

Interview with Velma Carey
January 27, 2004, Springfield, Illinois
Interviewer: Bettie Allen

- Allen: This interview is part of the African-American Oral History Project in Springfield, Illinois. Today's date is January 27th, 2004. Bettie Allen is the interviewer, and the interviewee is Ms. Velma Carey. Velma, when did you arrive in Springfield?
- Carey: In 1956, I think September or October.
- Allen: And how did you come to Springfield?
- Carey: My husband got a job here, and it was a necessity for the family to move.
- Allen: Tell us a bit about your – (break in tape) Tell me a little bit about your – tell me your husband's name. What was his job that he had here in Springfield?
- Carey: My husband was Lee Carey, and he came to Springfield to work on the playgrounds, later becoming Assistant Superintendent. And did that job for 20-plus years, before retiring.
- Allen: How many children did you bring with you to Springfield?
- Carey: Three. We brought three children. Daughter, and two sons.
- Allen: So I guess that made you more aware of community activities, for instance like the School Board, and the race riot. How did you get involved in these projects?
- Carey: I got involved in the schools because my children, you know, were in school. All of them was in school except the youngest. I think it's necessary, and always thought it was necessary, that you ought to know what's happening wherever your children are. And so I became involved with the school through that activity. Doing PTA and chilli suppers and whatever else that was going on, parents, room mothers, doing all of that, so that I would know who the person was that was treating my child in education. And I use the word treat, because if it was good they would grab it, and if it wasn't, they would never get it. So fortunately, we had teachers who really treated them well, who were good teachers.
- Allen: Was that really city-wide, or was it only the school that the children were in at that time?
- Carey: Well, it hardly wasn't city-wide. It wasn't even school-wide. It's just we were

fortunate enough to get good teachers.

Allen: We indicating District 186?

Carey: No, we, my family, was able to get good teachers. I think it was predicated on the fact that we came from Champaign to Springfield, and that the then-mayor, Nelson Howarth's daughter, taught at the school where my two children came from. And the Principal of that school came from Shawneetown, and knew indirectly about Lee's grandfather. So they sent with us, not only the children's grades, but a letter saying these are good people, and treat them well. They enrolled my kids before we got here. And the principal was shocked to find out that we were black when we walked into the school.

Allen: It's not very often that families get enrolled by some other educational system.

Carey: Right.

Allen: So that certainly was perhaps very new to Springfield.

Carey: Yeah. What was new to us, is that we had come here because the mayor's the one who selected Lee to the city for that job. And they had told us which neighborhood that we could get in, and which school that they thought was the better school at that time. And they said if you lived in the Lincoln[school] area, there were no houses there, so you'd need to live over a place where somebody had a tavern or killed chickens. And the same was true if you were at Palmer [School]. It was heavily populated with blacks, but the neighborhood didn't have any houses – that I guess you could buy – I don't know.

Allen: How did – what was some of the activities that you did to follow the school board through this period of time which led up to (inaudible) school integration or desegregation? I like the word desegregation better.

Carey: I think that when my daughter went to junior high school, which was a new school, but the way they shifted the boundaries at the last minute, to include a certain portion of whites who were low economics as well as blacks, they put them on the gap. They shifted the boundaries. Della Allen, who later became a school board member, was one of those parents who fought like I did for a better boundary, or go back to the other boundary. From that point on, then I became involved in the schools, because I knew that there was no such thing as a good school if you were black or poor.

Allen: I am presuming that you were attending school board meetings. Would that be the way a committee came – was formed to fight the school boundaries?

Velma Carey

Carey: We did this through PTA. The parents got together who was affected by the boundary change, and began to fight the school system – or meet with educators.

Allen: At that time who was – do you remember who the school board president was?

Carey: I can't remember.

Allen: All right. So the committee became a community committee. Is that right?

Carey: Not necessarily. Then it became an individual thing for me, because I felt like if my children were to succeed, I needed to step up and step in. So I began attending the school board meetings. And I was there so often, so if they had a committee they just put me on it.

Allen: Wow. But then this turned into a suit. So how did the plaintiffs, and those who were supporting the plaintiffs, come together?

Carey: Well, actually, this was not during middle school. That action took place when they got to high school, and I saw the kind of things that our kids had, compared to what the other schools had, Springfield in particular. And then I knew that when you took a bus, and you bussed kids from the lake area across to Springfield High, and left, there was something wrong with the system. If it wasn't good enough for them to stop here, then I needed to get involved.

Allen: OK. I almost missed the inference that there were sort of two actions; one directed at the middle school level, and that was before, and the one that was directed at the high school level.

Carey: But they were probably one and the same. It was just a different time for me.

Allen: But something happened, didn't it, as a result of the parents wanting new boundaries for the middle school?

Carey: Yeah.

Allen: So how did that happen?

Carey: The school board did that.

Allen: Because of –

Carey: Because of individual parents [who] did not want their kids to go to school with certain kinds of people.

Velma Carey

- Allen: OK. And was that much of a struggle, or was it – did it take a period of –
- Carey: It took a long, it took a long time.
- Allen: OK.
- Carey: You know, actually, the school desegregation suit did not come until after my two older children were out of school.
- Allen: Really?
- Carey: Really.
- Allen: OK. So we're talking about that maybe covering three to four years, or maybe longer, right?
- Carey: Longer. Until then, it was just a fight with the school and the school board.
- Allen: OK.
- Carey: Standing up to them and saying no.
- Allen: OK, then how did you get involved with the suit that issued out, that turned out to be the bussing of all children around (inaudible)?
- Carey: I think maybe from my entrance to going to the school board, then I started gathering and talking to other people who shared my feelings about equal education for everybody, or equal school facilities for everybody. And so we just kind of joined hands and talked and talked, and eventually formed a committee. By this time you know the University was out there, and so we were able to talk with instructors and people at the schools. There was a young attorney in town named Tara – Tara Beldit, or Bildet(?). I can't remember. I never heard of it since then. But there was Cullom Davis and Larry Shiner, and several other people that I can't remember. We would stop and talk and so we just got a committee together.
- Allen: So it was basically – am I correct to say it was basically the University who was able to bring people together?
- Carey: To embrace –they embraced it. The professors and things there. I don't think they brought the University community in some of them, but not the community members.
- Allen: How – in your mind – how do you in your mind, how do you remember the plaintiffs that were chosen? How were they chosen?

Carey: That was a multi-decision. And it blows my mind now to think about it, that it was so smooth. We had people from the League of Women Voters, and we had other people in the community who were strong believers of equal education, and we decided that in order to be successful, that we got to have the same numbers, black and white. Which we were able to do. The members who were white, like Mary Jo Potter, Roger Bridges, and Deanna Statler, and who else? But these were people who was able and maybe I just needed to say the committee was selected because they were able to go to parties and chat.

Allen: Spread the news.

Carey: No, chat with the school board people, and knew what was going on. They were the people who came back, you see what I'm saying? We could go to committee meetings. I could, but I didn't know what they was talking about. The people who were part of the committee, that their peers laughed at and joked with, but they were at these parties, and they knew what was going on. And so Theresa Cummings, brought Percy Julian in one day. And then she called me, and at that time she was in Dr. Lee's office, and so he (inaudible) community service in. And then we got together, Percy got together with us and in the group. I don't know how many of us it was at that time.

Allen: So Percy Julian didn't come through the NAACP, or how was Theresa involved in that from her level as community – ?

Carey: You know, I don't really know, but Percy Julian did not come through the NAACP. Separate from it. None of the members of NAACP was involved with (inaudible). Although there are a lot of people who took credit for it, and that was OK, because I was working for the Urban League, and I could not stand up and say what we were doing. But we were the impetus, Urban League was the impetus for that suit. The Zion Baptist Church, because we didn't want to be at the Urban League, became the site for the meetings. You know? A major (inaudible). The teachers, the minority teachers, were scared to death of us. They didn't join in, and I can understand that. They had families, they had jobs. So we were ...wow, but Julian would come in, talk to the people, give us a job, go back to Madison, you know? Mary Jo –

Allen: Let's just straighten, straighten up a list, Percy Julian [was] a part of the Madison –

Carey: Legal Defense.

Allen: OK. Great, Legal Defense.

Carey: NAACP Legal Defense.

Allen: OK. (inaudible)

Velma Carey

Carey: Was it on the national – I don't think they separated then, and that he was with Chatsky. It was the Legal Defense Fund, and they might have been. But anyway, they didn't bring him in.

Allen: OK.

Carey: You know, I don't mind giving credit, where credit is due.

Allen: OK, so how did they – I just need clarification. Are you saying that Potter and all those were also plaintiffs, or were they just part of that thing?

Carey: They were plaintiffs.

Allen: OK, very good.

Carey: And that Potter's husband is an attorney, and we used his law office – or Julian did – as a research place, where he'd come. Maybe he'd be here two days; nobody knew it.

Allen: You may not be able to remember this, but how long did it take to prepare the case to get it to the court? Approximately.

Carey: Couple of years. It was a whole lot of stuff he had to do. A whole lot of stuff.

Allen: In your mind, do you think that the suit was handled properly? What things did you feel might not have been addressed, or wasn't addressed properly?

Carey: I think the suit did everything we wanted it to do. I'm not sure that the people who were to take the suit, and the results, and use them the way it was supposed to be used, did in fact do that.

Allen: People, can you say what –

Carey: When I talk about people, I'm talking about the plaintiffs and the district.

Allen: The results then, weren't properly applied?

Carey: I don't think so. I don't think so.

Allen: But in your mind, was the distribution done wisely and met the need?

Carey: The plan that was adopted by the Judge was the plaintiff's plan, not the school district's. That was the plaintiff's plan. Now, the district has completely turned it around because of the new west and that kind of thing. And so, our school was a school where white kids had to come at all ages. Now, it's a middle school kid, and it's for special people. So we had bussing both ways,

for little kids as well as big kids, and pretty soon that was stopped.

Allen: So you were saying that the currently (inaudible), for instance, Springfield High School, that's sort of an unequal balance now?

Carey: No, Springfield High School probably has as many minorities as Southeast. Southeast probably has the most. I would say Lanphier would have fewer. I'm not sure. But they're all pretty well mixed. What bothers me are the things that have happened in the lower grades. Now that still bothers me. Because I don't see equity.

Allen: How do you feel about the reports that come out now, really very regularly, saying that the minority kids haven't advanced any. How do you feel about that type of –

Carey: I feel very bad about that.

Allen: Considering that we're supposed to have done –

Carey: I feel very bad about that. And I think it's low expectations. I think – I think that – I just think that it's revolving back the other way, that people, attitudes are different, and I think some of the teachers, frankly, are scared of the kids.

Allen: OK. You know, they've had access – blacks have an access to housing pretty much generally because the housing within the city of Springfield is becoming older, and so there's apartments for rent in almost any older section of the city, even West. Did that affect the mix in any way, in the – principally in the elementary school?

Carey: Not at the level that it is now. There aren't any kids, I think, and I don't want to be wrong, from first grade to fourth or fifth grade, minorities that aren't being bussed. I don't know if any white kids that age are being bussed.

Allen: OK. (inaudible) On the east side of Springfield (inaudible) I see them getting on the bus at the corner from my house. You don't think that there's any –

Carey: You don't see. And you might see whites, but the black in low economics.

Allen: OK. Is there anything else about the desegregation suit that should, from your perspective –

Carey: Teachers. At first, they did adhere toward getting teachers.

Allen: Minority teachers?

Carey: Minority teachers.

Allen: OK.

Carey: But there are very few minorities. They are lacking minority teachers. And that's because, you know the school union plays a big role in that. You can't rule out that. Sometimes I think they decide what education kids ought to have, rather than parents who pay the bill, but they'll say "I teach them." And you know I have great regards for teachers. Education was one of the things that was very near and dear in my mind where our kids were concerned. We worked with them. I think that it served my family well, but I worked at it.

Allen: OK.

Carey: That the [legal] defense and [Percy] Julian and the committee for two or three years monitored with the school system, and then they would ease, they'd do it an easement, and we would later go and they would ease some more. I'm not even sure whether they send the stuff to Julian anymore. The league did keep him involved for a good long while.

Carey: The question that I want to ask is, because we always have to have the educational institution attached to these kinds of things, why didn't Sangamon State, be the monitor of the program and the project, one of the monitors, and to do a revisit after so many years? Maybe that was part of the plan, I don't know.

Carey: The part of the plan was to send information to Julian, and he would then decide how it would be revisited. Would he be the one to come and sit with the school board and negotiate or what. (break in tape) OK. I'm honestly saying that to you. (break in tape) OK, some of the stuff, you couldn't talk about, because you didn't want it to get back to the sources that we were using. What do they say, a little slip sinks ships. And I think we would do that without even thinking what was going on. And that was the true cause of my involvement at that level, OK. And it was not an intent to exclude anybody. (break in tape) The other fact involved is that nobody knew how much we knew, and we were being laughed at, and saying that Springfield would never have a deseg[regation] suit. That, people laughed at us, laughed at the group, laughed at the thought of it. (break in tape) Probably more than the thought, they didn't know who the group was. When they was talking, they didn't know who those people were. (break in tape) In 1971, I ran for a member of the school board. From my running for the board, I was not elected, but I was the next highest of the people who got elected, and I remember that Mrs. Anne Maher told the group, when they were discussing it, someone who decided they would not be elected did not want to serve, or wasn't even in town, that she believed I would not be interested. And therefore they skipped over me and brought in a man named Van Winkle to serve that term out. So you know, they got low grades from me for that. But anyway, it built my determination up. I knew that from that experience, that it would take many

years for them to do anything that was right.

Allen: Are you saying that after the election, which you ran for, a school board member left town, and so that created a vacancy?

Carey: Right.

Allen: And that the school board could have – was empowered to select someone for that. And instead of taking you, because you were the next in line in terms of votes, they refused to do that?

Carey: I'm saying that. And left a person who did not want to run. He served one term, was not interested anymore.

Allen: Mr. Van Winkle.

Carey: Mr. Van Winkle. But the desegregation group was able to convince the then Honorable Waldo Ackerman, and he agreed that our plan was the better plan. And that it should start in time for January, that it should start in January. The school board had, was awaiting a court order on what form elementary school desegregation would take. The desegregation, the people who were working on the desegregation committee, had already done that. So the judge accepted the plaintiff's plan, and ordered that it be implemented. That's how that [was] done. And a lot of people was very angry with Waldo, I mean the honorable judge, that that happened. They weren't happy with him because of the consent decree. There was a consent decree, oh, Bettie, there were so many things. So it was 1976 when the plan was implemented. Which is almost six years after I didn't get a seat on the board.

Allen: So --

Carey: I think --

END OF SIDE A, START OF SIDE B

Carey: ... at first. We were kind of fumbling around because nobody had done any kind of research, and really hadn't thought about it, thought it was a joke, really. But the mayor had made a commitment, and he was saying, I'm going to honor that commitment to these young women, who was bold enough in the sixth grade (Phone Rings) to research and to bring it to fruition. (break in tape)

Allen: Who were the people who brought it to the mayor's attention?

Carey: The two young ladies were members of the sixth grade class at Iles Elementary School. One was Lindsay Harney, the other was Amanda Staab.

These young women, I guess, were chosen by the school to be their spokespersons. And apparently they were pretty persuasive; they got an OK to go ahead. And the mayor felt that he had given his word, and therefore needed to honor their request. So he had brought different parts of the community in, black and white, there were some whites on this committee, as well as the blacks, to see what they could do to come up with some kind of way to memorialize this event, to fashion it as a part of Springfield. So that's how we got started on this event. As a background to that, Springfield in 1908 had a population of about 47,000. And 2,000 of [what] Springfield had – in 1908 Springfield had 2,000 blacks, which was a higher percentage than blacks in Chicago, and most Illinois cities in the early 20th century, from 1880 to 1910. A significant change in the black settlements did occur in those years along East Washington Street downtown, particularly in the “Levee” between 7th and 9th. Blacks owned assorted businesses, barbershops, small restaurants, grocery stores, pawn shops, pool halls, and even a theater. But beneath the soot and grime of a Northern factory Springfield, was a Southern base. Some of the reasons that was done indicates the underlying cause of the riot was the resentment among some whites, because of economics and the social success of [the] Springfield black community.

Allen: Was there anything said about their political power, because of that 2,000 out of 40,000. It looked like if they got the voters, the Southern (inaudible) had some political clout.

Carey: I don't perceive through reading and listening that there was anything written about political clout. That anywhere there's economics involved, somebody had some political clout. And I'm sure that the people in the community knew that. For example, barbers, they had political clout because in the area of where I grew up in, blacks were good barbers, but they couldn't have blacks in their barbershop. Whites were the patrons. So, I suspect that blacks knew as much of went on in Springfield as did the whites. Because it's something that tells me about getting your face shaved and your hair cut that loosens your tongue a bit. But anyway. It was – Blacks were also, I guess they were socially acceptable, because I think some of them had perhaps waited on, or did a lot of things for Mr. Lincoln and other people who were kind of looking plus. It was right after the Civil War, and most of the people I'm sure who came up was very fair [complexioned]. So it was hard to walk down the street and see who was and who wasn't. So, I'm sure there were places that people who knew them felt they shouldn't be in, or did things they shouldn't have. To this extent, when the rumor that a black man had raped a white woman began to spread like wildfire, and in the meantime a black man had [been] accused of killing a white engineer. And as soon as a group of whites heard this, they immediately thought, let's go get the...

Allen: N-word.

Carey: Yeah. Let's go get them. And so they immediately rushed out to see what they could do. And in doing so, when they got to the jail where they thought "we'll catch them niggers, and we'll mob, we'll lynch them." But when they got there, they found that a white restaurateur, who probably had the best car of anybody in town, had loaned his car to the law officers to take these prisoners, these accusers, to another county. And this, then, angered very much the people who wanted to do something. So, my mind tells me that the first thing they wanted to know, "whose car?" Harry Loper's. And Loper was one of the, according to history, one of the people in town who had a restaurant, and had blacks working for him. So they decided, let's put him out of business. So one of the first acts was to burn down Loper's business. And in that event, it's believed that a black man was burned to death in there. So. When given all of this information, which the girls had gathered, to the committee, not having been a part of that research, the committee was in a quandary as to how can we take this information and fashion it into something that would not be sinister, but educational. Here's what happened, here are the facts, where do we go from here. There was no intent, in the committee's mind, to use the information to do anything except present it in a way so that it would forever be etched in the minds of Springfield people. And so, the committee, after many, many meetings, decided that the best way to tell this story was a video. So then they began to fashion a video to talk about what happened, the black man who had died. And out of the people whom the book says were killed, seven of them – six of them – were black. The seventh person was a white woman named Kate Howard.

Allen: What book are you referring to?

Carey: I'm referring to *Summer Riot*.

Allen: *Summer [of] Rage*?

Carey: Yeah, *Summer [of] Rage*, [that's the] correct book.

Allen: And that book was available during the research?

Carey: Yes. And was even revised, or renewed for the committee to use. They did it and they gave it to the committee.

Allen: Who's the author of that?

Carey: James Krohe, Junior.

Allen: I believe he was involved with the *Illinois Times* paper for a long time before he moved out west. I think he's back now, but anyway, he – that was good, that we had that revised for the use of the committee.

Carey: Well, you know it had gone out of print. And so he had the third printing in 1997.

Allen: What – actually, who did the committee use, or, rather not who, but the different groups in terms of maybe the university, how many groups did they use to put together this video?

Carey: Well. You know, I know that they used Sangamon State’s CONVOCOM to put together the video. I know that the city did give us money. I know that various people made donations. And from these donations, even from the members of the group, we were able to then do the video.

Allen: How much – were there any items used from the library?

Carey: The Sangamon Valley committee [i.e., Collection], of whom one of the members, Ed Russo, who is head of that, made available a lot of information that he had garnered over the years. Cullom Davis, who became one of the people who is on the video, was another person. And he had also contributed to the *Summer of Rage* that Jim Krohe, Jr. did. So, the information that we got – and I suspect that these young girls had also gone and done something – we had a librarian who also researched it, you know. And a couple who had – the Buhl family [Sandra and Larry], which had become a part of the committee, [their] daughter had, according to the information we received, had done this project, the 1908 riot project, and presented it to another mayor who had not done anything about it. But they were very helpful in promoting this. And Alvera [Knox], who was a librarian at Franklin Middle School, and Bettie Allen who was a community member who has been involved with Springfield at all levels, from Sunday school teacher to taking care of sick people and just a giving person who was always there to give and lend her knowledge. Whereas her family didn’t talk about it, I’m sure they had knowledge of it, but she had also been very much involved with the NAACP. And we had Rudy Davenport, and Carl Oblinger and Carl Madison, who were the other part of this committee. All of these people gave whatever they could give. And when we finalized that we would do a video, we entered into a contract with Sangamon State University, that they would give time and we would provide the resources for them to do the video. We had chosen, for the person who would narrate the video, was the most notably honored William Warfield, who was then a professor at Northwestern University. The video was very successful, and ended – a part of the video gave out the sites, I believe. If not, I want to reiterate them. That there are – that Mayor Ossie Langfelder got the city of Springfield, and the city of Springfield, I’m not sure which department, I think – oh, I’m not sure. But anyway. They put up plaques at all of the places where there is a happening, or an event. And prior to that, we had put together a committee who was able to walk the tour where this would take place. The places are some of the places. There’s the county jail, which now is a part of the historical library, and therefore the cornerstone, the document or

the plaque that was there was moved. I don't know whether it would be replaced or not. There's one at Ninth and Carpenter, Eleventh and Madison, one almost directly in front of the museum, a little bit different from it, and there are one at the State Arsenal, and one at Spring and Edwards. That's where Mr. Donegan lived, and where they – where his wife, [who] was a white woman, and attempted to shield him. And they drug him out of his house, and apparently hung him on the clothes line and left him. But I think they got him to a hospital, and he was not able to sustain, or to recuperate from the blows, and therefore he died. Now, one thing I want to make clear, is that nobody from the committee got any money for this. And they did meet regularly. And two people I want to mention, that's a part of the committee, was Reverend Benn and Tony Harley. I think most of us know that Tony Harley was killed in a tornado at his wife's home, her family home, in Birmingham, Alabama.

End of Interview