

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell Race Relations Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 683

LILA SAVAGE

Interviewed

by

Ronald Rice

on

November 11, 1980

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell Race Relations Project

INTERVIEWEE: LILA SAVAGE

INTERVIEWER: Ronald Rice

SUBJECT: Schooling, racial situations, Farrell community

DATE: November 11, 1980

R: This is an interview with Mrs. Lila Savage for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Racial Tensions during the 1960's in Farrell, Pennsylvania, by Ronald J. Rice, at 913 Wallace Avenue, Farrell, Pennsylvania, on November 11, 1980, at 8:10 p.m.

Would you like to start out by telling us a little bit about what your childhood was like and what you remember about growing up?

S: I was born and raised until I was nine years old in Pulaski, Virginia. I was the oldest of three children. I had one brother Franklin, Freddie, and a sister Florence. With me being born in the south I came through racial tensions of blacks one place and whites in another. We had radios, but there wasn't any television. We had electric lights. We heated by coal and then finally we went to all electric heat, which still even to this day is mostly regular heat through the south. I attended an all black school in Pulaski.

R: High school?

S: I went to high school. I wouldn't have been able to go because the closest one was in Christianburg, and we were bused. It was common for us to be bused from one school to another. But since she moved to Farrell, she got to go and graduated from Farrell High School. Our grade school now is used for day care and we have a legal service in there. They taught us a lot as far as social things. They taught us that we had to succeed; we had to get ahead. Having all black teachers, they instilled in us that we should learn and remember what we had learned.

We had music, drama, which were fun; we would go and attend white schools and they would come to our school. We put on activities and that and played together.

R: What do you remember about your parents?

S: I remember my parents' cooking. My father was a cook all of his life and he was a very good cook. I remember him always playing the piano. We were a very close family because we did a lot of talking together and laughing and playing. My mother and father separated when I was at a very young age, so I had a lot of time to spend. In Pulaski your mother would have you for six months and your father would have you for six months. That way, each parent was always responsible to you, and that was carried through until we left and came to Pennsylvania. My mother and father were always a close family even after they separated.

R: What year was it that you came to Pennsylvania?

S: In 1947. My baby sister was two weeks old.

R: Where did you settle?

S: In Farrell, Pennsylvania, at 109 Wallace Avenue in the projects.

R: You attended a high school here in Farrell?

S: Yes.

R: What do you remember most about high school?

S: The kids. I think that we had one of the best relationships, black and white relationships. We didn't look at each other as that. We were more like a group of kids who were thrown in a melting pot and we just wanted to learn and have fun. Even now, when we see one another, we still have that closeness.

R: What year did you graduate from high school?

S: 1955.

R: What did you do when you graduated?

S: I stayed home with my mother for awhile until I decided to start raising a family.

R: When did you go into cosmetology?

S: I started that when my son Leonard was two years old. I wanted to get some kind of an educational background. I always wanted to go into the service, but my mother wouldn't permit it.

R: What were some of your chief interests at that time?

S: At that time I was just mostly a homebody.

R: Did you get a job in cosmetology?

S: No. I would do it awhile at home, maybe have three or four customers. I didn't get involved in anything in the community until my son went to school. Wherever my children went, that is where I would be. When he started school that's when I became involved in the P.T.A. and Little League. I did volunteer work; I started out as a classroom aide. I worked for one year as a teacher's aide. I was president of the state Head Start Program.

R: What was a typical day like for you in the early 1960's?

S: I would fix breakfast for my husband at 4:00, then feed the kids at 7:00. Then I would clean house and get ready to go to Head Start with my son Raymond. I would come back at 12:00, fix lunch. Then my children and I would take a nap between 1:00 and 2:00. Then I would clean some more, get supper ready, and start all over again washing and ironing.

R: Do you remember much about the community minority leaders in the 1960's? Do you remember the first time you ever heard about Dr. Martin Luther King?

S: Well, I first noticed him in the Jet; that's when he began to come out speaking, making his dippy, little comments on racial things. When I first heard about him, I read about him in the Jet. The Jet is a black magazine. This is where you hear a lot about our people. It keeps you informed all over the United States, plus Africa and different places like that. I read about him long before I heard him on television.

R: Would that be in the early 1960's?

S: Yes.

R: How did you feel about him?

S: I was indifferent.

R: Did any of your friends ever talk about him?

