P E T E R S B U R G

V O I C E S O F C I V I L R I G H T S :

T H E O R A L H I S T O R Y

INTERVIEW OF ANN JACKSON ELLISON

conducted by

Hermanze Fauntleroy

Petersburg, Virginia

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BY MR. FAUNTLEROY:

Q Good afternoon. I am Hermanze Fauntleroy and today I shall be interviewing Mrs. Ann Jackson Ellison, and this comes as a result of her involvement as a citizen in Petersburg, as a high school student at Peabody High School, and her knowledge of what took place and what the conditions were in th city of Petersburg.

Mrs. Ellison, what do you recall about the situation in terms of the conditions within the City of Petersburg as you were growing up?

A All right. Well, thank you, first of all, for the opportunity to share some memories. I remember moving from our home on Clinton Street, Bunker Hill as it is known, to 508 Mistletoe Street. Now, this was significant not only for the family, but for my parents as well. My father had purchased that house at 508 Mistletoe Street at auction.

He came home one day at lunch and told my mother that he had bought a house. Now, the

house is located two doors from the corner of Blick Street and Mistletoe Street, and it was a lovely house. However, it was set between two white families. Not only was it positioned between two white -- the homes of two white families, but it was across the street from several other white families.

Of course, this must have been a source of consternation for those families, because eventually they all moved out from across the street. The Mallorys lived next door on our left. This was an elderly couple, very pleasant people, very friendly. And the Barksdales and the Griggs lived in the two-family house on our right. Again, they were most cordial to us.

I remember Margaret Griggs, who was probably about 20 years old, sunning herself in the backyard. I'd never seen a white woman close up like that, but she would get a tan every now and then. I was just fascinated by that. Never seen anything like that.

Now, I don't remember when the Griggs family moved out, but I do remember the Barksdales who lived on the second floor of that home. Mr. Barksdale -- Marshall and Mildred Barksdale had one child, a daughter, Peggy. To this day she and I

remain very close friends, closer than sisters, and I have a sister. We never went to school together because of the system of segregation.

However, we played together; we played dolls, we rolled our doll carriages up and down the block between Blick and Halifax Street. We played paper dolls together. She ate dinner at our house. I ate at her house. Mr. Barksdale helped me with my math problems when I was a student at Virginia Avenue School, and again at Henry Williams School.

So no one -- and I mention this because no one had to teach us how to get along together, how to understand each other. Those things became natural -- well, they were natural, I should say, simply because we were two children who loved each other's company tremendously.

And I want to mention here that there must have been some modicum of trust on their part to allow Peggy to come back after they had moved to East Washington Street, she was allowed to come back to my 12th birthday party. The one condition was that no boys be present, and of course no boys were going to be present because George Saxon had already said, no boys were going to be at that party. So

that was fine, but I was happy to have her come back and share in that 12th birthday celebration. And as I said, we have remained friends over the years. She just called me to say happy birthday on February 15th. I call her every January 3rd to do the same. So those are my early memories of relating to white people.

Now, we were one block from the city bus stop. I recall getting onto the bus at the corner of Halifax where Shelton Store is -- was. For some reason the seat on the bus, as you boarded the bus, the seat that was across from the driver held a particular fascination for me when I was a little kid. There was something about sitting with one's back to the window that was absolutely the rage for me, but it was not to happen.

Now, my mother would take me by the hand, and she would say -- you know,I must have done this more than once. My mother never said, you can't sit there, we can't sit there, you don't belong there. She never said anything like that. She said, come on, Ann, we're going to sit here, and she would escort me to the back of the bus.

Later, I found out that there was an ugliness to not being a certain color. When I

entered McClelland Store, for example, and I saw the two water fountains, they were a signature, if you will, of the system. I can clearly see the signs bearing the words "white" and "colored." And on a couple of occasions I dared to drink from the white fountain. The water was the same. But there was something in the act of defiance of those signs that held some purpose for me, but again, it was an ill-defined purpose because I was young, but I knew something was not quite right about that.

Q Having seen that as far as the water fountains are concerned, do you recall what the layout was, if you will, as far as the restrooms were concerned?

A The restroom was in the rear of the store. It seems to me it was on the left wall -- in the rear of the store. That part is not clear to me, but I do remember the water fountains on the left wall. Perhaps they were next to the doors. That part I don't remember. But I do recall the location of the ladies restroom in Ruckle Rosenstock, it was in the basement, had an unusual order.

It wasn't a place that I avoided going, but the odor was distinctive, and I recall a feeling of inconvenience, somewhat of an -- there

was somewhat of an inconvenient feeling about having to go to the basement. Now, perhaps the Caucasian women had to do the same thing. That I don't recall.

But as I think of the experience of shopping in Ruckle Rosenstock's I'm reminded of all of the times I rode the elevator, took the elevator to the second -- no. Let's see, maybe -- help me remember this -- it was either the second or the third floor, but here's what, here's what was outstanding to me, Mr. Fauntleroy, as the door opened I could hear the tickling of crystal, spoons, knives, forks and light banter of a lunchroom crowd.

I was never privy to those conversations because it was not my place. I didn't "belong" in that place. I am referring of course to the dining room to the left as one exited the elevator. I remember the French doors. I remember the sound of people conversing cheerfully. I remember what they must have felt as intimacy, being able to talk, to stop, to refresh themselves during a shopping spree. That was something alien to me.

My only business on that floor would have been to look at the crystal, and I don't know why I would have been looking at crystal at that

age, except to appreciate the beauty of what the department store had to offer. But clearly, getting off that elevator and smelling the wafting and the delicious flavors forthcoming from that dining room is something I shall never forget.

When we were hungry, we walked out of the stores, and up to -- well, perhaps we bought a bag of popcorn from the front of McClelland's, or we went into Centers, which was another five and dime, or to Woolworth's, but we didn't sit anywhere. Oh, no, no. No. That didn't happen for us. So we walked back up Halifax Street and into our own area, unless we were planning a trip to Richmond or some points north, or perhaps some points south, then we would go into the Trailways Bus Station.

There again, eating was something that black families did among themselves, so that when we walked into the Trailways Bus Station we went to the right to get a sandwich, or cup of coffee or a Coke, and if you were something other than black you went around to the left side. That I recall distinctly.

Q Do you think that that was done by purpose in terms of having to go to the right or at Ruckle Rosenstock's, as a specific example, not being able

to go into what you refer to as the dining room
or --

A Yes.

Q -- going to the basement to the restroom?

A That's right. Well, yes, of course. I'm sure it was by design. Dining is a familial activity. It is not exclusively a black event. And since we all have enormous appetites and great thirst when we are engaged in exercise or shopping we want to stop to have something to eat or something to drink. And so to blatantly push the picture, so to speak, of people doing something that I was going to do later on Mistletoe Street, to push that picture at me every time I exited that elevator was an abomination. I'm using the word "abomination" now. It was not a part of my vocabulary then. Nevertheless, I felt terrible not being able to go into that dining room. Never had that experience.

Q Did you experience anything similar to that when you went into one of the five and dime stores in relationship to being able to buy a hotdog at a counter; could you sit and eat that hotdog?

A Oh, no. No. Couldn't sit and eat. Now, on one occasion, at least one occasion when we were

into the demonstrations, I recall sitting at the counter of Woolworth's. I think about this in the context of dealing with students today, Petersburg High School, and I think about how students today are not disciplined enough to do what we did at that counter. We knew that we weren't going there to dine. That we knew. We were on a mission.

We sat at the counter. We hardly batted an eyelash. We looked at the mirrors across from us. We sat motionless, speechless, and I won't say emotionless because emotions were running high. I am positive of that. The manager, a male, directed us to get up. We continued to look straight ahead.

He went towards the other end because we had occupied all of those swivel barstools. And he said, all right. He came back behind me, towards my right, came out of a side door of the store with a heavy, black chain. I can hear the sound of that chain as he looped the chain one by one around the backs of each chair, and I knew he was coming to my chair, my seat.

Again, I sat there without saying anything. I didn't cry for my mother and dad. I didn't hear anyone else crying for mother. We sat

there. And as he looped each -- the back of each chair, it was as though he wanted to say, okay, I got you now. Now, what are you going to do?

We didn't do anything until someone from the SCLC came in, perhaps it was two hours later, could have been three, could have been four hours later, but time didn't matter to us. It didn't matter to me then. As long as it took -- for as long as it took I should say.

The same applied to our walking up and down the front of Ruckle Rosenstock, same thing. You walked to the end of the store, the front of the store, and you made a U-turn, and you came back this way. And then you made a U-turn, and you walked this way, back and forth, back and forth behind the other person.

Maybe some of that discipline could be attributed to the way our teachers at Virginia Avenue School and Henry Williams and Peabody said to line up according to height, then we would do our exercises. I don't know. I suppose one could factor a number of points into our ability to carry out the mission of the civil rights movement, but we were able to do that.

If we had not, it might have led to

someone's becoming injured, or killed. Those things -- any of those things could have happened because, as I recall, the headline stories on the network news, people were being slaughtered daily across the south. No, we were not in Mobile, no, we were not in Biloxi, we were in Petersburg, but we were still a part of the overall picture of what was going on. It affected each of us in many different ways. So that's what's I recall, sir.

Q You spoke about the possibility at least that your teachers had instilled in you certain characteristics of behavior and related factors that may have attributed themselves to how you reacted when you were on the picket line or you were doing a sit-in. What do you remember in terms of your schools as they relate to what you had available in your school to work with educationally, textbooks, reading material, and did you have any way to compare that with what was happening in what was the white school system?

A Not by way of comparison, but I will respond to this based on my recall. The children were remarkably disciplined in this particular area of securing textbooks. The only new materials we had were the language -- I think Building Language

Skills, or something to that effect, I think that was the title, but the consumable workbooks, the locker handwriting books that were so helpful to us, but I recall taking a book list every fall, we all did this, we looked at the assessment. The titles were listed on the left. The assessment with the cost.

If, for example, a book was worth $2.00, let's say that was half price, okay, then we said to our parents, I can get an Arithmetic Today, let's say, I'm making that up, an Arithmetic Today book from John Jones. And he lives on Mercury Street. I need to go there to get it. Okay. So the parents would give me the dollar or the 50 cents and we had to assess -- our parents didn't know what the books were worth. This presupposed that two intelligent children were on the telephone saying, do you have such and such a book? And the other person would say, yes, but the cover is lose, and so I'll let you have it for 75 cents. We were doing that among ourselves. And of course we would walk, or if the person lived too far away, you know, parents would walk you or drive you there.

The point is this, we were mature enough to handle those kinds of transactions, as

primary as they were, and they were primary transactions, and precursors, if you will, to bigger and better things that we would pursue.

But the books were not all that, as young people would say, today, but it didn't matter whether a cover was loose or detached from its spine. It was the content of the book that held the essentials. That's what we were about. But I mention that in passing because it was an act of initiative on the part of the children.

We did our part. We carried the book list around. We said, I need this book, I need that book. Do you have this? Yes, I do have it. How much do you want for it? Mother, I need 50 cents or a dollar and 25 cents. I'm going to buy this book. Fine. And then you held onto that book.

And not only did you hold onto it and cherish it and take care of it, even though it was a used tool of instruction, but you covered that book with the Bond Bread wrappers, covered that book, took care of it. You didn't throw it in the floor. It was yours. And you were proud to say, I bought this from Mary Jones. It is mine now. And next fall I would be able to say, I'm passing it on to the next person.

Q With those conditions in place, would you say that the teachers were such that they still were able to provide a very meaningful and productive educational environment?

A Absolutely. Absolutely. If my teachers were having a hard time, I never heard about it. I never heard about it. Let me tell you about an experience at Virginia Avenue School.
Mrs. Gwendolyn Brown Jones was my piano teacher, and she was my third grade teacher at Virginia Avenue. Mrs. Jones used to take us -- take the chair -- take the chorus to Fort Lee at Christmas to entertain the troops.

Now, who told them to do that? Who told Mrs. Jones that this was necessary to do? Who told Mrs. Jones and the other teachers at Virginia Avenue school that the students needed to see Shirley Temple's films, that this was part of our cultural program. And I think we paid 10 cents to see a Shirley Temple movie every so often in auditorium. Who told Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Eunice Bias, the principal, that the students needed to be exposed to Tchaichovsky's Nutcracker Suite?

We had the Nutcracker. This was a presentation. Sandra Crowle was taking ballet. She

was dancing on point. Mary Harding Moore, who was Mrs. Bias' niece was also dancing on point. Natalie Jones danced in the Nutcracker. We sang the lyrics, and didn't even know there were any lyrics to the Nutcracker Suite, but of course someone had scored that production professionally. And so early on we were able to appreciate a different kind of music.

Yes, we had exposure to popular music, pop songs, Patti Page, Perry Como, Julius La Rosa and others. I can still sing those lyrics. It wasn't a matter of not knowing how to sing something other than what was directed, and arranged and performed by black artists.

And also, I want to say this whole business about identifying ourselves as black, we were -- for a long time we were negroes. That term is more accurate a description of who we are socially and ethically than black. I mean, it means black, does it not? So I recall being colored. I recall being negro. Then, we were Afro, and African -- Afro-American. I remember all of that.

When we were in school, we didn't want -- there were two things I didn't want to hear. I didn't want to hear another child say, I'll get you at 3:00 o'clock. I didn't want to hear

that. those words were ominous to me. And you know how children would fight on the school yard. And they do. They do among all groups. But that was one thing I didn't want to hear.

And I didn't want to hear the term "black." If someone said, oh, you old black fool, you old black dog, that certainly was an indictment on who you were, on your character. This is something children said.

So to fast forward to now say I am wearing an ID that reads I am black, I am black and I am proud, that was something else. My daughter who was -- my oldest daughter, Lisa, who was born in 1965, and whose best friend was Greer, my brother Morgan's daughter, Greer is very, very fair, very fair. And I remember telling Lisa that we were now going to call ourselves black people.

And she could not understand that, a little girl. She couldn't understand it. She said, well, Greer is not black. Greer isn't black. No, she is not. Well then, why do I have to call her black? Why am I black?

This is one of the things emanating from the movement that is absolutely an anomaly to me even today. But I, you know, I don't mind saying

I am a black person, or I am an African American. I don't mind doing that, but I'm just saying we have come a long, long way. This has been an arduous journey, from who we are, how others identify us, what others have expected of us along the way. Well, what do you want me to be this year? Do you want me to be a negro this year? Are you going to provide dinner for me in that tea room in Ruckle Rosenstock this year? Or am I going to be -- am I going to be black? Am I going to be colored? What is it that you want me to be? What label should I wear, and what are the implications and ramifications of my going along with what you want me to be. That's all been part of the struggle I believe in getting from where we were to where we are now.

But I think that there was an there was an overriding factor as far as the movement was concerned. I don't think the demonstrators were saying, well, I don't know whether I am a negro out here on this line or sitting at this lunch counter. I don't think we said that. I think what we were feeling was that, yes, there was equality. You cannot tell me I don't belong in this chair, in this restaurant, or at this church in the library, at the

lunch counter, on this side of the Trailways Bus Station because I look different from you. I am just like you in many ways. I am different culturally. We probably do things different in my neighborhood, but other than that, what is the difference?

And so maybe that is what drove the movement into a state of being strengthened. Maybe it is what drove us into a sense of resolve, a very strong sense of resolve that, yes, we are doing the right thing. This is the right thing. We are not fighting back on Sycamore Street when people are taunting us as we are picketing. We are not striking back. We are exercising passive resistance. We are not turning our heads even momentarily to say, you are another one. You called me a name. Okay, here, hold my picket sign. Let me take care of this. No. We didn't do that. We didn't do that.

Q Where did your children go to school?

A My daughter, Lisa, of course, was born in New York, and she went to Gillfield Daycare Center here. I moved to Hartford, Connecticut to teach and I was divorced by that time, so my little girl and I moved out of state. And we moved to -- moved back

to Petersburg, and I taught at Peabody and Henry Williams.

Now, Henry Williams and -- I am remembering something, because I had a scholarship, defense scholarship -- defense loan, rather, National Defense Loan. My dad held onto that document for me. I taught at Henry Williams School first. At the end of that year, the school was dissolved and someone came from the Board of Education and said, you may teach anywhere in the city. You may go to any school you want to. And there was no question but that I would go to Peabody High School. I loved Peabody High School.

All of you were there. You were role models. You are role models to me now. And to teach with what I call the masters, Mrs. Fisher, Marjorie Lewis Fisher, Mrs. Faye Giss, Ms. Florence Brown, Mrs. Rebecca Merrit, all these people, Mr. Blue. I mean it was such a privilege to be able to work with those people. Could have gone to any other school in the city, but I didn't want to. I wanted to be at Peabody High School.

Q When your children were in public school did you recall anything that caused you to remember that there really was a difference between the

circumstances when you were in public school and at the time that they were in public school, whether it be Hartford, Connecticut or Petersburg, Virginia?

A Well, let's see. Okay. We lived in Maryland, also --

Q Okay.

A -- and our middle daughter, Holly, was in elementary school there. And then we moved -- we moved around. Incidentally, my former husband was an ATF agent, worked for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and so we moved around quite a bit. And my children grew up in Maryland, and Georgia and Florida.

But I could tell that there were some differences. We usually lived in predominantly a white neighborhood. Our friends at church were white, for the most part, and not that we were choosing white churches. This is how life unfolded for us.

My husband was the resident agent in charge of a group of agents, and I don't think there were any other black agents in the office at the time. But of course the scene had changed somewhat and opportunities were different.

But when my children were in school,

and doing exceptionally well, they didn't always bring home good grades from their white teachers, and I've not been one to say, well, you are doing that, or you are withholding this just because I am black and you are not. I am not one to step up to the front and say, you don't want me to have this A or this B because I am black. No. If I didn't earn it, then I don't deserve it.

But clearly, my children were doing well in school and were kept off the A-B Honor Roll because of a white teacher's assessment of their progress. And I knew my children were doing well in school. I knew what they were capable of. I saw their projects. I saw them study. I saw them -- I heard them speak. I saw their writing. I knew that they enjoyed reading. So why were their grades just a little bit off to keep them from the honor roll? And I believe that it was because some people still at the time we're talking about, the seventies and the eighties now, had not quite gotten over the mission of black Americans.

And I remember when we lived in Maryland. This would have been in the mid to late seventies. I remember driving to the home of a friend on a Sunday evening, to Home Church. We

called it Home Church then. And it was an informal gathering. And I drove across Good Luck Road. We lived in Kings Wood on the other side of Good Luck road. I wasn't that far from home.

But I crossed -- I drove across Good Luck Road, and made a left turn into the area that is called Carrollton. The other part is called New Carrollton. It was on a summer evening. Summer evening. And I heard a thunderous rant, get out of Carrollton, nigger. And it jarred me. It jarred me. And whenever we came back to Petersburg to visit something unsettling covered me. I'm back in Virginia.

Even though we had lived in Georgia and in Florida. And as I said, we were around white people all the time, but they weren't behaving themselves in an unseemly manner. These were people who took care of my two older children when my youngest baby was born. These were people who had dinner ready for me when I came from the hospital. These were people who took care of me in my time of recovery. And I didn't see any of that hated, and the bias and the prejudice. But I know -- I knew that it was out there, but I didn't experience it among those people.

Q Mrs. Ellison, I certainly want to thank you very much for taking the time to come and be with us --

A Thank you.

Q -- this afternoon.

A Thank you.

Q You have set the tone here, and I really didn't have to ask too many questions, but you shared with us experiences that I think tell the story. And we certainly really appreciate your doing it that way, and relating different localities, if you will, in terms of what happened, what happened to you when you were growing up and what happened in terms of Petersburg's circumstances and conditions. So again, thank you very much for coming.

A Thank you.

Q And thank you very much for just telling us about what your knowledge is and was and your experiences.

A Thank you, Mr. Fauntleroy.

Q Thank you.