

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Depression Experience of Blacks

Personal Experience

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REV. LONNIE A. SIMON

Interviewed

by

John A. Parker

on

July 14, 1989

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: REV. LONNIE A. SIMON

INTERVIEWER: John A. (Sandy) Parker

SUBJECT: racism; poverty; education; family; coping strategies; Christian ministry; travels

DATE: July 14, 1989

P: This is an interview with Lonnie A. Simon for the Youngstown State Oral History Program, on Depression Experience of Blacks, by Sandy Parker, at the New Bethel Baptist Church, where Reverend Simon is the minister, on July 14, 1989, at 1:50 p.m.

P: Reverend Simon, if you would, I'd appreciate it if you could tell me where you were born and a little bit about your family and growing up and where you went to school as a youngster.

S: Okay, I was born in the state of Alabama in a little town called East Mulga, Alabama, (Jefferson County) March 23, 1925. There were six children. According to my parents, in 1928 we moved to Pennsylvania. My father used to be a coal miner and work was pretty good in the Southwestern part of Pennsylvania, a little town called Cardale, Pennsylvania; it's in Fayette County, forty miles southwest of Pittsburgh, ten miles from Uniontown, which was the county seat. I grew up in that little town, went to elementary school and graduated from Redstone Township High School in Republic, Pennsylvania, in 1943. I came to Youngstown in 1946 to work at U.S. Steel, Ohio Works. My purpose for coming to Youngstown was to make enough money to go to West Virginia State College to become a French teacher.

However, I met a young lady and here I am, forty-three years later. I worked for U.S. Steel, nine years, from 1946-1955, and then I resigned and I started working at the U.S. Post Office as a mail carrier from 1955-1965. Then, I resigned from the post office. I was called to the Christian ministry in 1951, and it was in 1951 that I enrolled at Youngstown College, which is now Youngstown State University. I completed two years at Youngstown College, majoring in Philosophy and Religion. I completed sixty-five hours there, from 1951-1955; then I was called to my first church on the East side, Elizabeth Baptist Church in 1954. I pastored there from 1954-1959. I resigned in 1959 and went to school in Cleveland, Central Bible College three nights a week where I completed four years of study, receiving a diploma in Theology. I was called to a church in Canton, Ohio in 1960 and I spent two years there; then I was called to this congregation, New Bethel Baptist where I am now, going on twenty-seven years. My wife and I have been married forty years. I married in 1949 and we have four children, ranging from ages twenty-four to thirty-seven, and I have six grandchildren.

P: Could you tell me a little bit now about... You mentioned about going to school in Pennsylvania. Now what was the size of the school, what was the size of the classes? If you remember back in those times, did you pray in class and things like that? Could you tell me a little bit about a typical day in about the first or second grade?

S: As I can recall, I was anxious to get to school my first year, however, the first day I was there, I cried all during class period, and a young white fellow, Everette Barker befriended me. When I see him at our class reunion, he always reminds me of the time when I came to school, that first day, and cried until the end of class. I can recall in my elementary school days that we did have scripture reading and prayer in the classroom. That was no problem back there at that particular time.

When I went to high school, I attended Redstone Township High School, which is about a mile and a half from the little town where I was living. You had to live, I think, two miles before you could be provided with bus transportation. The high school I attended, there was about 235 in my graduation class. There were only seven blacks in that class. I experienced segregation at that time in a little town called Republic, Pennsylvania where they had a theater, and blacks were not allowed to sit anywhere in the theater. There was a certain section reserved for blacks. Being young, I questioned a lot of things, but your parents would say to you, "Well, that's the way the system is." We

always wondered why is it that we had to sit in a certain reserved section, even though there were seats vacant in the other section. If the black section was filled, we still couldn't sit in the white section, we had to wait until some blacks moved out from the black section. Even in high school I experienced racism. We were allowed to play basketball, football, and belong to the Glee Club, but such organizations as Hi Y and Tri Hi Y, extracurricular activities, we weren't allowed to participate in scholastic things. In fact, when I enrolled in high school, most of us blacks were told that even though we wanted to enroll in the academic course, they steered us into general and commercial courses. And I asked them why? "Why would you want me to take the commercial course, or the general course, when I prefer an academic course?" They said, "Well you might as well face reality. When you come out of high school, there is really not that many kind of jobs suited for black people." They geared us to commercial and general courses. So, I experienced that.

