

**Interview with
Otheletta Blake-Orr
by Connie Jean Zirkle,
June 21, 1997**

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Released Form signed by Otheletta Blake-Orr
June 21, 1997, at Camp Washington Carver, West Virginia

Transcriber not identified
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Otheletta Blake-Orr Interview

Connie Jean Zirkle: This is Connie Zirkle and it is June the twenty first, nineteen ninety seven and I am conducting an oral history interview of Otheletta Orr and she was a Camp Washing Carver camper for several years. You have signed the release form and I made you aware of what was going on here, so we just need to clarify that.

Otheletta Blake-Orr: Yes

CZ: And I am going to let you take the microphone. And would you state your name and where you are from, age, and stuff like that.

OO: My name is Otheletta Blake-Orr. I live in Montgomery, West Virginia. I attended Camp Washington Carver as a camper from 1958 to 1962.

CZ: What I am going to ask you, I'm going to ask you some general questions about your history now.

OO: My parents were Robert A and Bernice Blake. One brother, Robert Blake. I came as, We had a 4-H in Montgomery and I came as a 4-Her. I was not sponsored by any other group.

CZ: And you said you were here for several years?

OO: I was here for four summers.

CZ: What we are trying to find out, what we want to know is the history of the camp in itself, but also, if it had any affect on your life. You know, like if there was some kind of major event - I know you just told me about one, but I mean things that happened.

OO: As a child my family would come to this camp. As a very very young child, as a matter of fact, from the time I can remember walking our Sunday School came here for picnics, which was a big major event. The event was the swimming pool. Before integration, black children had no where to swim, except to come here and I would say within a maybe a 75 mile radius

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people would come to this camp just to swim. I learned to swim here.

CZ: Ok. And you were telling me a nice story just a little bit earlier about your first kiss.

OO: Oh my first kiss was my last year of camp. I won't give the name, but this young gentleman and I held hands for a whole week. On the very last day I happened to be sitting in a swing and he zooms right by and plasters this kiss on me and he leaves. (Laughs.)

CZ: So the camp was a important social experience?

OO: Very much so! Very much! In the - we came here to meet new friends, we came back to see old friends. The adults had a very positive impact on our lives. Very strict camp rules. As a camper, no one got out of line. Nobody talked back to adults. We didn't even talk back to the counselors, although we felt like it.

CZ: You said that you had some friends that you remembered from camp?

OO: My best friend was the director's daughter, Sandra Lynch. We're still very quite close, although we live states apart. We do get together at least two or three times a year. We were always friends I would say from the time that we were walking or toddling around. Coming to the camp yes. I even got to stay over sometimes over the weekend after the camp was over, because the family, the Lynch family, was, they were family friends.

CZ: So that's how you found out about the camp, but you said you used to come up here in the summer.

OO: Yes.

CZ: So you were from this area?

OO: From the Montgomery area.

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CZ: And you said that you just recently returned to West Virginia?

OO: Oh it's been - I was in Ohio. I'm a music teacher and I taught for nine years in north eastern Ohio. I'm a graduate of West Virginia Tech. I graduated in 1971. I have just completed 26 years of teaching and I am on my way to retirement.

CZ: Yeah!! Good for you. I'm looking forward to that. Do you have children?

OO: I have two daughters. I have a daughter who is 19, her name is Sharissa. She will be a junior at West Virginia University. Also, a daughter who is a camper, who has been here for four summers. Bernice, she is a junior at Valley High School, Smithers, West Virginia.

CZ: So you wanted her to come to the camp because you had been here?

OO: Oh yes. Oh yes, the positives of the camp and the responsibilities that children need to take on. That was taught in the old camp.

CZ: And how was that taught? I mean did you have activities or responsibilities that they assigned to you?

OO: Oh yes, there were activities that we did. It was early rise. There was the flag raising. Breakfast. And I think that the children who misbehaved had to clean the tables and sweep the dining room. We had structured classes, we had art, we had music, we had archery, we had swimming, to name a few. Our lunch time. After lunch we all had take a nap for one hour before we could go to do activities on our own for two hours, then we would rehearse for what we would do at the council circle at night. The very first night at camp we were put into tribes. There were four tribes. The Mingo, the Delaware, the Seneca and the Cherokee and we had a tribal leader and we would do performances every night at the council circle.

CZ: The person I interviewed yesterday told me a little bit about that. That was one of the things that I was really interested in was the symbolism that the students are learning here at the

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camp and how important that is and that is something else that I wanted to ask you about. You came when the camp was integrated already.

OO: No the camp was not integrated, in 1958. It was not integrated, but school had begun to integrate at that time.

CZ: So, you didn't attend the camp when it was integrated at all?

OO: No I didn't. There were African American children here only.

CZ: You seen your daughters and they have been in the integrated camp. Do you think that it is better, worse

OO: Well, I think that it is better for non-African American children just to see the heritage that black children have enjoyed for a long time.

CZ: That is one of the problems, that we need to learn about each other so that we can understand each other.

OO: Absolutely.

CZ: And we were just kind of curious about people's views on whether ... because we thought some people may have negative views on integration and some ...

OO: This has been very positive, I think more so for non-African American students. The multicultural and I'm really pleased that that's on right now. We've been trying to teach this in our schools for a very, very long time and I don't think that it's been quite understood what multiculturalism is.

CZ: And what do you, and what is your definition of multiculturalism?

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OO: It's learning and about cultures. What cultures do. Basically just knowing about cultures and getting along, being able to relate to one another.

CZ: You know, there are so many different definitions out there now of multiculturalism.

OO: Well, I don't have a really set definition because there are so many cultures that there are cultures within West Virginia.

CZ: Yes, that's what we are finding out and it is important for people to learn about each other's culture like we said to understand each other. You can't understand each other if you don't understand each other's culture.

OO: Absolutely.

CZ: You have to have a foundation to build on. Do you think that the camp had any impact on your African American identity? Did it make you feel better? Help your self-esteem?

OO: Oh sure, definitely. It was the one thing you looked forward to every year. Coming to the camp, like I said with your friends and meeting new friends. Yes it did build your self esteem.

CZ: Do you think it made you like maybe more assertive as a female?

OO: Sure, more assertive, yes.

CZ: Did you learn ...

OO: Well coming from an African American family, females were always pretty assertive in the family. (Laughs.)

CZ: So it was a natural thing.

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OO: It was a natural thing for African American females to be assertive.

CZ: Do you think it helped at all in your choice of a career or a ... maybe to go on to college?

OO: No, I think that I was probably so young when I came, I was ten when I was first attended and I attended until fourteen, but I am quite sure that it has had some impact that I haven't thought about.

CZ: Do you think, I know the boys and girls were separate, and they should be, but do you think that, were the activities so that did you have ... were involved in the same activities?

OO: The girls and boys were involved in the same activities.

CZ: And did you think that that was a good idea?

OO: Well, we never thought about that. It was just a natural thing to do I think. The things that we didn't do - like we didn't sleep in the same quarters. In the big log cabin, all the females stayed upstairs and it was at one time one very large room. The males stayed down in the woods in the cabins. At that time it was a very wooded area.

CZ: So they really had the woods experience and the girls were a little bit more sheltered from that.

OO: Right.

CZ: What do you think the importance of the camp is in general?

OO: The importance of the camp is that it was a camp built, I think the history dates back to 1938. It was important to African Americans because this was the only camp in the whole, that I can remember, that I know of where we could come and enjoy ourselves.

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CZ: And did you have any perception of people outside the camp? Did they know about the camp? Were they, did they talk about it or did they say, "Oh that's a great or a bad place" or anything like that?

OO: It was always a great place to come to. The whole communities, communities would come to this camp. From, maybe, I would say, maybe the Northern part of the state, I can't recall.

CZ: Do you have any stories in particular that you would like to tell us? You know, maybe something silly, or I know when we came up the other night someone said that a skunk had gotten in, under neath the bunk house and chased everybody out and so she was kind of telling me about that type of a story. Do you have anything like that that you can remember?

OO: I remember a hike one year and Mrs. Joyelette Childs was our music teacher and she was also I believe a biologist and there was a snake going up a tree, so she decided we're going to get this snake and take it back to the camp. Well, the snake was killed brought back. Oh, it must have been, oh, eight, nine feet long, very thick and she dissected that snake on a table. She had all the children around and everything that she did, she showed us what she was doing and she would explain how what she was doing and why she was doing it.

CZ: And so did you learn a lot?

OO: Oh I learned quite a bit and then when I was in high school I knew what to do when you dissected.

CZ: You learned how to dissect. Yeah.

OO: She was really great in dissecting. I think she was a natural biologist or either taught biology and she was our music teacher.

CZ: Yes, you just mentioned she was your music teacher. Do you think that maybe she inspired you to be a music teacher also?

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OO: Somewhat, yes she did. I loved to sing as a child. She was one of, probably one of my very first music teachers from a child, from a young child and the type of music that we performed in camp.

CZ: Did you perform African American music?

OO: No, we didn't perform African American music. We performed traditional camp music. We did some African American music at that time, but it wasn't as commercial at that time as it is now, being the popular music. We didn't do a lot of popular music.

CZ: Were you here for the show case today?

OO: Yes.

CZ: And what was your feeling, I know that ...

OO: Being an African Heritage camp, I think that it was really wonderful because these things need to be expressed. Children need to learn about them and how they are performed.

CZ: So as a music teacher you think they did a good job?

OO: Oh, wonderful! Oh, a fantastic job! My daughter wrote, I think two songs. She performed one that she wrote on clarinet and she wrote another piece for, I think, during the time that they - poetry was being read. She wrote something. I had no idea that she knew how to write music, but I knew she plays. (Laughs.)

CZ: And that is one of the things we were discussing too that the camp experience allows you to kind of tease out those hidden talents that you may have.

OO: Oh, sure it does. I'm quite sure there were a lot of parents who have been shocked by their children's performance. We don't see that every day from them.

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CZ: I want to thank you for participating in the interviews. Is there anything else that you would say that you can think of? You know, any other stories?

OO: Boy, I wish I could really think back. It takes a lot of us to do reminiscing and then you - it clicks right in. Well, I suppose the interview is over and thank you.

CZ: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW