

**Interview with
Paulette Mabry
by Connie Jean Zirkle,
June 20, 1997**

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Released Form signed by Paulette Mabry
June 20, 1997, at Camp Washington Carver, West Virginia

Transcriber not identified
PDF prepared by Lisle G Brown

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Note: In the original transcript there were blank spaces.
These have been indicated by [blank space] in the following text.

Paulette Mabry Interview

Connie Zirkle: Today is June twentieth nineteen ninety seven and I am conducting an oral history interview. We are at Camp Washington Carver and I'm going to first (inaudible) I want you to tell me some basic information about where you were born, your age, etc.

Paulette Mabry: OK. Yes I did sign the basic consent form. I actually was born in Montgomery West Virginia in 1945. I am 52 years old. I tell people all of the time that I think I was born in an excellent time. Because I came in a time when African.Americans families were extremely close and segregated communities and we had, really the support of not only our parents, but the extended family which was actually the community. I was thinking about one lady in the community, particularly, that had a tremendous influence over all of us young people. Her name was Lena, Lena Williams, but we called her Lena and she was one of our older mentors, but she had a wealth of history, oral history that she continued to convey to us young people. It wasn't as if someone had asked her to take that job, it was just a job that she wanted to share with young people and it was interesting because she didn't let all children (inaudible). She was extremely careful about who she wanted to impart this knowledge with and I've always wondered about that, you know what is her criteria that she used. I think that she had this uncanny nature of knowing who (inaudible) to make sure that we would - our children and our children's children of the oral history of the founding of West Virginia and the founding of Montgomery in particular. She told me so many things about my family, about her perceptions of this one and that in the community and how relatives that I didn't even know, they were deceased at that time. How they conducted themselves in the community and how as an African American that was very important because even though people worked together and kids played together, they were separate communities that we lived in. So she wanted to be certain that we knew that we had some very gorgeous people out there. I think that the reason that she did that was to instill pride in us and a sense of direction and dignity and that was really very, very important.

(Checks tape)

So, as I think back about people in our community and how during the time of integration, well, we went to separate schools until I was in third grade and at that time we decided, or it was

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decided that the schools were integrated. And I tell people this story because I live in the south, I forgot to tell you that I live in Little Rock Arkansas which is a historical site. As you know and extremely sensitive about racial issues. So, I tell this story to people that I have worked with in Arkansas and in Little Rock and they sometimes look at me with disbelief and also people in Mississippi and Louisiana, because I do work with people in those states too in building communities. But I tell people about the story about when our schools were integrated in West Virginia, when I was little, particularly in Montgomery and how there were really very few problems. We just decided to go to school together. Of course you had people that were interested in comparing differences. I remember one incident when I was in the bathroom at the elementary school and I was down washing my hands, it must have been after lunch, or something like that and there was one of my class mates down there too and she looked at me and then she glanced back down at the sink and she, I guess her curiosity got the best of her. She asked me just a simple question. She said, "How do you know when your hands are clean?" And I didn't take offence with that even though I was really kind of a young age because I felt that it was really kind of a question that I would probably ask someone if I wanted to know and I just told her, "The same as you. They look clean." So I think that it was our approach as young people, the way that you approached each other as human beings and I attribute a lot of that to our early teachers in those segregated schools. Mrs. Emma Carter, who lived in the community, two doors from me was one of my teachers. Mrs. Ida Wade was my very first teacher. I went to the primer which is known as kindergarten now and then first and second grades in her class room and Mrs. Wade was real novel as a teacher. She lived in the community also. So we had access to her and she had access to us and would pull us in if she felt that she needed to anytime. She used to have these lovely things called tea parties on Saturdays. And it was a wonderful way that she introduced us to the world beyond Montgomery. She and her husband Dina used to travel all the time. They would go to New York. They would go to all these exotic and exciting places we thought, you know, at that time and in coming back she would bring all of these nick nacks. Very unusual things that she wanted to introduce us to - to kind of stretch our minds beyond Montgomery. I remember this one time that she had a group of us, boys and girls in her home for this tea party on Saturday morning and you had to dress. You had to dress to go to her house. So it was really a big treat to be invited to her house for these tea parties and her husband, Dina used to cook. That was his job was to clean,

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he was a house mom that we know today. Where she was the educator, she was the teacher. So she would invite us in and Dina was an intricate part of the whole relationship there and she would introduce us to these wonderful conversations and poise and learning to really have the confidence in yourself to communicate with people. We didn't know what she was doing at the time, but I have since realized that this was what she was doing, socializing us.

CZ: Teaching you.