The year that I graduated in 1943, our class prom was held at an establishment where blacks were not permitted. And, because that establishment did not permit blacks, the seven blacks in that graduating class couldn't attend the prom. So we went to the principal to see what could be done. So he allowed the seven of us to invite outsiders. He and his wife came to the prom, also, the superintendent. So during that particular period, I experienced quite a bit of racism.

P: You said your dad was a coal miner.

S: A coal miner and a minister too.

P: Also, you said that there were six of you. Were you the youngest of the six?

S: I was the fifth. My youngest brother, Jesse was the sixth.

P: How did your dad, and your family make it through the Depression, because there wasn't an awful lot of coal mining during that time.

S: Right. In fact, my father did a lot of farming, truck farming. He would grow sweet potatoes, tomatoes, beans. He would raise hogs, he would sell corn, he would sell fish on Fridays. So that's how we made it. I can recall welfare days back there, when those of us who were going to school, were given government food like milk and sandwiches. I remember that very vividly. Also back there, with six in the family, parents couldn't buy each of us new clothes so it was like

hand-me-downs. I can recall the days when I had to wear cardboard in my shoes, when the sole would wear out. My father, when he could afford it, would buy leather and heels and would repair our shoes. But then, there were times when he didn't have the money to buy the leather and the shoe heel; then we would wear cardboard in our shoes. Patched pants, and with the kind of modern clothes that kids wear, especially the leisure clothes like khaki's where they buy them already bleached, my mother would sometimes put too much bleach in the water when she was washing clothes and the clothes automatically became bleached. Nobody liked to wear bleached clothes during that time. It's a fad now. Bread was about \$.05 a loaf at that time. I can recall that, back in those days. I don't think we had television in those days; radio, yes! I remember the telephone where you used to have to crank the dial; also the victrola that we used to have. Today we call them tape players.

P: You said your father drove a truck. Where did he find somebody who had money to buy that, or to use it for trading, and how did he transport it?

S: You mean...

P: The produce.

S: Oh, yes. The truck. He had a truck that he would use for transportation. He would go throughout the small coal mining towns and sell his corn and sweet potatoes; those things that he grew in the garden, yes!

P: Kind of hard finding people with cash, though, wasn't it?

S: Yes. That's true too. But some of them could pay, and being that he was a minister, he would let some have it, and when they got the money he would say, "Whenever you have the money, then you can pay, if you don't, so well and good." There wasn't too much money circulating around during that time, but people that did work, they could live off a little of nothing. It didn't take that much for them to survive. As long as they could eat, they were satisfied.

P: I'm surprised that you said there were seven of you in your graduating class and that out of 235.

S: Yes!

P: Well, what surprises me is that there were that many going all the way through high school at the time.

S: Yes. Our parents stressed our staying in school. Out of the six children in our family, only two didn't graduate. My second oldest brother didn't graduate and my oldest sister didn't graduate at the time, though she did go back to school to get her diploma and she's in New Jersey and she's enrolled in college there, this is her third year in college. But she didn't graduate at the same time that my other brothers and sister graduated. She quit school and she went to New Jersey and she went back to night school and got her diploma. But our parents stressed education, in spite of the fact that we weren't directed into academic studies, academic courses. The basics, we learned. Back there, you had to learn how to write and read and count, and spell. Those were some basic things that all of us acquired.

P: Do two things for me. Would you describe what your house was like and the things that your family did in the house?

Walk me from your house to your elementary school, tell me what it looked like and how you got there. You mentioned that you had a white boy that befriended you. Tell me a little about him.

S: Well back there, in the neighborhoods, you didn't experience racism or segregation, because we were a small town. We played together, we ate together, we slept together in each others homes, we borrowed from each other, flour, sugar, etc. It was surprising to find out when you went to the school, especially high school, and when you went to work, this is where you faced racism. But as far as the neighborhood was concerned, the neighborhood kids, we played together, slept together, ate together, there was not that type of prejudice that you experienced elsewhere. I didn't live too far from the elementary school, so I had easy access to it. The neighborhood that we stayed in, we didn't have no running water or inside toilets. We had the outside toilet and we had well water, spring water and the zinc tub where we took a bath on the weekends. So it was that type of thing.

We had coal stoves, where in the mining camp there was a coal dump, where we used to pick coal. We didn't have to buy our coal, those of us who were old enough, we'd go on the dump and when the railroad car would come up on the dump and dump coal, those of us who were old enough were able to pick coal and take it home, and sometimes sell it to people who needed coal. I remember those kind of days. The young white boy that befriended me on my first day in school was named Everette Barker.

P: What did your house look like? How many rooms did it have?

S: I think the last house we lived in, I think it was about seven rooms. It didn't have all the furnishings that a modern day home would have. I remember the icebox days and the coal stoves. We didn't have refrigeration at that time. My father used to kill pigs, hogs, he used curing salt. He would salt them down. There was not refrigeration back there, so he didn't go to the slaughter house to have his meat cured. He would cure it with salt and with other preservatives he had, that he knew about. It was during the wintertime, we always had meat to eat, because he would raise hogs and chickens.

P: You said your house had seven rooms. Was your house a frame house?

S: It was a frame house, it was two stories, then we had a basement, but it wasn't concrete. It was just a dirt floor and when it rained, it would be wet all the time. Since we left, the people who live in it now, they remodeled the home and you wouldn't think it was the same home. We didn't have electricity, I remember the days where we didn't have electricity. We had the coal oil lamps, as we called it. Kids would have to clean the chimney, the wick type of thing that was in the lamp, it had to be trimmed. So I can recall those times. As far as inside the house is concerned I remember my mother used to get on us about helping to paper the walls. It was one of the hardest chores I had ever had, papering walls. We had chickens and my mother used to tell us to go out and kill some chickens. She used to wring the chicken's neck off. I couldn't do that. Those were the days.

P: You lived almost like on a farm, or similar?

S: I didn't know anything about cities, about city life, until I came to Youngstown in 1946. I didn't know anything about city life at all. I went in the service in 1943, and being all alone, I cried all the time I was there, for a week. I was in the U.S. Navy two years and three months. I was stationed in California, about fifteen months. That's where I spent most of the time.

P: What did you do in the Navy?

S: I was a steward's mate. I took an exam for it. At that time, they didn't have certain positions open, so I took a position for a third-class cook, even though I wasn't a cook, I was a steward's mate in the Navy. And you wouldn't believe it, I didn't know how to swim.

Here is a Navy guy who can't swim. At that time, they were rushing us in. In fact, when they gave me my choice, I asked for the Army, but they just put me in the Navy, and during that time, they were rushing the guys in. I remember going to New York, Pier 92- West 52nd Street and we stayed on board this ship, U.S. Elizabeth, I think it was, for about five weeks, then they shipped us out to Sampson, New York. Then from there, I came to Norton Heights, Connecticut. It was a training center for Naval Officers, and I was a steward's mate. Then they shipped me out to California, where I spent fifteen months. I was discharged from there, from San Francisco.

P: You said you lived near your school. Describing the door of your house, would you turn left or right and walk down the... What did the school look like?

S: Yes! When I would go to school, I guess I was no more than three blocks. The school was a red brick school. I'd have to pass the church where my father pastored and I had to pass the little post office. I can remember our post office box number, Box 51. Then, in the next block was the schoolhouse on the left.

P: You didn't have the postal delivery yet, you had to go pick it up?

S: No, that's right. You had to go pick up your mail at the post office.

P: When you got to school, how many rooms were there in that school?

S: I guess there was about eight, since it was elementary, it went up to eighth grade. It contained from first grade to eighth grade. We didn't have kindergarten at that time. You had to be six years old to go to school. At six, you were in first grade. When I graduated, I was eighteen. The elementary school was a two-story building, brick school, had some fine teachers and that's where I got my basic education at Cardale Elementary School.

P: Did the teachers there go ahead and help the students out that were having a hard time?

S: Yes! The teachers took an interest in each student. I can remember, it's been... Well, I'm sixty-four now, it's been over fifty-some years-- my arithmetic teacher, they didn't call it math, they called it arithmetic-- Mrs. Kreinbrook, I remember her, Mrs. Gibbs, Mr. Foster, my principal. I could never forget him because I can recall an incident that happened in the class, my homeroom teacher wasn't able to be at school



that day and they couldn't get a substitute so we had those draw doors that separated two classrooms. He was teaching in one class and we were in a study period, and I had a cold that day and I started coughing, like this, (cough, cough!) you know, and I guess it annoyed him. Then he came over. He was a big guy, and he said, "Who was that coughing, who was that making that noise over here?" So I just held up my hand. I didn't think nothing of it, and he said, "You come on out here." He called another teacher, and he got a leather paddle, and he belted the daylights out of me. "You go back there and sit down." He was standing up front near the desk and I remember looking at him real mean, and he said, "If looks would kill I guess I would have been dead a long time ago." I could never forget that experience, because he thought I was goofing around, but actually I had a cold that day. He is one of the most unforgettable characters I've ever met. He's dead now. His name was Mr. Foster. I remember that guy. It was rumored that he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

P: You said you had arithmetic as one of your classes. What were some of the other subjects that you had?

S: Geography, History, Spelling and English. I didn't care for Geography, I didn't care for History, either. I didn't care for English literature at that time. Spelling was a major subject, English grammar, that was easy for me, and arithmetic. Those were my favorite subjects. I wrote pretty well. We had what they call the P. O. Peterson Writing, and I can tell when somebody has had that same system.

P: It sounds to me like you had a pretty good elementary experience, but when you got into high school, you seemed to have run up against a longer hit situation.

S: Yes. It seems though that's where your education ended, because you weren't going any further than that. I don't know why. Oh! Yes I do know, too, why. I thought I wanted to become a French teacher. My French teacher made a great impression on me. Sometimes you sit in a class and certain teachers impress you. I was a pretty good student in French, I think I had a "B" average, it appealed to me- the French language. But when I enrolled in Youngstown College, I had to have two years of language. Well, the French that I had, they were going to credit me with that, that I had in high school, but I was so far behind, that I had to drop it, and I took modern Greek instead. I had a chance to use French, recalling some of the basic things that I learned in French when I went to three French-speaking countries in West Africa in 1987.

P: Can you tell me anything else you remember from the Depression? You mentioned the fact that you didn't have indoor plumbing or anything like that, or electricity at that beginning of that period of time, and you had all these changes....

S: There were no street lights during that time. Well, there was closeness within the family structure at that time. There were certain things that your parents didn't allow you to do. In my home, our father was a minister, our mother didn't allow us to play cards, we weren't allowed to dance. Naturally, kids would sneak and dance someplace else. We weren't allowed to bring anything into that house that didn't belong there. Anytime we'd come in the house with something that was unfamiliar, it was, "Where did you get that? Take it back." Because they knew it was stolen. Back there, other neighbors could discipline your children. If they told your mother and father something that you did, you got it.

P: You got it twice then, huh?

S: Oh, yes. You had to have respect for the elderly back during that time. The state law now is that parents, according to the law now in the state of Ohio, you can't hardly discipline your children because they would accuse you of child abuse, charge you with cruelty. But back there, my mother used to say, "I brought you into the world, and I'll take you out if you talk back to me." She would pick up a broom handle, go outside and get peach tree limbs, or get the strap and have you take off your clothes, too. You would never forget that. Sometimes you thought your parents were a little hard on you, but when I reflect now, I'm thankful for the type of upbringing. We weren't allowed to smoke, there was no drinking in our home, there was no smoking. I grew up in that type of atmosphere.

P: Do you still practice that?

S: That's why I don't smoke now. I have no problem drinking. I've tried it but it never took with me because we were brought up like that.

P: Well, I guess the next thing I need to ask is when did you find out about Youngstown?

S: Now, in Pennsylvania there was a coal company called H. C. Frick Coal Company, which was a subsidiary of U.S. Steel. My father had a trustee and he was the treasurer of his church, who worked at H. C. Frick Coal Company and he got transferred here to Youngstown to work in the steel mill. So when I came out of the service, I worked in the coal mine seven days before I went in the

service, but I didn't want to go into coal mining. So he wrote to my father and told him that there was work here at U. S. Steel, making steel so I came to Youngstown. It was on a Saturday, September 30, 1946 and I stayed with that family, what was called the Sharon mine. It's McGuffey Heights now. I stayed with them and started working at U.S. Steel and worked there nine years. 1949 is when I got married. My wife of forty years now, I met her out there and we got married in 1949.

