Harriet Octavia Cole

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

1205 North Crispus Street
Champaign, Illinois
August 2, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree
Patrick Tyler

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Introduction

This interview is with Mrs. Harriet Octavia Cole, the past director of the 4-H program for blacks. Mrs. Cole started this program in the black community with the help of the University of Illinois. A resident of Champaign-Urbana since 1952, Mrs. Cole was born in Mississippi in October 1927.

The interview was conducted on August 2, 1983, at her home, 1205 N. Crispus Drive, Champaign. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives.

Harriet O. Cole, Oral Interview
SIDE A

Melinda Roundtree: First of all, Mrs. Cole, could you tell us when you were born, the date, the month, and where?

Harriet Cole: I was born the tenth month, 1927 year, and that's October, in Bassfield, B-A-S-S-F-I-E-L-D, Mississippi.

Melinda Roundtree: What year?

Harriet Cole: 1927.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell me a little about your family background?

Harriet Cole: My parents were sharecrop farmers - that's in the South of course. My father passed away at the age of 49, and my mother finished raising us and did the best she could for us.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you go to school?

Harriet Cole: I went to grade school in Mississippi. I finished the eighth grade, and then I got married at the age of seventeen. Stupid, but I haven't regretted it, and we've

been married now for 38 years. We married in 1944, so we've been married 39 years in December, 24th of December.

Melinda Roundtree: You married in Mississippi right?

Harriet Cole: Ah huh.

Melinda Roundtree: He lived there too or ...

Harriet Cole: Ah huh, we were family friends. His parents and my parents were friends and neighbors.

Melinda Roundtree: Can you remember any childhood experiences?

Harriet Cole: I do recall, I think about school and things like that. I recall my experiences in grade school in math. However, I do love math. I think math is the most important subject because you're going to have to deal with math the rest of your life. And I recall very vividly in my environment at the time I was growing up we were studying about kilowatts, you know, the electricity, electrical kilowatts and all that kind of stuff. And the teacher was telling us about kilowatts, how many kilowatts there are in whatever, and I thought to myself. I sat in my desk at school and I thought, "What's the use of me trying to learn this? 'Cause nobody got no electricity but white folks, so why do I have to clog my brain up trying to learn this?" I regret that, because we do

have to deal with kilowatts now, and had I learned then what kilowatts was all about and what to deal with kilowatts, I would know whether the man was cheating me when he comes to read my meter. I don't know whether he is or not. And I say to children and young people, "Learn everything you can." Not just the things that you think you might not never need, because you going to need everything you learn. And I look back on that and I - well, being in an environment - we didn't have any electricity around me, the only people that had electricity were white people. And I thought, there's no need of us black folks learning that because we don't have any need for it. You know, we have lamp lights, fireplaces, you know . . .

Melinda Roundtree: What year did you come to Champaign?

Harriet Cole: We came to Champaign-Urbana in 1952.

Melinda Roundtree: Where did you live?

Harriet Cole: We lived in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Well, we came here from Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Melinda Roundtree: Where did you live when you first came here?

Harriet Cole: Our first residence was in church parsonage, and at that time the church was located at North Fourth Street. And the parsonage was 1109 North Fourth Street. And my mother was here and we moved in with her.

Melinda Roundtree: Your mother came here before you did?

Harriet Cole: Ah, huh.

Melinda Roundtree: What year did she come here?

Harriet Cole: Oh, I guess she must have come in 1949.

Melinda Roundtree: What other places did you live?

Harriet Cole: We moved from the parsonage to 1206 and a half west Dublin. Another member of our church who's now deceased, we moved in with her, Sandy Clark. We roomed with her for many years until we bought this house.

Patrick Tyler: What brought you to Champaign?

Harriet Cole: Trying to better ourselves, a better way of living. You could get employment in the South, but it didn't pay anything. As a matter of fact, my husband was working doing hard manual labor at a sawmill, lumbermill, and he was earning the

great sum of 85 cents an hour. It's hard to believe, but we bought a house on that with that kind of salary. We were buying a house in Hattiesburg, and we were making our payments, and buy grocery and do whatever else we had to do. The Lord just made it that possible, I know that. I know it wasn't us that did it. The Lord did it.

Melinda Roundtree: When you came here, did you work?

Harriet Cole: Ah huh, I came here having no skills, not having finished school, you know, so you couldn't get very much. The only employment available to blacks were domestic type things, so I got a job. I came here on a Saturday night and my mom had already lined up me a job and I went to work Monday morning. And my husband got - we came here like I said, Saturday night - and he got a job, and I got a job Monday, and started to work Wednesday. He got a job Wednesday.

Patrick Tyler: What was the starting pay?

Harriet Cole: What was the starting pay? I really can't recall, but it was more than you was getting. I was getting 50 cents a day or something like that for domestic work in the South and the pay here was much more than that. I can't recall how much it was, but it was much more than we were getting paid in the South. We left the children. We have five children, and we left the three older children - three older children were born in the South - with my husband's sister and we came up here in April '52. And I went back with the rest of the family, my aunt came north and my uncle moved a little

while. My aunt and her husband, and oh some other members of the family came home - went home for vacation in August and I went with them to go home in August on vacation with the expressed purpose of picking up the children and bringing them back here. I rode down with them, and my children and I came back on the train, after I took them to Hattiesburg and bought them some new clothes and stuff. We boarded the train in Hattiesburg.

Melinda Roundtree: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Harriet Cole: There were nine of us all together. I'm the sixth girl, and I often think, you know, there's an old saying that the seventh is the lucky one, and I often think I just missed it by one. [Laughs.] I'm the sixth daughter and I have two sisters deceased now. Two older sisters are deceased. Loretha's mother Loretha Harmon, Ms. Harmon, her mother, died in January. And I have another niece, you might not know her, she comes to the church occasionally. Her mother's deceased. Her mother's deceased many years ago.

Melinda Roundtree: You came here during the fifties right?

Harriet Cole: Ah huh.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay, when the sixties rolled around, how did you feel about the Civil Rights Movement?

Harriet Cole: I was glad that at last something was being done. I recall one year, I guess it must have been in 1962 or 1963, I don't know, it was in the early sixties. We were on vacation when the riots were prevalent. Eisenhower was the president at that time. He called out the troopers, you know, to quiet down - we were down South then. I felt fearful but in the traveling around, well, we traveled, we didn't come in direct contact with any of that, you know, the problems that was going on, but I was kind of fearful.

By the way, my parents were married before they married each other, and I do have other brothers and sisters. I have two brothers and a sister - this sister's deceased also - that lived in the Delta part of Mississippi, which is the part of the Mississippi that was back in the olden days was traditionally not very good for blacks. You know, it was dangerous for blacks to be there, especially the outside blacks. And so I went 25 years without seeing my brothers and my sister who lived in the Delta part of Mississippi. Because, during the years we've gone down - we usually went down every year, but during the time we'd go down, my husband would say, "Honey I don't want ... " I said, "Honey I haven't seen my brothers and sister since my father ... " They came, of course, when my father died.

We wrote to each other. We talked to each other on the telephone and that kind of thing. But so far as seeing each other, we had not seen each other since my father died. So I said, "Now this year we are going to go down and see my brothers and sister." ... And so my husband said, "I just can't go up there." And some of the rest of the members of my families, they had gone, and they'd come back and report how

things were. I recall one time my brothers and sisters and my aunt went there to visit them. They were braver than my husband was, and they witnessed the white landowners or you know, the white people that were in authority, would walk with shotguns on their back and at sundown all black people that do not live in the area were required to be out of the area or give an account of why they were still there. And my husband just couldn't take that, so we did never go back until like I said 25 years had escaped. I did get a chance to see my brothers and sisters. So things have - that was after the 60s - that was way past that time.

So we were down visiting my husband's sister who I'd left the older children with and she's living in Memphis now. We went down visiting her one summer and my husband said, "I guess it's all right. I think we can go over there now. I don't think it's bad now. We can go over there." So I called my sister-in-law and I talked to her and she said, "Oh yes, we'd be so happy to have you." And my niece and my sister-in-law, they moved. They had friends that lived in Clarksdale, so they knew the way, so they went with us over there. We had a glorious time. And we didn't encounter any problems. So things have really changed.

Melinda Roundtree: What other places have you traveled?

Harriet Cole: Oh, I guess the year when we first got married, my husband and I I told people, "I honeymooned in Alabama." Tuscaloosa, Alabama. My husband was in bad health, and he was there at the doctor when we got married. And when we got

married, we both went back there and stayed there. We got married December 24, and we were there the last raining days of December and stayed until February.

Where else have we traveled? Since we've been here we've been to Utah. We've been to California with other organizations. I've joined any kind of organizations that's going to be of help to mankind and the community. I belong to the Urban League Guild. I was President of the Urban League Guild - I don't know what years it was - so many years. And I've gone to conventions for the Guild, to Omaha, Nebraska. I went to Chicago one year, and of course, the family has traveled there many times. I've been to Indiana. I have relatives in Indiana. I go up there and visit them.

My most notable trip, I guess, of travel, we went to Germany in 1972 - in December of 1972, and stayed until January of 1973. My oldest daughter was married to an airman, and he's lived in Korea and been in service. And that was when our grandson was one year old. He was going to be one year old that year. And we decided that our first grandchild could not celebrate his first birthday without his grandparents being there. With the economy as it is and all the children grown, we can't afford to go now. But when he celebrates his tenth birthday, we won't be able to go. I guess it's his tenth or eleventh. I think this'll be his eleventh birthday in December. We would hope that we could go back and help him celebrate his eleventh birthday, but right now it don't look promising.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell us how you got involved with the 4-H Club?

Harriet Cole: I was working at the time at Frances Nelson, as outreach worker at Frances Nelson, and it came to my attention that, I think it was in the newspaper, that they wanted somebody to work with coordinating the black 4-H club kids. Okay, being from the rural and being involved in 4-H when I was a youngster, I thought about it and so I applied for the job.

I don't know whether it was in the newspaper or ... I was involved with the Cooperative Extension activities, that's what it was. I was on some kind of board, but I can't remember what it's called right at this moment. I was on this board prior to being employed by the Extension Service, and that's how I found out about it. They needed a black person to coordinate a 4-H club for black youngsters. And it worked very successfully.

There was no problem in recruiting the children. The problem is recruiting and maintaining competent leaders. It's not that we are not as concerned as anybody else about their children achieving and doing well, but as a rule, most of us can't really afford to really give the volunteer time that's required to lead youngsters in the activities, or meaningful activities. But, most of us, to devote that kind of time to really lead a group of 4-H Club youngsters, we just don't have it to give. That time that we have we have to do it with employment, you know, so we can keep body and soul together. You know, you kids know what I'm talking about. So, it just didn't work. I did recruit. We had close to 200 youngsters recruited. And we had some good, dedicated people that wanted to help lead those young people, but their time schedule just did not allow them to devote the time that is needed to lead those youngsters in meaningful activity.

Melinda Roundtree: What days did you meet with the children? Was it during the week?

Harriet Cole: Well, see I worked full time, 40 hours a week, and I met with different groups, you know, each day. The Black Cats - that's at the top of my mind - that's one of the names of the groups. By the way, all 4-H Club groups organize, they elect their own officers, then choose among themselves what name they want to be called, which makes it individualized, you know. And we had one group that was called the Black Cats, you know and basketball players - it was a group of boys in this group and they wanted to be called the Johnson Kids, Magic Johnson. They wanted to be called Johnson Kids. And say for instance, maybe I'd have an appointment with the Johnson Kids' leader and her ... as such, only just an organization. I didn't meet with them per se, you know, I met with the leader and helped her plan, you know, and she needed me at their regular meeting. They chose their regular meeting, and they chose where they was going to meet: once a week, or every other week, or once a month. And then if she needed my advice and my help, I'd give it. And if they were working on projects or something, such as, I don't know, there's a different project that a child can enroll in. Each 4-H'er that enrolled must enroll in a project: breadmaking, teen-age cooking, you know, whatever. And they must keep that project to achievement that they put something from that project on display. It's judged and they receive ribbons according to how well they've done on that project. And a lot of our youngsters were very good achievers. Traditionally, you know, we had good cooks, so most of our girls and boys

excelled very well and got blue ribbons. Some of them got double blue ribbons on their cooking projects.

Melinda Roundtree: What were the age groups?

Harriet Cole: Four-H age group is 8 to 19 I believe, age eight years old through nineteen. You can't join before eight and you can't stay in no longer than nineteen.

Patrick Tyler: What was the date when you started 4-H?

Harriet Cole: What was the date? It must have been 1976 when I started working at the Cooperative Extension Service. It's under the University of Illinois - Cooperative Extension. Now, basically I was working with the University of Illinois.

Melinda Roundtree: What year did it ...

Harriet Cole: What year did I quit? I quit in July 1979, the 31st of July 1979.

Melinda Roundtree: What did you enjoy most about ... ?

Harriet Cole: I enjoyed the getting together. You know, I enjoyed the accomplishment of seeing our youngsters achieve some of these things that they thought were not available to them. I really enjoyed that. Also I was distressed for not having been

exposed to it earlier, they were way behind. They had a lot of catching up to do, so they were frustrated, in that they could not achieve a lot of things that were required of them to achieve. Whereas, the white kids were more experienced and had been doing it longer, they were excelling and doing - this was frustrating to me and to the children. So it was my choice to quit. I wasn't asked to quit, because I felt I was doing the children more harm than I was doing them good.