PM: That' s right. And so this one particular time she had brought chocolate covered ants back from New York. It was just like a little block of chocolate. It wasn't an individual ant. And she explained to us what it was, it was a delicacy, something very unusual and that we should always in life try things that we didn't feel would be quite appetizing. So early on we had these people in our community that also taught us in school, that also were church members. They were the extended, truly the extended family and this instilled, I think in us, the confidence of self, knowing our past and planning for the future. And sometimes I wonder and I cry really about this because I am an educator and you see so many kids coming in the class room, coming to church, coming to you in the community and they don't have a sense of the past and a sense of where they want to go in the future. They are muddling into the woes of today. So thinking in terms of this camp, I think it is probably one of the best things that can happen to kids in West Virginia. To have an opportunity to come and in a pristine environment like Clifftop without a lot of the pressures that these kids ... These kids have some tremendous daily pressures that on them. You can't - we just cannot forget that, but they need to be in an environment where they can stretch themselves, with the guidance and instruction and decide or get an inkling of where they want to go in life. But not only that, but to also have a connection with the past and that is what this camp does so well. The only problem that I feel is that there is some financial problems that need to be addressed to give many more kids in West Virginia that opportunity.

CZ: I was speaking to the director up here before we met and that's what he said. The camp needs some kind of national attention so that funding could be raised to keep this camp running and provide an opportunity to these kids. Did you attend the camp as a child?

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PM: I certainly did, yes. This is really an intricate part, one of the components of growing up. Camp Washington Carver was one of the best retreats not only for children, but for families that we knew of. My family used to travel quite a bit. My dad worked in the post office and my mother was a professional beautician. So we would travel all over the United States as children and as a family, but this is one location that we always looked forward to coming to as children. I did belong to a 4-H club and I was a girl scout and those were kind of blended into a total presentation here at this camp. My aunt, who was a music instructor in Mount Hope taught here in the summer time. This was her job. She was music director of this camp, Aunt Juliette Childs. So when we came it wasn't as if we were coming someplace that we had no connection. Even when we weren't in camp we would come up here to swim and everything and that hole that you see in the ground in front of the great lodge is in shambles. That was a beautiful swimming pool and as you will probably hear from each person that you interview. Swimming pools were not integrated for a long time.

CZ: I learned that earlier when I arrived.

PM: Yeah, well, they weren't, they weren't integrated, I mean, black kids in the community, what we had were people who were sensitive to that issue. That we couldn't go to the swimming pool so we had people who would turn on the fire plug and spray the water like that and we would make the best of the situation. But the camp George Washington Carver had a beautiful swimming pool with a diving board. I mean it was the center of attention when we came up here because we knew we could go swimming. So to come this year, and this is probably the first year I've been to Clifftop for maybe about ten years. It's been a long time since I have been up here, but to come to this camp and see that pool in disrepair like that I think is absolutely ridiculous. I do. It really hurts me in my heart to see that the state does not see the connection of this camp with the citizens of West Virginia.

(Tape noise - inaudible) ABOUT THE BIRD.

The following story is as I remember Paulette Mabry telling it - it is not her exact words as the tape was inaudible. This year the students are using the Senufo bird as their symbol during this

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camp. The Senufo bird was an African symbol for strength in family because the birds mated for life and raised their family together. The Senufo bird was also a symbol of fertility and the name used by an African tribe. Ms. Mabry explained that the purpose of this symbol in the African American Arts Camp was that the bird was looking back while moving into the future. This is what was stressed during this camp. Learning about your roots and culture while moving and planning for your future. She said that a positive future must be grounded in the culture of the past.

End of tape problem.

CZ: So you said you were a 4-H student and girl Scout?

PM: Yes.

CZ: How were you sponsored to come to camp? Was it through 4-H? Was it a local sponsorship?

PM: Who paid the money? Is that what you are asking? Oh my parents paid the money. Oh sure and it was not a very expensive fee like the camps of today. You know to come to 4-H camp. But I think, and I don't remember how much it was. I know these kids coming to the African American Heritage camp pay a very small fee to attend here and I was relating that to some of them. That \$75.00 is nothing for ten days of intensive instruction and that they have gone through. The three meals a day, and they have wonderful cook staff down here. Just wonderful a dining hall staff. But some of the camps that I send my kids, my child to cost \$475.00 for five days. I mean that is what I have to expect when I send her to those camps. So \$75.00 for this kind of experience is just a really small amount of money. But we have to realize also that there are many children that don't have \$75.00, the parent's don't have \$75.00 to send them to camp. So, we have to be conscious of that and through a fund raising opportunity, or some type of a scheme to support these children and to encourage them to attend the camp. Nothing should stand in the way for any child wanting to come to the arts camp should happen. Nothing should get in the way.

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CZ: Is one of the reasons that you are teaching at the camp because you were here as a child?

PM: No actually, it's not the reason why I came. My brother is our Assistant Director this year, Greg Childs and he served as an instructor of this very camp for thirteen years before taking on that position. In the past years, he has talked to me about the diversity of the children coming as well as the staff, but primarily the diversity of the kids. And addressing some of the same issues that we were just talking about that many of the kids come with a lot of luggage. They really do. A lot of personal concerns that they may have and when they get here away from home it really kind of impacts them. For instance the loneliness of being in a home where maybe one parent is the sole supporter and works all of the time and to try to support a family. It is very tough for kids. And then to get away in a situation like this, away from that little bit of security, sometimes really is just a little too much. In previous years there have been a lot of deaths in the families while the children are here. So he felt that a camp counselor really did need to be on site and work with the children and do some team building activities and to just be here to talk with the kids. To identify say, from real potential problems where follow-up needed to take place, because the idea here is not only to give the kids here, one year, one summer experience, one time experience, but to make them into campers that would like to come back to George Washington Carver.

CZ: So you said you were serving in the position of camp counselor?

PM: Yes. I am camp counselor.

CZ: Do you have training ...

PM: Yes. Do I have training in counseling? Yes I do. Yes I do. I am a certified counselor. I worked as a guidance counselor in elementary, jr. high and senior high in Ohio and finished at John Carroll University, a counseling degree. What I am doing right now in Arkansas and I have been doing in the past is working in educational research. I worked for the foundation in the mid-south out of Jackson Mississippi.

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CZ: Did you attend the camp when it was, before it was integrated or after?

PM: No I intended the camp before, remember I was born in 1945. (Laughs.)

CZ: So you don't show your age. I think you are a lot like me, I don't show my age and people think I am younger than I am.

PM: Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

CZ: So do you think that there is, of course there are differences then when you attended the camp and now that it is segregated do you think that is good or bad for the children?

PM: Oh, I think that it is definitely good for the children, because we live in a more integrated society. So this is a natural for these children. To come and be in an integrated, a multi cultural environment. I think that it would be more of a strain, and this is my personal opinion. I think it would be more of a strain or stretch for children to come and be in a non-integrated environment. I really do. Plus the kids, the emphasis in this camp as you can see is on African American heritage and I think it is a good opportunity for children to share cultures. It is a good opportunity for non-African American children to learn about a culture that may not be as represented in our history as it should be.

CZ: Definitely!

PM: These are some of the comments that we picked up from some of the non-African American children. That it has put them into a learning environment that they will cherish. They grow through it and that's what we need to do because when we look at history, it is from a particular perspective, which is white mid-western perspective. Those are our books and if we begin to supplement those books with materials, then we have a non-liberal or a ultra-conservative group that seems to think that we are trying to, that our society, is trying to alter and change history into a non-authenticated source. But you and I both know that isn't true, but if people continue to hear that, then they will begin to believe that and they will begin to

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rise up against any type of change in history. So I think that settings like this definitely give children that are not African Americans an opportunity to come into a non-restrictive point of view about the way that things have happened in the past and the impact that African Americans, Orientals, all segments of America, cultural segments of America have contributed.

CZ: The same way that women have been ignored in the history where they are not in the history books and not just women that were important in a man's perspective, you know not just the first ladies or something like that, but all women. So I think that is very important thing that you are doing. You need to have, our children need to be learning history, real history.

PM: Absolutely. Absolutely.

CZ: Not a particular person's point of view, but real history of the diverse populations that we have.

PM: And the learning environment at this particular camp is a lot of fun. It is non-threatening, kids are creative, and they are learning something that they have never ever, perhaps ever participated in. But the most important thing about is, that it is a non-threatening environment and it is fun.

CZ: [blank space]

PM: I think that all of the people, and I'm not really being overly generous, but all of the people that were here at this camp at the time that I was here were dedicated individuals. Pretty much like the teachers that we had at home. The Ida B. Wade and Emma Carter's and the James Moore's who was the music teacher of my brothers. I wasn't old enough to take his classes because I was still in elementary school, but the high school and elementary school were together. So we always saw these teachers and inspired to be in their classes because they were the best in their field and they made education exciting. The people here at this camp made education exciting. We played hard here and we also learned hard here. My aunt who was the music director, Julia Childs, was also the science here at the camp. She would take us

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out in the woods and she was show us about the different leaves, describe the trees to us, and she would show us the different animals and she made that a fun experience. She really did. And I can remember some of the things that we would do and I was usually frightened myself of going into the woods because of the snakes, but when you came to George Washington Carver, you faced a lot of your fears and you overcame a lot of your fears in a non-threatening environment. Mr. Crawford, he was the director of the camp was a very generous man as far as affection was concerned, as far as teaching was concerned, but he was also a disciplinarian. A strong disciplinarian. He didn't want you to get smart.

CZ: He was easy to get along with as long as you obeyed him?

PM: Yes.

CZ: When you were in camp, were events separated by gender?