But my purpose for coming to Youngstown was not to stay, but that's how I got here, when I found out there was work here through one of the officers at my father's church.

P: What did you do at U.S. Steel?

S: I worked in the service department, I worked in the maintenance department, I worked at the scrap yard, I worked as a custodian the last place I worked, cleaning up office buildings. I worked the midnight shift because I had secured a second job. I worked midnight at U.S. Steel and then when I'd get off in the morning, I'd work for a scrap iron company. I worked for Columbia Scrap Iron Company in Girard. I don't know if it's still in business now, but the office was on Oakhill and at that time, they were doing away with the old type of engines that they were using, the regular trains, the steam engines, they were demolishing them. So those of us who had some experience in burning scrap, we were able to get a second job working for the scrap iron company and demolishing all of those steam engines.

P: Somebody should have put them all aside and they could have made a mint selling them now.

S: Yes!

P: Then you went on to the post office. Why did you leave U.S. Steel?

S: Well I took the exam for the post office in 1955. I was at U.S. Steel when I felt a call to the ministry in 1951. I went to Youngstown College in 1951, completed two years, majored in Philosophy and Religion, came out in 1955. My G.I. Entitlement ran out then. That's when I quit the mill. I started working at the post office in 1955. I was called to my first church Elizabeth Baptist in 1954 on the East side and I stayed there five years. I started working at the post office in 1955 and I resigned in 1965.

P: You mentioned that you went to school up in Cleveland. How did you work that in?

S: Yes. It was strange. There were three of us, two buddies of mine. We found out that there was a bible school in Cleveland. That was the closest, so we went three nights a week. I'd get off at 4:00 p.m. and go home, wash up, and at 5:00 p.m., we'd strike out, spend three hours in Cleveland in school and drive back to Youngstown. Each one of us took turns and drove for four years. I did that four years.

P: Modern Greek didn't do you any good, I take it?

S: No, I couldn't use that. I wasn't able to use much Greek. Since there was no accredited seminary near by, that was the closest and that's where I got my basic bible school training in Cleveland. Three nights a week for four years.

I did some traveling. My first time going out of the country was in 1968. My first time flying, too, to Guyana, South America was in 1968. It used to be British Guiana. Our church belonged to a foreign mission convention, and one of the ministers in Baltimore, Maryland said to me at the convention one year, "Simon, when you get ready to take a vacation, I know a lot of guys go to Bermuda and Hawaii. But I suggest that you go to the mission field. I'm sure you'll appreciate that experience." I did. My first trip overseas was in 1968 to Guyana, South America. Since that time, I have been there about three or four other times. We have a mission project there, as a church, we built a feeding center over there in Guyana. Then I went to the Holy Land in Israel in 1969. In 1978, I went to Ghana, West Africa. I went as a guest of one of the missionaries over there. He was here in the States and he appealed to our convention to give assistance there, so he invited me to come over and I went over and I spent seventeen days in Ghana, West Africa. It was a rich experience going to the motherland. They rolled out the carpet for me, like I was a lost son coming back.

Since that time, I am part of a national council of church's organization called PIE Partners-In-Ecumenism. Twenty-five of us black church leaders were invited to attend an all African Church Conference in Togo, West Africa. We spent eight years at the conference, where I met Bishop Desmond Tutu. That was not my first time meeting Bishop Tutu. I met him for the second time at this conference. He was elected president at this conference. Prior to that time, there had been a conference in Washington and I took a picture with him, and when the conference was over, he and his

wife and I took the same cab, and rode to the airport. About a year later, I found out that he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, so I stuck out my chest because I had met him, and the second time I met him was in Togo, two years later. He was elected the president of the All African Church Conference. I have had rich experiences in traveling.

P: I certainly appreciate your sharing your recollections with me, you had an interesting life.

S: When I look back, I fulfilled most of my dreams. The only place that I think I would like to go where I haven't been, is Egypt. I haven't been to any European countries. I think I would like to go to Russia for some reason.

P: Thank you for the interview.

S: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW