a chance at some of those schools because, as I understand it—I don't have research to bear me out, just word of mouth—that some students were actually set up for (inaudible) and many of those students were very light complexioned. (inaudible) couldn't very well name those students, because they were quite embarrassed and some students are graduates of those schools.

I do know I have a cousin who was in such a predicament, who had a nervous breakdown at that time when nervous breakdowns were not feasible for blacks anyway; we were

just—something was wrong with us. That terminology was not in vogue at that time. But she had some emotional problems, because she was in a black community but because of her skin color she was ostracized, and it had a tremendous effect upon her to the point that she had to transfer to avoid insanity.

OA: That's interesting. How do you think that teaching has changed in terms of the class over time in the black community? You know, at one time the black teacher was, so to speak, the high class member of the community. It seems to me that the image in that role has changed a great deal.

DY: Yes, it has changed quite a bit. I think that image was because of the fact that there were so few jobs for blacks. And of course, to be a teacher or minister were some of the high aims and aspirations that blacks could cope with, or endeavor, or to try to reach that height or that goal, and for that reason many persons would look up to teachers as a person to set the tone or to be the guiding light or the caution light, and put in those terminologies because there were not many jobs available. And that was the epitome of success when a person became a teacher; he has really escalated to just about the highest level he could attain. So this is one reason that the teacher has been looked upon as a savior to a point, for many of the black American students.

OA: I get the feeling that black teachers were more race conscious than they verbalized, and now looking back at it all, I think they hid a lot. Is that true, or can we say that maybe a lot of them wasn't as race conscious?

DY: Well, I think on a whole the black teachers were race conscious unaware, because the black teachers were mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, nurses, doctors, counselors and maids for black students. So we have that constant of unaware race pride that was not really vocalized as such, but there was a certain amount of love and care that we just had to do more than our jobs actually called for because our children needed more. And even today (inaudible) of teachers still have that reflection; we still try to be the protective agent for our children because we've learned that. The black female teacher—we are even more so inclined than the male black teacher, because of the role that we have played throughout slavery as black women (inaudible). So this would parallel with the black teacher.

OA: What has integration brought for the black student and the black teacher? What are the advantages and what are the disadvantages? What kind of things do we need to reach back and have for our kids and for ourselves in education?

DY: Well, the advantages and disadvantages—that's a very hard question. Answer, I feel that some of the advantages have been the fact that we are able to acquire or to believe the persons who have always been attuned to good facilities, first class, to a point as far as educational materials. I think that is a good feature about it.

OA: Do you really think we have excess, are we really utilizing them? The black students?

DY: Yes.

OA: Has it helped, given the frustration in the atmosphere?

DY: Well, the material things were one thing, the thing were another. So that would be somewhat hard to assess. I do feel that the material gains have been very much advantageous, but of course from an emotional point of view, a great many blacks are disproportionately isolated. This isolation is more or less internalized. Sometimes a student does not reflect this verbally, but a black teacher, a dedicated black teacher, can always pick up on this type of situation. Because we can feel this; it's part of our roots that we just feel certain things. And then of course, we are playing a dual role, too, in those situations, because we must be fair. Fairness is the main gain (inaudible). But in the meantime we call it sense and sensibility as far as black teachers are concerned. It's a dual role. There is also the idea of knowing your roots.

OA: Tell me this—I understand there was a black teachers' organization. Were you ever part of the black teachers organization?

DY: Yes, I was.

OA: Could you tell us a little bit about when it started or when did it exist?

DY: Well, I became part of the black teachers' association in the early fifties [1950s], and it was most vital.

OA: What was the name of it?

DY: The Florida State Black Teachers' Association. All blacks, statewide. (inaudible) at that time was our leader, and it was most essential for us because that was the only thing that we had to look for, too, because we had not been invited and we were not wanted in any other organization, and even [when] we were taken gradually into the larger organization. Of course, we were just there. We were able to attend the meetings, but we could not even go with them to even have a drink of water because we were segregated.

So it was just the idea of going to the same church, but you sit in different pews after the meeting. You go into the church, but you had another route to take after a certain juncture. After a certain session we would have the lunch break. At the lunch break each man goes on his own. If you're black you had your track; if you're white you knew you had your track. So the black track was always a one-way street. We knew where we had to go.

OA: Did the Florida State Teachers' Association take an advocacy role, or was it a very diplomatic organization? What was their style, and how did it approach the problems of black teachers—or was it more socially oriented?

DY: No, no, it was not socially oriented at all. It was more or less designed to apprise us of what was coming—and keep in mind that this association began far before the 1954 Supreme Court decision¹. It was during that time that we were always—I wouldn't want to use the word preached to, but I guess you've heard great lectures on getting prepared for that day. I didn't know sometimes whether it was a judgment or a doomsday, which day it was they were referring to, but we were totally out of line with some of the things that we were told at that time.

And keep in mind, too, that in the fifties [1950s] not only did the association officials lecture in part on this—it wasn't as blatant as some of the principals throughout the South would lecture upon or give these great sermons to friends of mine to get them ready, because one day they wouldn't be teaching all blacks. It was more or less a brainwashing situations. We were just as fearful—when I say we, some of the teachers, just as the Americans were fearful when Russia initiated Sputnik in 1957. We were just running, we didn't know where we were going. Something was happening but [we were] not knowing; we were unaware that we [were] more prepared than people thought we were. We were over-prepared, mainly because we could improvise. We could do anything.

OA: Do you remember one example of anything they wanted or asked for that that addressed itself to the problems of black teachers? Can you remember any issues?

DY: The only issue that I can recall many years back was Mr. Ben Griffin—a former principal, retired now—along with Mr. Bates of the Central Life Insurance Company—and there were others who were very much instrumental or say, vocal enough to express certain inequalities. And that group actually went to court and stood up to say that we were unequally paid. Also the insinuation was that schools were also very much separate and—in fact, I was just talking to Ben Griffin about this thing yesterday.

OA: We interviewed him. Can you describe (inaudible) black administrators and supervisors and department heads? The conditions they were confronting, the administrators, supervisors, that type of thing?

DY: Yes. The thing that confronted them were the thing that confronted black Americans in general. On a whole, sure, they had a job. But many of those guys would cringe because they were (inaudible) power structure people. It's the same as going to the Geneva conference, and you just have your mouth closed because you're not asked to be on the agenda. They weren't given an agenda—and this is what black Americans don't understand. We have the agenda, we have the hidden agenda, then you got the program.

OA: That's very true. Tell me this: who were the teachers, the kind of teachers that you admire? The ones that had the philosophical orientation that we had to be better than the rest, twice as good. The ones that painted that into the heads of kids.

DY: I'll be frank with you. I just don't recall any teachers per se, because I was always the type of person that was hard to lead. Many things that people said to me, I never could

¹ Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.

accept it, because I saw myself in a system wherein there is a dual type situation of preach one thing and do another to a certain point. So I just can't come out and name a person who actually embedded anything in me other than encouraged me to want to succeed.

But as far as having that great impact upon my life, I really could not just pinpoint a person. I guess I could pinpoint one person, just by one note a lady wrote in my (inaudible) paper one day. It was Ms. Beatrice Stewart. I had done a fantastic job, she thought, on the paper, and that note read, "Continue to do this type of work. Success is sure to follow." That made me very, very proud, because here is a person that has taken time to read everything I had written to come up with that. And I really wanted to do something—not because of that note, because someone had believed in me. Someone thought that I could do something. And then I had something beyond my home environment, someone who cared and that helped me quite a bit. Never did she know that note touched my heart, and I imagine there were many notes she had place on a history of papers. I don't know; I only know that my note touched my heart.

OA: Can you remember of the segregated crises in the school system that just stands out?