PM: No.

CZ: Did you just do female things?

PM: No.

CZ: Your activities were for the girls and boys?

PM: At the point I came to this camp boys and girls that's where our society was. You know we would fight and we would argue and everything and people pretty much knew the extent to which they could carry on, you know like that. But it was also a meeting place for girls and guys to you know socialize and get your first boyfriend and have a crush someone and there was a lot of giggling, you know fun about things. But there were games and you could have that kind of activity under the supervision of people that loved you and guided you into that period of socialization. We had dances, and shuffleboard and ping pong and those evenings you could just go out on the camp grounds and kind of stroll together and most of the time you were in a

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group though. (Laughs) Unless, you know, you were one of the older campers and then you really had a crush on a guy. There was so much learning at this place, at this camp, and you didn't know it was taking place. You know, it was just an experience.

CZ: Kind of a social as well as academic education. Just an all around experience.

PM: Yes, we had arts and crafts, and music, and nature and we had first aid and you know just a whole bunch of things that all children should do of course that were of interest to them.

(Not audible)

PM: It was one of those things that you really looked forward to.

CZ: You think that it helped you, well obviously it helped you. Do you think that it helped build character and help you with the decisions you made in your life?

PM: The camp itself probably was a part of that, but I wouldn't go so far as to say that it built the character. It built an initiative, it was part of the whole process of building it. I think that what really pushed me forward as far as deciding that I wanted to go to college, deciding that I wanted to work with people, deciding that I really to be somewhat adventurous and be sort of a nontraditional individual. I think that possibly what helped me was that, predominately the people in my community and the experiences with them and wanting to go beyond Montgomery West Virginia.

CZ: That's one of the things that I have discussed with my mother. I feel confident that the things we have now with teenagers and how the community helped raise the children. My mother experienced the same thing. Where everybody knew everybody and they helped each other out. Now, the children aren't experiencing that and I think it is one of the reasons that we are having the social problems that we are now because children aren't raised in that environment where they can grow.

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PM: And that's why a camp like this can give them the support that they need and the individuals who are responsible, clearly energetic individuals, give children that sense of community. I think this camp really does that. It really need to be longer. It is a unique experience.

CZ: The camp needs to be longer?

PM: Yes, I think about 14 days. The first three days kids are just getting adjusted and they have a lot of aches and pains and a lot of is because they are lonely. You know they are away from home for a couple of days and away from their friends and all and the telephone. Because see, this camp offers a way to get away from that stuff. No telephone or television in their rooms and see the kids really need to be away from all that stuff for a while. They begin to think about themselves, you know. They just kind of take the time for themselves to develop their inner selves.

CZ: Instead of the television taking care of them.

PM: That's right.

CZ: And what they are supposed to look like and feel.

PM: That's right and having the support of friends telling them that you can't be something or whether or not they think it is the right thing for you to do. They get a chance to think about who they are and where they want to be five, ten years - setting some goals and having fun with other people, maybe that they didn't even know. They are getting back to learning how to establish positive relationships.

CZ: Is there any special stories that you want to tell me about the camp?

PM: You know, that's funny, I don't remember any special stories in this camp. (Laughs) I know every time that I came, I just valued the relationships that I had. See many of us came together in the community. There was just a group of us that was always coming to camp and we had

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fun together. I guess, I know, I guess, the most fun thing I suppose that we did here, in camp that I can always come back and remember was the camp fire. I don't know if you heard about our camp fire or not, but there are four tribes, Indian tribes. The Seneca, Cherokee, Delaware, and Mingo and you had to choose ... and the chief was the word of the council. In the evening we would go to the camp fire circle which is over behind the pool and sit in bleachers and each section of the bleachers would be indicative of the tribes. The tribes would all sit together. And the chief would recognize you only if you stood up with your hand up and your last finger and thumb up and said, "Oh great chief, I brave Paulette would like to speak." And he of course would say, if I was one of the lucky ones to be chosen, "Speak brave of the Delaware tribe." or whatever tribe you were from. And that way you would have an opportunity to say to the chief, I would like to challenge whomever to a riddle or a joke or a stunt, or whatever, a song. And if the brave would accept the challenge, they would have to go up front up in front of the council and they would have to accept the challenge or reject it and then if the challenge was good and the other person took the challenge too, then all the braves would say, "How, How." If it was a bad challenge, you would know it was bad because everyone would say, "Nitchie, Nitchie." So the camp fire was really - we had a camp fire every night - that was a culmination of the camp day. Scouting reports, what you thought that was good, what you thought that needed to be changed and then the challenges and then the Chief would also ask for a and all the braves must be quiet and listen to the council. So it was a way, that we didn't realize of course, to learn parliamentary procedures in a friendly fun atmosphere.

CZ: Well, thank you very much.

PM: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW