

LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview #0643
RODDEY, Cynthia Harriett Plair

Interviewer: Paul Finkelstein
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Abstract: In her interview with Paul Finkelstein on September 4, 1994, Cynthia Roddey shares her experiences at Winthrop from 1964-1967 as the first African American student admitted to Winthrop College. Roddey details the process of applying to Winthrop, the reaction she received from the Winthrop and Rock Hill community, and her participation in student life. Roddey includes her insight on race relations today and her hopes for the future. This interview was conducted for an article to be published in the Roddey-McMillan Record.

Keywords: Integration, Segregation, Desegregation, Civil Rights Movement, Racism, Teaching, Arnetta Gladden Mackey, MAT, NAACP, American Dream, Politics, Family, XI Delta chapter of Sigma Beta Sorority

Interview Session (September 4, 1994): Cassette

Time	Keywords
00:00:00	<i>Start of Interview</i> /Interviewer's Introduction
00:00:12	<i>Question:</i> Born? <i>Answer:</i> April 6, 1940.
00:00:15	<i>Question:</i> Upbringing? <i>Answer:</i> Grew up during the war. Was raised by grandparents. Had an extended family. Had a lot of exposure because of traveling, as a child. CR recalls seeing her first opera. Exposed to music, books, and art.
00:02:15	<i>Question:</i> Did this exposure affect attitude towards higher education? <i>Answer:</i> Grew up in an educational environment. Read bible every day. Sang every day. Learned something every day.
00:03:05	<i>Question:</i> Contradicting stereotypes? <i>Answer:</i> Education a constant part of her life.
00:03:35	<i>Question:</i> Date married? <i>Answer:</i> December 23, 1961. Happily married. Children moved out.
00:04:10	<i>Question:</i> Most significant event in your life? <i>Answer:</i> Can't pin point one thing. CR says everything happens for a reason. CR received an international award – one of 81 women who make a difference. CR was nominated for this award – unaware of how she influenced this person who nominated her. CR refers to convocation speech. CR talks about having no idea the influence she's had on people's lives.
00:08:44	<i>Question:</i> Personal mentors? <i>Answer:</i> Family. Grandfather – self-educated man who became an entrepreneur (Isaac G. Plair). CR's grandfather always helped people. Elementary school

teachers – demanded students to have self-respect. CR talks about how advanced her curriculum was in elementary school.

00:10:45 *Question:* Education? *Answer:* First grade in Charlotte. CR started reading at 3 years old. CR tested by aunt. Went off to boarding school at Immanuel Lutheran College – “cleanliness next to Godliness.” Prepared her for college. Went to a Presbyterian College – teachers cared about you. CR was academically prepared for Winthrop.

00:13:50 **[no question]** When CR taught in Charlotte, her best students were in special education classes. CR talks about schools lowering standards.

00:15:45 *Question:* Other awards? *Answer:* Xi Beta Chapter called the Visible Woman. Asked to speak at convocation.

00:16:15 *Question:* Retired? *Answer:* Charlotte/Mecklenberg School System as a media coordinator – in charge of print and non-print materials. Retired from Kennedy Middle School.

00:16:55 *Question:* Accomplishments at work? *Answer:* Last three years were the best. Had kids that she had taught when they were in kindergarten. CR could see how much these students had grown.

00:18:00 *Question:* Your application was considered quiet? *Answer:* Other schools had started integrating. The controversy was over in the courts by the time that CR applied to Winthrop. Not sponsored by an political organization. Did not want to have picture taken. Winthrop didn’t want all of the media on campus. There was a simple announcement that she enrolled.

00:19:20 **[no question]** Talking about protests on Winthrop.

00:20:20 *Question:* 1961, Joe Johnson introduced a resolution to integrate colleges – was that observable on campus? *Answer:* No hostility on campus. There was no interaction between CR and other students. CR talked to the maids and cooks who she went to school with. CR developed relationship with a handful of professors – older, married, and lived off campus. CR says her experience was unusual compared to other experiences. Interviewer refers to postcards at the archives. Interviewer reads off postcards sent to Winthrop about integration. CR responds to these postcards. CR talks about report from Governor Holland – says they wanted to go coed before integration.

00:24:22 *Question:* Compare Winthrop experience to Johnson C. Smith? *Answer:* At Smith, faculty was integrated. CR didn’t feel challenged at Winthrop – except at Dr. Murdy’s class. CR says methods of teaching different.

00:26:45 *Question:* Turned lack of resources in black schools into an advantage? *Answer:* Yes. Schools were resourceful. Made what they needed. There were no manuals to teach you how to teach. Teachers had to be innovative.

00:28:05 *Question:* Aware of movement? *Answer:* CR looking for a job after she had her second child. Decided she wanted to become a librarian. CR’s coworkers were applying to Winthrop – CR shocked that she was admitted.

00:30:05 *Question:* Grandfather and Winthrop? *Answer:* CR’s father always told people she would go to

Winthrop. CR's grandfather helped paint Tillman Hall.

- 00:31:08 *Question:* What contact did you have from Winthrop? *Answer:* A lot of people did not know she was a student – CR associated with maids and cooks at Winthrop. CR had no social contact.
- 00:31:55 *Question:* Insight into how Dolores Johnson and Arnetta Gladden Mackey's experience differed from yours? *Answer:* CR says they were harassed. Harvey Ghent's sister did not have a pleasant time. CR not a part of the alumni association. "I did not feel like it was my school."
- 00:34:10 *Question:* Difficulties of going back to school? *Answer:* Support from family and neighbors.
- 00:35:30 *Question:* Status as a female college affected admittance? *Answer:* Yes. A black male would have been unquestionable. Talks about teaching etiquette not education.
- 00:36:50 *Question:* Did you feel you were being educated to take a subservient role in society? *Answer:* CR speculates they didn't want integration, because they didn't want black people to know how slow they were. CR did not feel academically challenged. CR recalls writing a paper for a term paper.
- 00:39:18 *Question:* Issues confronting current black, college students today? *Answer:* CR says students will have a rude awakening. Black students today have been shielded from racial tension and prejudice. Even Winthrop will insulate these students to admit and retain black students. CR says black students need to give back to other black students who may have no hope or who need more assistance.
- 00:42:25 *Question:* Are the Ebonites at Winthrop and the NAACP doing enough to turn students into mentors? *Answer:* CR says they do an excellent job, but there isn't enough of them. They do what they can. CR says black churches may need to do more.
- 00:43:50 *Question:* Who is emerging as leaders in the black community? *Answer:* It will take more than one group. It has to start in the home.
- 00:45:05 *Question:* Thoughts about programs for minorities? *Answer:* CR talks about the people giving the government guidance, not the other way around. Civic duties.
- 00:45:50 *Question:* What does Winthrop mean to you? *Answer:* Has a different feeling about Winthrop – it's "growing on me." The presence of black faculty and the Black Alumni Association has made CR view Winthrop differently. CR started working with the Black Alumni Association and that helped her get re-interested in Winthrop.
- 00:47:50 *Question:* Recommendations for youth going to college and getting involved? *Answer:* Everyone always has something their interested in and the college can provide avenues to pursue or you can create your own student group. Get involved so you're interested in coming back to Winthrop each semester.
- 00:48:55 *Question:* Final thoughts? *Answer:* We can all excel at something. Strive for excellence. Behavior and attitude are important.
- 00:49:52 *End of Interview*