After getting them all excited about doing and participating in these activities, not to have a leader to help them achieve those things. And then they're already behind and trying to catch up. Okay, maybe you're working on a project and then the leader says, "Well, I can't meet with you this week because I got called in to work," or "My baby was sick," or for whatever reason. Well, the child is starting to finish his project, then when the time comes to show off his project he's not ready. So that's very frustrating, and in all good conscience, "It was getting my blood pressure up!" [Laughs.] I just couldn't take it. So I made a choice at the end of July that I would no longer be employed. I am not sorry I made the decision because I know that the Lord has some other way he wants me to go.

Patrick Tyler: Are the youths, black youths, today more involved with the community or what's your thoughts about the black youth today?

Harriet Cole: I don't think so. I don't really think so, and this was one the reasons why I regretted having to make the decision to quit because I felt like it did get them involved in the community - and I don't think they are. I found that to be true when I

was raising my children, that as a whole, we as a black people don't get ourselves involved enough in things that affect us. For instance, the schools. I've been so saddened many times when my children were in school to look out into the audience and the only other black face I'd see would be my husband's, or maybe one or two others. When so many things are affecting our children, I think we black parents need to be there to see what some of the things - you know, to get ourselves involved in some of these things.

I can recall when I was a youngster that I made a vow. At that time my mom, as I mentioned to you, was a sharecropper's wife - a farm woman - and many times the PTA in those days was held in the afternoon in the daytime. Well, mamma was hard at work in the field and I can recall looking out and seeing the other mothers looking nice, starched and ironed, aprons on, coming to PTA meeting and my mamma wasn't there. Not that my mamma didn't love me. Not that she didn't want to be there, but she was in the field working and she couldn't be there. And I used to say, "I don't care how much cotton there is to be picked when I grow up." I thought that. See, the mentality I had I thought I'd always be picking cotton, always be chopping cotton, whatever. "And I don't care what, when my kids get in school I'm going to go to PTA meetings." And that's a vow I've kept. I've kept that vow with all five of them. Sometimes there would be two PTA meetings going on the same night. I had that experience, but as a rule, I tried my best to go because I just know what it did to me to not see mamma there, and I know what it did to me when she couldn't ...

[End Side A]

Harriet O. Cole, Oral Interview
SIDE B

Harriet Cole: [remarks joined in progress] ... for rent, and they ask do you have children, and I said he have three - sorry. And the law had not been changed. But since then the law has been changed and it's against the law to not rent to people who have children, but it wasn't back in those days. Also, racial discrimination was very rampant in those days, too. I recall very vividly looking in the newspaper and finding a place that said for rent, telling how much it was going to rent for and by then I had lost a lot of the southern accent, and I guess talking on the telephone they didn't know who I was. And then they would say, "Yes, such and such a place is for rent and blah blah blah," you know, over the telephone. Okay, we'd get in the car and go there and soon as we walked in, we were told that, "Oh, I'm sorry, that place has just been rented." Now you know, between the time we talked to them on the telephone and by the time we got there, it had not just been rented. But like I say, I had lost my southern accent and they didn't know who I was, so, that was an excuse. Oh, it was a lot of things that's different now than they were then. The law says they can't do that anymore and if they want to pursue it, they cannot get away with that.

Melinda Roundtree: The 4-H Club, was it funded or you know . . . ?

Harriet Cole: Yes, it's funded in as much as material, its supplies, you know, all those things. Groups - if they wanted to pay dues to take care of little things, activities, that they wanted to take care of. Say a 4-H Club group decided they going to pay 25 cents

a meeting or 15 cents a meeting or whatever, you know, then that money does not have to be turned into the Extension Service or nothing like that. You could use that for a field trip, whatever, you know, whatever your club decides to use it for.

Melinda Roundtree: I read in the article in the Courier, it said that you and the children had made a garden or something, and somebody messed it up.

Harriet Cole: They did. That was heartbreaking. We had a garden plot. I guess we had two pretty successful garden plots. We had one across the street from Gene's store. I guess that was the first one. Oh, the children were so enthused. Some children, the inner city children, had not even grown anything in all their lives, but they were just so excited. Okay, this little spot here was roped off for the Black Cats. This little plot here was roped off for the Johnson Kids. And you know, each group had their plot. And, oh, they had some gorgeous tomatoes, cantaloupes ... .

Oh yes, thinking of financing, in order to get these groups started, yes, they did allow us a budget. The Extension Director, the man, the Agricultural Director gave me authority as the coordinator for the group to go over to Farm Store over on University Avenue - that's the store for the Extension Service - and to get anything we wanted to, you know, but since we were late getting started we bought plants. Being an old farmer, I had never known that you could buy lettuce plants, cucumber plants, cantaloupe plants - we had always planted ours from seeds, you know. But having being so late getting started, he advised us to get plants and that's what we did. I got hundreds and hundreds of plants and distributed them among each group. Oh, we

had gorgeous cantaloupes, and our garden was vandalized. Not somebody taking it and eating it, which we wouldn't have minded that. I would have thought we had done something to help if they had taken and eaten it, but somebody came out, took a stick and just burst unripe cantaloupe, just smashed a whole bunch of unripe cantaloupes. I don't know where it was a child that had been frustrated because he couldn't participate or what. We never did know who did it.

Another thing that was a good thing that happened to us, because we were trying to do something to help, the city was helpful to us. The city manager authorized the fire department to come out and water our garden. I wish we - we got some pictures, but I don't even know where they are anymore. But anyway, you should've seen this great fire truck sprinkler just sprinkling down the garden. It was hot and dry like it is now, but earlier. But the 4-H gardens did not suffer because we didn't get any rain, but the fire department would come out and sprinkle it. It came out just the first time and sprinkled it, then they gave us permission to open up, what they call it?

Patrick Tyler: Fire hydrant.

Harriet Cole: Fire hydrant, and we could hook up hoses and water our garden. The enthusiasm of the children - it just did my heart the world of good to see their happiness and their enthusiasm. I enjoyed it. It gave you a nice feeling to know you've helped a child grow a pretty, little flower. And some of the children had flower projects - they had some flower projects, gardens, you know, vegetable garden projects. Some children had flower projects and the girls would have flowers in their

yards that had never grown nothing before - so proud of it. We had some children that was very artistic and children that drew beautiful pictures.

Melinda Roundtree: What kinds of things do you think the children learned other than how to plant ...?

Harriet Cole: Well, I think they learned to cooperate with each other. I think this was a good cooperative learning project. And also I think it made them aware of other - the most important thing I think that most of them thought that 4-H was only for foreign kids, that nobody could participate in 4-H but foreign kids. Then also it gave them the knowledge that it's not only just for foreign kids, also that it was not only just for white kids. It's also for all kids.

I think it helped the adults and leaders to know that the Cooperative Extension Service is not just for foreign people; it's for the community. The Cooperative Extension is available, there're services available through the Cooperative Extension that's helpful to the whole community. Say, for instance, you get a spot in your blouse or shirt, the - call the Cooperative Extension Service. They can tell you how to get it out. If your garden is doing well and you want to know how to store those green beans to have to eat this winter, the Cooperative Extension can tell you how to do it: how to can them, how to freeze them, you know, or whatever. If your lawn is not doing as well as you think it ought to be, there're people at the Cooperative Extension can tell you what to do and it doesn't cost you anything. This information is available to you and it doesn't cost you anything but your time and effort to ask for it. You know, that's some

of things that I got through the Cooperative Extension Service. I knew the Cooperative Extension - as I said, having been born into that kind of environment, I knew that the Cooperative Extension was, you know, the service that was available to the community.

Patrick Tyler: Yes, could you give us the names of all your children?

Harriet Cole: All my children? I think I can remember. My oldest daughter is Johnnie Ruth ... Do you want married names, too?

Patrick Tyler: Yes.

Harriet Cole: OK. Johnnie Ruth Fomby.

Melinda Roundtree: How do you spell that?

Harriet Cole: The last name? F-O-M-B-Y. My oldest son is Edward Cole, Jr. My next son is George Harrel Cole. My next child is a girl, is Jane Patricia Clayborn. She just made me a little grandma. And the baby is Carolyn Denise Hubbard. And she lives in East St. Louis, Illinois. She was here this weekend. I guess you saw her at church (referring to Melinda).

Melinda Roundtree: This Sunday? No.

Harriet Cole: She came up to see her sister and cook for her dad while I was gone.

Melinda Roundtree: That's all the questions that we have. Do you have anything else you want to tell us?

Harriet Cole: All right then. Well, number one, I'm happy to see that you have a good job this summer. I know you got work when you wanted it, I know that, and last summer I was glad to see you have work but I wasn't glad to see where you worked. (referring to Melinda, who worked at the Community Recycling Center). [Laughter.] And I'm happy to see a young man ...