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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
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Edwin G. Artest: —I was born in Georgia, 1912, and I attended school in Georgia up until age fourteen, which was the year of 1926, when I came to Florida then. And went to school here and, of course, I have been in Florida—Florida has been my residence every since.

I entered school here in the junior high school. At that time, Benjamin Mays was the secretary of the Tampa Urban League, and he was very interested in teaching Negro history. And he organized a Negro history class. I don't remember how many students there were—but from the junior high schools, I was one of those people in that first class. When he taught us it inspired us by, and always remember that one of incidents he quoted was that he and his brother, they lived on a farm somewhere, and he was determined to leave that farm. I don't think his brother did. He [Benjamin Mays] was determined to leave and he did—he did go toward advancing himself, and at that time, well restoring images where he had advanced thus far.

Well, I continued school and I finished high [school] here at Booker T. Washington. Of course, I might back up a little and say that before coming here, before reaching the age fourteen—now this is a thing many people may wonder about, but there was a man here. His name was Singleton, didn't know that this actually happen. In my home town where I was born, Savannah, Georgia, I work in Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company store. I was just an errand boy, but they allow me to wait on people. I got very, very good at—they recognized as a kid—I was very, very good they said. At that time, they didn't have computers and you had to figure the bill on paper sacks and pencil. I was recognized as being pretty fast and accurate on it. And at one time, I do know that they reported me as being a clerk in the store and was recognized by many people in the a city as being a clerk.

Then I worked at a dairy, a creamery dairy. At that time they was called creameries. And I was still under fourteen and I was so efficient I was hired as a delivery boy, but I was

put in charge of creamery, the bottling, making of the buttermilk, churning of the buttermilk, and I worked there and I was considered as the foreman of the creamery. And then I was asked by some other people of—

Pause in recording

EA: So I came to Florida and back I came to Florida and finished school. Well, while here I carried the *Tampa Morning Tribune* from 1926 through 1931.

Fred Beaton: What were the conditions of Blacks, say, in the twenties [1920's] in Tampa?

EA: Well, I know that some time after I came, that the banks broke. The banks had a boom or something and many people lost money. Of course, it looked like before the boom, it was before the bust, before twenty-six [1926], look like people were doing better or pretty well, because many people had bought some homes. I know of some many people who had bought some homes. But after the banks closed, why things got pretty tough and it was rough, up until, through 1933 when Roosevelt came and brought about the New Deal, so it was pretty rough.

I do remember groceries sold, they were very low, get five pounds of flour—that was about fifteen cent for five pounds. I remember when you could get Jewel lard for eight cent a pound. I remember they had bread, I think it was Sally Ann bread, you could buy five cent a loaf. It was smaller than the big loaf, but I don't think the big loaf cost more than eight or ten cent a loaf at that time. But it was very difficult to get the money to buy it, because a man making \$18.00 a week was a pretty high salary—a woman would make \$6.00 or \$8.00 a week—and therefore you didn't have too much money to buy much with, so it was pretty tough.

FB: Were you here during the Depression also?

EA: Yeah, I was here during the Depression. What year was the Depression? What year are you referring to as the Depression, after twenty-six [1926]?

FB: After twenty-six [1926].

EA: Around thirty-three [1933]? Yeah, yeah, during the Hoover days. That's when everything was a little tough, but we got along, my family got along pretty well, because we were carrying the *Tribune*. Now to give you an example, the best that I can remember, the *Tribune* was about fifteen cent a week, and we paid about seven cent for a week's paper, so we made about eight cent. And we had a pretty large size route and so my family got along pretty well, because we just happen to have had a good opportunity, but that wasn't the regular trend of things. And my dad lost some money in the bank when the bank closed. We lost some money in the bank and were never able to retrieve it.

FB: From Booker T., did you go into college or what?

EA: Yes, from Booker T., I finished Booker T. in 1931 and I went on to Florida A&M [Agricultural & Mechanical University]. I went to Florida A&M, went to Florida A&M for two years and at that time, I had a kind of independent attitude or idea. I wanted to take care of myself and I remember that when I finished high school, my father wanted to buy me a blue suit to wear and he would have brought a more expensive one than I brought, but I had money, cause I was working with him carrying the paper or whatnot, so I wanted to buy the suit myself.

Then I went to Florida A&M, I stayed two years and I didn't want my daddy to pay for my schooling, so I transferred from Florida A&M to Bethune Cookman [College] and got the associate degree. Started teaching school and then I went to—I finished the master's degree by sending myself to school. During the interim, why I served as educator in this county for thirty-nine years and one year in Manatee county for a total of forty years.

FB: Okay, what conditions were the schools during this time?

EA: Well, during that time, they were all totally segregated and in 1926 when I came here, why they had just built some schools, Booker T. Washington was one, Union Street school was another one, and I believe West Tampa Dunbar was another one. They had just built those schools somewhat recently and they were small, inadequate, you know, just enough to say you had a building and someplace for the children to sit. So they weren't anything that act surprisingly or anything that you could be particularly proud of. Of course, I imagine we were proud then because we didn't have that.

FB: Okay, what were conditions surrounding the equalization of teachers' salaries? How did that come about?

EA: Well, now when I was in school we had a superintendent that I can remember, that's E. L. Robinson, and I would hear him talk quite a bit and he didn't seem to be the type of individual who recognized or thought well of Blacks, Negroes. But he always spoke kindly and he thought what he was doing was good or adequate. And then after I started teaching in thirty-five [1935], I have heard him say that rather than equalize salaries he rather be dead, before his grave—and he believe in a differential in salary between Black and White—

FB: Okay, were there any attempts by the Black teachers to form, say a coalition or forming a group, to attack this?

EA: Yes, yes, several attempts were made. The best that I can remember, the first one that I remember, was made by Griffin, Noel Griffin. That was the first one that I can remember. He tried to corral the teachers to some extent, to the point of making a petition.

Oh, I've got to go back a little further than that. I think the first one was made by Ed Davis. Ed Davis, or even you may say Ed Davis and Noel Griffin, were the early ones.

The one that actually brought the teachers' salary to the head was made by Elsie Turner¹, as the defendant. And the teachers were organized and they came to the realization and I imagine got tired of being discriminated against, and organized, and we had a suit. And the suit was, the suit was taken over by the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall. He was the lawyer for the case, and it was won.

FB: Were there attempts by the School Board, say, to create circumstances where the teachers' salaries would be judged by other criteria?

EA: Well, in the beginning why, they just had the criteria was, you know just being Black and being White, was a differential in salary. But with the law, the one that made them come to the point wherein it would that all salaries would be judged, or classified or regulated, according to certain standards, for certain accomplishments. And it eventually came to that, and that's what it was based on, so that we had equal salaries.

FB: Okay, were the teachers judged on some type of merit up to equalization or something?

EA: Well, they tried that. They tried to judge it by merit in order to make a differential. A merit judgment, in my opinion, is a very lucid thing. I know when they did start judging the teachers—well like I say happily, why I was judged as one of the number ones, but there were some other teachers who were not. And so that played out, because they found out that it wouldn't hold water. It wouldn't stand up against them. So it was tried, but it faded out.

FB: After this case were there any attempts to keep the teachers, say the Black teachers, form a particularly group, or would the Black teachers come together in some type of, say, create a committee and all that?

EA: Well, in Florida, you know, we had segregated teacher organizations. We had what they called FEA and we had the FSTA. FSTA was the Florida State Teachers Association, FEA was the Florida Educational Association, two different organizations. The organizations over the years finally came to working somewhat in a coalition, working together, and they eventually were working pretty close. And we had chapters down here in the Florida FSTA which brought us together. And we would petition the School Board for our rights. But eventually the FSTA merged with the FEA and now we no longer have that, so that, might say that integration has taken over that (inaudible) walk that we had of FSTA fighting solely for Black teachers. Now, the integration part of us, where we don't have now an organization.

FB: Mr. Artest, I want to ask you something. Did you teach before segregation and desegregation?

EA: Yeah, yeah, both.

¹ On the paper transcript, there is a handwritten note that says "Correction Hilda Turner."

FB: Okay, were there any marked differences you could see between the two institutions as a whole?

EA: Well, you know, I would say yes. I'm going to say the difference, I don't know whether I'm answering your questions, but when we were all together, I want to put it that way, when we were all together, there seemed to have been more compassion on working with the group, than there seemed to be under integration, and well, that's the main difference. The children, you have to understand, you have to understand the two cultures and I do believe that the experiences, the different worlds that we live in, all those who live on the street. We live in two different worlds on the same street. And if you're not in that world, you don't understand it.

And that's why I feel that there is some type of difference in the two situations. We have to keep children in school. We had to beg children to come to school. We had to go get them, we had to dress them, we had to feed them, we even had to send them back home to get bathed. And all these other things, wherein the other person take them for granted and they wanted, we could understand it was an oversight or like of experience or like of desire to do better or be better and we know it had to be, so we would try to encourage them or corral them into doing what was necessary. Wherein people who don't expect that, they don't expect to do it, to do what we did, that might be a differences.

FB: Mr. Artest, how deal with the present day literacy tests, what they are giving to the first graders?

EA: Well, I have always felt that you must be academic. I've always felt that. I don't have no compunction on that. I do wish that all the children could pass the literacy tests. Now, I have seen some of the tests and I have not—I'm not at this point able to make a statement as to whether the test is really a racial, cause I haven't seen that much of it. I don't know, but I do think that it's a good thing and I would hope that all those children could pass it. If it's not racial and not knowing the racial side of it, if it's racial, then it's unfair. But I don't want to look, I don't want to think it is racial, cause I want to think it is academic and I want to think everybody should pass it.

FB: Okay, the reason why we brought this question up, we had several figures from this year that showed that 75 percent—well, between 70 and 75 percent of the Black kids that took this test flunked in math. Would you contribute this to their background or would [you] contribute to lack of disciplined, or academics?

EA: Well, I go back to this, you know we are supposed to go to school to learn. That's the only reason we have school, the only purpose we should go. And I must say regardless to what anybody might say, but just based on my experiences, Black teachers taught. Black teachers taught. They went the extra mile, but in many instances our children did not respond equally as did the teachers in their efforts to teach them.

Now the recent question was lack of inspiration, aspiration, and their family background, teacher expectation, self realization, I don't know. But I can say that in many instances—

I'm going to say, in too many instances, they didn't apply themselves as they should and like education, education is from the first day in school you're building. You're building what you are at twenty-two even when you finish college, you're building it and if you don't build strongly in grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 you are just that much weaker when you finish college. And so everyday application and I imagine the literacy test, the children that fail the literacy test, just indicate how much application they have put along the way. And I would hope that all of them be passing.

Now a remedy would be try to catch them up, sometimes we call it remedial work, where it may not remedial, may be work for the first time, maybe never learned the first time. So whether we can call it remedial or learning, is yet to be seen.

FB: Okay, last question. Mr. Artest, in your last two or three months serving principal in certain high schools that have come up with idea of a disruptive school. Do you think the is the solution to the problem of say, disruptive students?

EA: No, I don't; now I have a long story on that. I don't know what all to say here, but it's a fact—it's my belief we've always had disruptive children; you've been to school, you know it. That's nothing new to us, it's new to the other people. And this idea, as I see it and I'm against it, is just another way of trying to get out of the back, in the segregated situation. By saying that we are disruptive, now there may be plenty of recourse because disruption is just a matter of interpretation. And as I said, disruption is a matter of interpretation and many things that are going on in schools today that is interpretative as disruptive. But with us, they were things that we just had to handle and we handle it.

Now I can give one example I remember. The last school, junior high school came there once, all of a sudden they found out that we had a lot children coming late, a large portion coming in late. They always came late. We didn't have parents who would get up and get them out. Children had go on their own, parents weren't home when they left, nobody to send them and we had no other way of getting them to school late—I mean on time. So we worked within the school. We would give them demerits, whatever we could do, to try to persuade them. But they were coming late. But they looked upon that as something that couldn't be tolerated. But the children were coming to school, getting their lessons and making grades and getting promoted and going to school. But to them that could have been a disruptive child.

And then I can hope maybe other things which they make a lot of fuss about now, which we could handle during those days. Because at that time we had more corporal punishment, other types of punishment that we could handle, but today we can't do that type of thing, now, what you did then. Therefore under these situations, therefore, you don't have the ease of handling the situation like you had back then.

end of interview