S: We would talk about him; we thought he was a great leader. A lot of times we felt he was setting himself up. We

- felt that he should have had more people so that he wouldn't have been singled out as one.
- R: Do you remember anything about rioting in other cities?
- S: Wats. I think Wats was in New York where they began to burn. I remember rioting in Washington D.C. I kept up with that quite a bit. We had some rioting here too.
- R: Could you recall any racial tensions growing in Farrell?
- S: I believe that the riot they had in Farrell was mostly of a few individuals. They had a group here that they called the Black Youth Action Committee. I think they caused a lot of tension.
- R: Would you call it a riot?
- S: I would have called it more breaking out, violence. The blacks really didn't fight the whites. It wasn't a racial riot because we were all concerned about our neighbors, whether they were black or white. We do have some problems here, even now. Jobs cause a whole lot of conflict.
- R: What was the sensitivity program?
- S: People from the police station, or community, or business would meet and you talked for three days. It was a very informal setting. You weren't allowed to leave; you had to stay there. You would just talk on how you feel about things.
- R: How was your life and your family's life, was it affected at all by the tensions? Did you feel there were any racial tensions in Farrell?
- S: It didn't affect me at all.
- R: How do you feel the police and governmental agencies handled some of the violence and tensions?
- S: I think it went fine. I didn't approve of some of the things. I think in the end the policemen made it worse than what it was, mostly by their attitude and conduct. Many policemen wanted to bring in dogs and other policemen, but a few of us in the neighborhood were able to talk to them. They went on home, but if they would have kept on doing what they were doing I think it would have really gone into something a lot worse.
- R: They probably added to it.
- S: They added to it more so, right.

- R: How about the curfew laws, do you think they did anything to add to the situation?
- S: That stopped it from being off the streets.
- R: A lot of people felt that forcing teen-agers to be in the house that early was absurd.
- S: I think the curfew in a way was good. I felt it kept them off the streets standing around. It's bad in the sense that they couldn't do activity things.
- R: How about the founding fathers, or the city government, do you think they could have prevented it?
- S: I don't think they would have been able to stop it. That would have been Mayor Tridione; he seemed to be very fair. He wasn't racial because he was very close to the blacks.
- R: Most of the violence occurred in the summer of 1969?
- S: Right.
- R: There was no black representation in the fire department?
- S: No.
- R: At the time did they have a common election?
- S: We just had a general election.
- R: Do you have the same policy now?
- S: No, we have gone to home rule. I think it would be fairer if we were allowed to have one from each district. That way you would get a better representation. Even now we only have one black. We still don't have the representation as far as the make-up of the community. It was hard to even get him on there. It's not easy for blacks to get on school boards and things, but I can't fault that to be a racial thing. I contribute that to a lot of our black leaders who also vote against the individuals who are running.
- R: You mentioned the Black Youth Action Committee, what do you remember about that?
- S: They were basing themselves, it seems, after the Panthers. I think we would have been further ahead here in Farrell if they would have stuck together. What they were fighting for was reformation for the kids, more black cheerleaders in the school and things, and better jobs.

- R: The action committee received a small grant for the cultural center, did it help the community?
- S: That didn't go as well as it should have.
- R: Do you remember any kind of racial tensions in the P.T.A. anywhere?
- S: A lot of the times we had arguments with some of the people. It can be racial I imagine.
- R: Would you say things are much better now than what they were in the 1960's?
- S: No. People shut up and became more quieter. I believe the United States is going backwards in a whole lot of things. I think the south is more advanced. New York is now becoming the south. The south is now really farther ahead.
- R: What do you think is the cause of the north moving backward?
- S: When the south found out they had to let blacks enter school and things, they went at it with an open heart. Here, they kind of hide it. You go to school, but they really don't want you there. They'll give you a job, but do they really want you there? You can almost tell when a person really wants you because they're going to see that you are given a better job; when there is change for career development they're going to send you and move those into the top positions. A lot of times right here in Farrell, before they would hire a person here they would go and bring someone in outside the community who didn't know anything. They didn't think about the community or the people, which is really necessary in order to do things with the community. You have to have the feel of the community and you have to know the community; by the time an individual knows all of that and someone here in the community teaches them that then they go on with the job, and they could have utilized a person right here in the community.
- R: Is there still housing discrimination today in Farrell?
- S: Yes. It's hard to find a house here in Farrell still. First of all, there are not that many.
- R: What do you remember about the news coverage given all the violence in Farrell?
- S: They never did print things the way they were. They always printed it the way they wanted it to be. A lot of things that they printed weren't true.
- R: Do you think the newspaper helped fuel the fire?

S: Yes.

R: Are they a little more objective today?

S: Not really.

R: How do you feel about Farrell's reputation, do you think it's the same?

S: I think we still have a bad reputation. It's hard to get away from that unless you have a lot of good things to counteract the bad. A lot of times they don't write about the good things anyway.

R: Were there any movements or organizations that you knew of besides the sensitivity group that tried to better things?

S: Some of the churches.

R: Do you think they helped at all?

S: Yes.

R: Looking back at the late 1960's now, what changes would you have liked to have seen instituted?

S: More black presentation in government right here in Farrell, better jobs, better paying jobs. We've done a lot of improvements as far as homes.

R: Is there anything else you think is important enough to add?

S: Of all the places I've been, I like Farrell the best.

END OF INTERVIEW