DY: Oh, surely. The textbooks, for instance. I don't know if I could get my hands on one or not, but some time ago we had a textbook with a special stamp, "Suitable for colored pupils only." We had the hand-me-downs. We had secondhand everything. When the students from the other schools in the county retired, their books then were transferred to us. That's true. When you were at school at Blake High School we had a chemistry department where the aprons, for instance—the aprons were no longer needed at some of the other schools in the county, white schools. (inaudible) (laughter) So those are some things that really stand out.

OA: So the same is true for expenditures and—

DY: Oh, yes. Another thing that really stands out now—I can't say why—who's responsible, I cannot say—but I do know this. When we integrated, that money raising scene died. Why, where money fell from trees to buy all those fine pretty things, I have no idea. But God sent some heavenly money from those rains to get everything straight after the schools were phased out.

OA: What was the reaction of the black teachers going into white schools and the white teachers coming into black schools?

DY: Well, the frustration element was at its highest. I suppose the same as death. Some people fear death because you don't know what to expect. This is analogy of that type of situation. I can imagine it's just as frustrating for whites as for blacks. For whites, I'm sure that rationales for their frustrations than blacks. I think blacks on a forward path, something so embedded that they were not just quite ready, wherein in white America—the white teachers, they were not ready for that situation. I think their readiness came about mentally as it came about for blacks. It's not that blacks were not mentally

prepared, it's that they had just been hogwashed, brainwashed that they weren't prepared, and they found out they were too prepared.

OA: It has to do with that old cultural kind of dialectic where we know them better than they know us. What about the discipline problem? Why didn't we read much about a discipline problem during segregation?

DY: Well, I'll give you a good example. We lost our black children. They felt that black teachers didn't love them anymore. When we were in control of our children, we didn't have many problems. We didn't have to have problems, because we were the substitute mothers and fathers for the children. They were in good hands with us—you know, the slogan for Allstate². They were in good hands with us, and the parents knew that.

Well, of course, once they were integrated to the (inaudible) many teachers, I do feel, let students somewhat have the way that we did not do, and then that was a new life for them. I think many students felt that they had more freedom, unaware that it really wasn't freedom; it was something else that was not verbalized. I've written about this several times. Well, I feel that any teacher who lets a student act in any way wants to just in order to appease this student—that's not love, that's harmful racism. That's what I feel. I expressed that in April 1978 under the heading "Teacher's Impartiality is Necessary." I don't think that teachers should let a black student get by with more than a white student, or a black teacher let a white child get by with more than a black student. I mean, look at Head Start³. Head Start is full of racism.

OA: Let's change the subject. Any time you've been living in Tampa, you've had a chance to observe the progress or no progress of blacks. Have you seen any progress? And I'm speaking more now politically. Have you seen any progress? Are we coming to any kind of maturity? Where do we stand? Let's back up some and talk about where we were.

DY: You mean politically or the atmosphere in general for blacks? It's going to be hard to say it; I must say what I believe. To a point, we are going back. Why? It is because of the black middle class. The black middle class is responsible for much of this. Why? Because the black middle class, to a point—people are just like the *Tale of Two Cities*, in two worlds. One where they cannot escape, one where they are not told they are welcome, so they just walk a tightrope. I really feel this way about the black middle class. We bug each other, we've forgotten where we've been, we don't want to hear about our roots anymore. That's degrading, always saying, "Let's forget about the past, we don't need to live in the past." It's the wise man who lives in the past; it's the wise man who learns from the past and gets a new man.

OA: But that's rather apathetic or confusing. Are we saying that they are just confused or apathetic?

DY: Oh, they are confused. No, not apathy. No, of course not, they're confused. I can cite

² Insurance company, whose slogan is "You're in good hands with us."

³ United States Department of Health and Human Services program.

many examples.

Well, let's bring up some good points. We can live where we want to live now, thank God for that. This has been a deterring factor to many persons. We don't know where each other lives anymore. (inaudible) Don't get me wrong, I'm not perpetuating for—I'm not saying that Blacks should not live by the river, by the ponds, by the lakes, mountains, hills, valleys, or deserts. I'm not saying that. All I'm saying is this: we need to reassess our roots. Come back to our roots, we are bypassing them. We cannot bypass that; our color won't let us. Black is total. It's just like love is commitment, you cannot escape it. When we try to escape this, we're frustrated.

OA: But isn't a certain degree of that fear? A lot of it fear?

DY: Yes, fear of others. Fear of being trapped.

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

DY: —his horizons growing. Many blacks have a sense of false pride, or they are wearing a façade, and this is essential because this is the passport to making it in the mainstream. But in making it, we are bypassing our brothers and sisters. Now, I'm not saying that you should give your brother your shirt; don't do that. I don't mean that. In the meantime, they are your brothers and your sisters. If you rise, you'll only be able to rise so far until you are able to pull someone down. You can't leave (inaudible) behind you. (inaudible) Do you agree with that?

OA: I agree with that.

DY: That's where I'm coming from.

OA: You talked about fear. What about confidence? What I'm saying is I get the feeling from talking to people that they no longer believe that black people can assert themselves, that we can move together as one. (inaudible)

DY: Well, on a whole, the black middle class is concerned about striving as a single entity, not as a group. So we always say, hang as a group, or hang as an individual. So, we're moving, but we're more or less moving on an individual basis; we're not moving group-wise. Because if you make it, then you're complacent. You are coming to reach that epitome, what we call success—what that term means, I don't really know. But in the meantime, once we make it, then of course we are—you know, once you get in that tower, it's a strange thing, your way up there. I'm not advocating negroology; I don't mean that at all. (inaudible) I want you to perceive what I'm saying, from that point of view, from that vantage point. (inaudible)

OA: So that's where the basis—since we are only moving as individuals, not as a collective, that's where the whole basis for the rationale that I'm hearing constantly deals with everybody saying we have to be responsible. And using responsible individually—

yet, I have been trying to understand it because a couple of times I have allowed myself to be put on a guilt trip about the fact that I only see things collectively sometimes. Sometimes it's difficult for me to speak individually, and when I talk and when I analyze, I see things in terms of the collective. I'm always looking at the collective, and I continue to get this from black people now—and now that I think about it they are all saying this about what we have to be doing as individuals. There is a great stress on that. To me, I think there is a retrogression in that philosophy.

DY: Sure, that is a personal nature, survival. Your survival. That's primitive. We're going backwards. But it can happen. We have great potential to do something.

Let's check out the fifties [1950s], for instance. We had people in Alabama who did it. We tried in Tallahassee, Florida. We did it in Augusta, Georgia. It can be done in Tampa. But we are concerned about making it independently—or let's say family-wise. It's hard. It's from independence to collectively. Point, counterpoint. Family-wise. It's hard to break into some of those families. You just can't get there. Try to break in there, you just can't do it. It's just one of those things. I hate to sound so dismal but it's a lost generation, it's in the lost and found. But I don't know what our last hope is. But we're pathetic. We are pathetic. No class lines, because of our thinking on hold. And I say on hold. They're responsible.

OA: Since the middle class has been the focal point of our problem, the catalyst for change would be the poor people conforming to some type of (inaudible) what?

DY: Of course, we need to have some grassroots people to help to generate some of their thinking. We have been dependent too long on just some people in our community. I realize there is a president of the United States. I realize we have a government. I realize we have a mayor. I realize how the system runs. But it's time now that we get people from the grass and bring them up. Just a blade of grass can change everything. You don't do anything unless you see certain families, certain people, because you feel that if I get that approval from these people that that's that. I don't need to have any more feedback.

This is what (inaudible) said. You think about persons in housing projects or other persons who are not as fortunate to be on a river, or persons who are able to have two or three split-level houses knowing what they are doing with a style like that, but it's getting to be, I guess, an advantage. I thought West Virginia was just fine; they just live in those hills, but we just make these extra things just getting up there. That's good. (inaudible) Much of this is been explored in my forthcoming book⁴.

OA: What do you think about our political self?

DY: Well, for one thing, we've got to stop being petty. We have someone who's running for an office or what have you, we can't go around talking about "We don't want to give any money, he won't speak, he wears expensive clothes." We need to get away from that type of junk, that's not important. There we have to come to a sense of pride and a sense

⁴ Referring to *Blacks' Survival for the 1980s and Beyond*, published by Valkyrie Press in 1980.

of solidarity and let that person get where he is, where he came from, who got him where he is, and then his redemption will be based upon what he perceives from persons who have made a commitment, financial or otherwise, to have that type faith in him to be where he is.

But this pettiness—this is our main going back point. We cannot survive with that, because we are so small. In regards to what a person's station might be as an American, a black American, we cannot put him down—put her down—because this person does not speak. This is the epitome of stupidity, and it really says that we are small. It goes back to a theory of crabology versus negroology, and we need to be able to ostracize those entities from our vernacular.

OA: That's the way I see it. As long as we are going to take the time to make the person accountable, (inaudible) he has.

DY: I don't know how much this tape is on and—no, no, what I'm saying is, you take yourself in what you are doing now. I'm glad that you are in this position. How many persons are going to glory you because you have been chosen for this? I want someone from the grassroots. We need this. Why now? Need I say more about that subject?

That's why I was so proud of you guys on the TV [television], in the [United States] Navy, and other West Virginians who were not mentioned, because we have some unsung heroes, and this is very, very important. Every time we pick up a paper we should not see (inaudible). That doesn't make sense. You don't see Jimmy Carter trying to watch TV, do you? (inaudible) good news. Not because he is good, but it's just not very plain, is it? Think about it.

OA: Maybe we need a political organization designed to cater to blacks, and we made the problems of divisions in the black community.

DY: We really need that and here again; we cannot wait for one segment to start it. It has to start from (inaudible)

OA: And it can be done.

DY: See, what happened was this. Just the way the persons could come together and get this project going, black history to be publicized. This is how we can get other things done too. Just in small groups, you don't just [have] certain people do it. (inaudible)

OA: I just have two more questions. I'd to know where you think we are going with education, schools and discipline, this type of thing. Where do you think we are headed?

DY: Well, I'll be frank with you. I will sound somewhat braggadocios trying to answer that question because I'll seem like I'm trying to promote my book, but I'm hoping that the new (inaudible). This is one reason I attempted to do what I have done thus far to get to the black American students, the new land, black and white, and this is why I

perpetuate the whole thing. That with the new land, planting in favor, fertilize with hope and water with love, we can make it. We can survive it now. We can make it if we want to. There is no way we can't. Slaves made it, we need to go back there and watch out.

OA: (laughter) (inaudible)

DY: Let me explain this to you, as I did point out in the autobiographical information (inaudible) very, very small, (inaudible) and hopefully just going to the page (inaudible) and hope I didn't embarrass anyone. But I made it plain that the book is not a panacea, but it is designed for all persons who are concerned about making America a promised land for all people. Equally important, I feel that the book has hope for black Americans too, because the world knows that America has long lived in chains and shackles from black Americans' hands and feet. But what has happened to us, we have chains and shackles in our minds, and once chained and shackled on your mind baby, you can't make it. That's why we can't move because the chains—we don't have them here, we have them up there; that's the main place for the chains, up there. So that's what I said to my people.

OA: Listen, I sort of developed a new thing, I'm trying to—this is sort of my own kind of thing, but it's something that interests me. I'm trying to get a feel from the people we are interviewing, sort of round out the interview with this question. This is that last thing in our book. What does Africa mean to you?

DY: Well, I'll tell you what. What Africa means to me? It means home. It means my ancestors. It means a vision. It means tombstones. It means epitaphs. It means skeletons. It means worms—our part of those worms—that crawl around. Nobody sees me, nobody knows me, nobody hears me, because I'm crawling, I'm moving all the time. Africa? My home. I'm going to Africa. I'm not going to stay; I have too much invested in the United States. You can't return by air or boat, we return by (inaudible).

OA: This is the Black History staff interviewing Ms. Dorothy York, August 8, 1978 at 4:41 PM.

end of interview