

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS RESEARCH CENTER

The University of North Carolina at Asheville

Interview with Lucy Herring, August 2, 1977
Second Session, Tape I Asheville, North Carolina
Interviewed by Dr. Louis D. Silveri

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Harnett County Schools, 1925-1935. 1

Standards and Conditions. 1

Asa Herring. 4

Stephens-Lee High School. 6

Living Arrangements. 9

Principal, Mountain Street School. 12

Supervisor, Asheville City Schools. 15

Supreme Court's Desegregation Decision. 16

Livingston College (1964). 21

Head Start Program Consultant. 23

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Side 1₁

Dr. Silveri: I'm not sure I got the names down. Do you go by your maiden name or your married name?

Lucy Herring: I go by my married name.

Dr. Silveri: Ok, then I forgot to get on the first tape the family name, I think.

Lucy Herring: Well, the family name is S-a-u-n-d-e-r-s. Saunders.

Dr. Silveri: Saunders.

Lucy Herring: Lucy Saunders Herring.

Dr. Silveri: S-a-u-n-d-e-r-s?

Lucy Herring: Right.

Silveri: Ok. Let's go back now to 1935. You spent ten years in Harnett County.

Herring: Yes.

Silveri: Since I talked to you last, I looked on the map where Harnett is.

Herring: Yes.

Silveri: The county seat is Erwin, was Erwin?

Herring: No, the county seat is Lillington.

Silveri: Lillington, right in the middle sort of.

Herring: Right.

Silveri: That was very rural.

Herring: Predominantly, well all rural practically. Tenant farmers.

Silveri: Tenant farmers?

Herring: Yes. Many tenant farmers. Very few of the black... farmers, owned their--

Silveri: All right.

Herring: Property. And that's the thing that made it difficult for the schools, you know, the attendance was affected by the work that the children had to do on the farms.

Silveri: Now you spent ten years there. In 1935 you decided to come back to Asheville, why?

Herring: Well, I--after ten years there, I wanted--I told--when I left Asheville, I left with the understanding that I'd come back and the doors would be open, if I wanted to come back. As you recall, I told you that I didn't want to go, but the superintendent gave the principal and the State Supervisor permission for me to leave on a trial basis, with the understanding that if I liked the work I would stay there and work. If I didn't, I could come back and get my same position. Well, I worked the remainder of a year, you see, it was midterm when I left; I worked the remainder of that school year in Harnett County, and the fact that they had forty schools, about ninety some

Lucy Herring: (continued) odd teachers, and only twelve of those teachers had college, you see what I fell into. I think I mentioned the fact, or if I didn't I'm mentioning it now: my first task was to get the teachers together. My most difficult task was that of working with the school committeemen.

As I explained to you they were all black. There were three committeemen in each school. They had been in charge; they recommended the teachers. They did not have a white supervisor. The superintendent had everything to do in the white schools, the supervision, and the general charge of all the schools. He had no time to devote to black schools, and he was really overworked trying to take care of the white schools. Many of the white citizens were also farmers, and many of them were very poor farmers. Harnett County was a very poor county, and at that time, we did not have a State salary schedule. The State was not paying the salaries. The counties paid the salaries of the teachers at that time. Because of that, black people suffered in many of the county school systems throughout the South. Of course, at that time, they had State certificates, then they had substandard certificates. There were temporary certificates; there were even second-grade certificates. In Fayetteville which is in Cumberland County, a much more prosperous county than Harnett, the superintendent there reportedly hired mostly black substandard teachers in order to avoid paying big salaries, but the white teachers were paid a different salary. And they would take white teachers with State certificates, but they took very few black teachers with State certificates because they didn't want to pay them that salary.

I have in my files a report from Dr. Newbold's office; he was director of the Division of Negro Education. He worked very closely with the supervisors, and I explained to you that we were "Jeanes Supervisors". In this report, I might as well say these reports because I have several, it was not uncommon to find one-teacher schools with enrollments of fifty or sixty, in some cases, one hundred, but you see they came--the attendance was poor. They were crowded; yet, they were not there full time. Very few of them attended full time, in fact during the planting season and the season when they were gathering crops, I think I mentioned to you before that the large children would drop out--I mean they would come into the schools after the cotton crops were harvested around the first of December. They dropped out to do the plowing to prepare for the spring crops around the first of April. So you see just sometime in December, January, and February; in fact, many of them dropped out in March.

Well, I stayed there, and we put on--the black teachers and I put on an intensive drive to lift the level of training of those teachers. I had a difficult time convincing some of the school committeemen that I was there

Lucy Herring: (continued) really below the high school level. Many went back and went through in-service training. We had extension courses; Fayetteville Teachers College is not very far from Harnett County, and the State had extension work conducted at that time, and so instructors from the college would come. On Saturday mornings and sometimes during the week in the evenings, we would have these extension courses, and the teachers would get credit for that. That credit counted toward certificate renewal and to raise the certificates from one level to the other. In that was when we left Harnett County, not only had the teachers raised the point in their training and their background, but they had college training, ^{Some} got their degrees, some got the equivalent of the degree through in-service work and summer school, and we also were successful in raising money to build quite a number of Rosenwald Schools.

Now coming back to Asheville, while I wasn't in Asheville, while I was in Harnett County, as I said before, I had no transportation. I had no car; very few people then had cars. I met a young man who was a farm demonstration agent, from a very fine family. He was traveling through the same areas of the county; he would hold meetings in the communities and talk to the people about improving the land, and about rotation crops instead of planting just all cotton crops and to produce other crops, and he worked with them. He would go out on the farm and work with them. Then he would have meetings at night; so we formed an agreement that I would go with him and have joint meetings. While he would talk some times about improving home conditions and improving the crops, then I would talk about improving education, and then we got excellent cooperation from the parents. It was just a wonderful experience; it was just the fact to see how hungry they were for help not only with their farms, but with the education of their children.

In 1935, I decided--I had married--let me go back; I must back up a minute. This same young man--I can tell you how it started. There wasn't this courtship type of thing; I had never been very much interested in boys all throughout my life, but people can grow on you, you know. And so one Sunday, I was attending a church service; very often I spoke to people in the churches on Sunday. That was the way I reached many of them, and after the service was over, this young man said to me, "I'll take you home!" I said, "Very well." So I had come out with one of the school committeemen, and so when I went around to the side of the church, he had a nice, shiny Chevrolet! I said, "Oh my, what a beautiful car!" He said, "Well, that's a surprise!" So we rode on; so that Sunday he took me back to my place where I was boarding, he said, "Do you like my car?" I said, "Yes!" He said, "I'll give it to you if you want it!" I said, "I know you're joking! You could never make me believe that!"

Lucy Herring: (continued) He said, "I've never been more sincere in my life! I will give it to you on one condition!" I said, "What is that condition?" He said, "I will give it to you, if you will take the car and the Owner!" So that was a proposal! I said, "Well, I don't think I could handle the Owner, but I think I could handle the car!" He said, "You think about it!"

Well, I did think about it, and at that point in life, I thought it was time I fell in love with somebody, and I did. Eventually he made a trip to Asheville to ask my mother and my father if they would give their consent, and they were quite pleased with him. We were married at Christmas time; I don't ask me the year. I don't recall it, but I recall the affair with very pleasant memories. We were married in the home of my sister and brother-in-law, Dr. Joseph and Mrs. Robinson in Hamlet, North Carolina. So I lived there in Harnett County, and later a son was born. By the way, my husband's name was A-s-a; that's a Biblical name, Asa. Ok, Asa Herring. We named our son Asa Herring, Jr.

I mentioned in the last interview with you that after seven years, my marital sky fell, but it wasn't the end of the world. It was quite an ordeal, but I decided that I wanted to bring--to take my young son back to Asheville where he could be under the influence of a good man. I didn't want to bring him up without a father image. Although the sky fell, we were friendly throughout to the end of his life, which I can tell you about later. But we came back to Asheville, and we stopped and stayed with my second oldest sister, Mrs. Nettie Candler; her husband was a shoemaker, and he had a barbershop. He was a very good man, a church man, a family man. I don't know that I could have found a better person. He had two girls; one was near the age of my son, and so we just fitted in as a family. He was a very unusual person. He had done hotel work here in the city before he went to the war, and before he finished his training in shoemaking. So having been a hotel man, he liked to prepare food. He prepared food every morning for the whole family. And my son stayed here, and he finished the high school as I told you.

The thing that I recall now, I was teaching the high school when I first came back, and the thing that happened I had to teach English classes to about two hundred students. The superintendent said--I think I mentioned this before, the high school teachers who had been trained specifically for high school work did not understand what to expect from students who were coming in from the public schools, public elementary schools, and therefore the transition was not very smooth, and they had so many failures in the white schools and in the black schools because of this transition that was a very difficult thing. And so he said, "I would like to have a good Negro teacher and a good white teacher to take the English classes in the high schools, and teach the freshman

Lucy Herring: (continued) students and help them to bridge the gap between the two levels, educational levels. And at that time I had my son in an English class, very amusing at times. He said to me one day after we had an examination, and we were reading the scores. He said to me after school one afternoon, "Mama?" I said, "Yes, what is it dear?" He said, "You know when the other children make mistakes in class, their mothers don't know it. But when I make mistakes, you are there, and you see and know the mistakes I'm making! Do you know how that makes me feel?" I said, "Well, there is an advantage in that, and there is a disadvantage because the other children don't tell their parents that they didn't do well, but there is this advantage: I see where you make your mistakes and I can help you!" He said, "Well, I guess that's right, but it's pretty rough!"

Silveri: When you came back in 1935, what did--did you secure a job right away?

Herring: I had the promise when I left Harnett County, I'm sorry, when I left Asheville, if I would take this job in Harnett County, if I didn't like it, the doors would always be open. I could come back and get my job. All right, when I decided that I wanted to stay, I accepted the challenge to work in this rural area. It was like missionary work. I wrote Professor John H. Michael, who was my principal at the time who released me to come there. Well, I wrote him and told him that I had decided I wanted to come back here, and I said, "You said that if anything special bogged me down or something like that--" So he wrote me and told me that he did not have a vacancy at that time, but he said, "I'm sure I can get the high school principal to take you temporarily until I have an opening." Mr. Newbold, who was Director of the Division of Negro Education, wrote a letter of recommendation to the high school principal, Mr. Albert Manley. Mr. Gentry, who was the superintendent in Harnett County, released me, and he wrote an excellent recommendation to the principal and the superintendent here. So the high school principal took me there in the high school on the high school staff.

Silveri: What was the name of the high school?

Herring: Stephens-Lee High School.

Silveri: Where is that located?

Herring: It's located on Catholic Avenue, just to the left when you go down Valley Street if you're going down from David Millard School on College Street. So that was the thing--I did quite a bit of experimenting while I was at-- I've always been a person who is willing to experiment. I guess the thing that comes to my mind, and when things come I have to say them. When I think of the things I have gone into, I think of this: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Well, I would just go in: "Why don't you take this adventure?" I will go into something; I will think about it seriously. I will plan carefully; I will pray carefully about it, and then if I'm determined I'm going to do that thing, I don't walk around the edges. I do a nose dive

