

Black Women's Oral History Project

Interview with Virginia Lacy Jones

EDITOR'S NOTE: This interview with Dean Virginia Lacy Jones was conducted as part of the Black Women's Oral History Project of Radcliffe College. It is reprinted with the kind permission of the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College and K. G. Saur, a division of R. R. Bowker. Address inquiries to Jaime Horowitz, managing editor of the Social History Collection of K. G. Saur, 8 Stamford Forum, Stamford, CT 06904-2277, phone 203/328-2580.

The interview with Dean Jones was conducted by Felicia Bowens, now Felicia Bowens Anderson. She received her bachelor's degree in journalism magna cum laude from the University of Georgia and was enrolled in the master's degree program in history at Atlanta University at the time she participated in the oral history project. Mrs. Anderson currently resides in Lithonia, Georgia.

Introduction

Since July 1976 the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College, with support from The Rockefeller Foundation, supplemented in 1980 by grants from The Blanchard Foundation of Boston and the National Institute on Aging, has been conducting a project to record and transcribe the autobiographical memoirs of a group of black American women 70 years of age or older. The purpose of the project is to develop a body of resources on the lives of black women in the twentieth century, especially in the years prior to the Civil Rights Movement, and to make this material available to researchers and students interested in the struggles of women and racial minorities in the United States. Many interviewees have had professional careers in such fields as education, government, the arts, business, medicine, law, and social work. Others have combined care for their families with voluntary service to their communities. All have made significant contributions toward the improvement of the lives of black people and to the development of American society.

In the past, the black woman often has not created a written record of her experiences, and when such a record has been created, it is not usually found in libraries or archives, the traditional repositories for historical documents. One means of attempting to capture and preserve such lives is the oral interview, which explores the influences and events that have shaped each woman's experience and gives her an opportunity to reflect on the past and to present her point of view of on historical events. The interviews of the Black Women's Oral History Project offer fresh source material that can add an important dimension to the study of the history of the United States. They supplement and comment on other sources as they examine the active participation of a group whose members were previously overlooked as being only shaped by and not shapers of historical events . . .

Interview with Virginia Lacy Jones

Felicia Bowens: We are here with Dean Virginia Lacy Jones at the School of Library Service at Atlanta University. And we are going to conduct an interview for the Black Women's Oral History Project of the Schlesinger Library. Dean Jones, why don't you tell me something about your parents, about your mother and father?



Virginia Lacy Jones

Virginia Jones: Well, my father died when I was about eighteen months old, so I have nothing to say about him. I do not remember him. And I have had practically no contact in all my life with my father's family. So the only family I have to talk about is my mother's family. My mother was one of a large family. Well, we thought it was a large family, five children. I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. When my father died, my mother moved back home with her mother and reared me by herself. We were poor. My mother kept boarders. The boarders were made up of professional people who lived in the small town of Clarksburg, West Virginia. They made a very good environment for me to grow up in because all of them were rather accomplished people and I guess I aspired to be a professional person too at a very early age.

I always did very well in school. My mother was very strict in terms of discipline, in terms of studying and getting my lessons. I took piano lessons from the time I was a little girl and performed in piano recitals. We were both very active in the Methodist church. My mother for many years was the treasurer of the church. I sang in the choir and went to Sunday school. I used to go in summer to what they called Summer Vacation Bible School. We had a very large garden; I used to work in the garden. We grew our own vegetables and we had a lot of grapes. We had a very, very large grape arbor. I played with white and colored children in the neighborhood and in a way had a very happy childhood. I was

interested in music, and neighbors taught me how to crochet and my mother taught me to knit and embroider. As a little girl, I was always making things. I grew up liking very much to do things with my hands. I did very well in school and was always encouraged to do my best by my mother who expected the very best out of me.

Mother was trying to save money to send me to college. I had an aunt, my mother's youngest sister, who was married to a teacher in the high school system in Saint Louis, Missouri. When I finished the second year of high school in Clarksburg, West Virginia, my aunt and uncle persuaded my mother to send me to Saint Louis to live with them to finish high school, because the high school was a very good one. If I established residence there, I could go to Stowe Teachers College in Saint Louis and get my college work without having to pay for it. Well, reluctantly I went to live with my uncle and aunt and with the idea I would go to the Stowe Teachers College when I finished high school. I was very unhappy with my uncle and aunt, and my senior year in high school was a very unhappy one. I had decided then that whether I went to college or not, I would not stay in Saint Louis and go to college. By that time, I decided that I did not necessarily want to be a teacher, but that I wanted to be a librarian. I really wanted to go to Howard University in Washington, D.C.

The year I finished high school there was a failure of banks all over the country as we were moving into a very heavy depression. My mother lost her meager savings, and that would have been the savings that would have started me out to go to college. So, I came back to West Virginia in the summer and talked with the older sister of one of my former playmates who was a neighbor and who had gone to Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. She informed me that at Hampton, you did not have to have a lot of money, that you could go to Hampton on a work-study plan. I wrote to Hampton and I got admitted, and I got a scholarship and an opportunity to work to earn part of my expenses. Of course, my mother helped with some of the expenses and that way I got to go to college. I have never regretted it. I have always felt that the fact that I had to work to go to college made me a better person. The experiences that I had in working have been very, very valuable parts of my education. . . .

FB: So you went to Hampton Institute in what year—1929?

VJ: Twenty-nine.

FB: Twenty-nine. Fall of '29. And you went there with the intention of going into the library. Is that what you went right into when you were there?

VJ: No, I had to go to college three years, and the fourth year I went in the library school, and got a Bachelor of Science in Library Service degree. But this meant that if I got the degree on that basis and then I wanted to get a master's degree, I had to go back to college and finish that fourth year of college. So I went to Hampton three years, and the fourth year I went to library school and I got a Bachelor of Library Science degree in '33. Then I worked two years and then went back to Hampton in '35 to '36, and finished my fourth year of college, and got another degree from the School of Education, with a major in social studies and a minor in English. After that, I could get admitted to do further graduate study because by that time I knew that I wanted to get a master's degree in library science. But I could not get

enrolled in the master's degree program unless I had a four-year bachelor's degree and the fifth-year professional degree in library science. So I got two degrees from Hampton Institute, one in '33 in library science and one in '36 in education with a social science major.

FB: At the time you went to Hampton Institute, that was a depression year. Tell me something about student life you had to face . . .

VJ: At Hampton? Oh, I liked it. I guess those were some of the happiest years of my life. I had a lot of friends. I belonged . . . They did not have sororities and fraternities at Hampton. They had two of what they called literary clubs, and Phillis Wheatley Club and the Calliope Club. I was invited to join the Phillis Wheatley Club. They used to have parties, dances, guest speakers, and all kinds of club activities. The spirit of it was very much like sorority sisters, and they had the same thing for the men. There were different kinds of clubs. I was very active in drama. I belonged to the Hampton Institute Players, and was in a number of plays. The Hampton Institute Players used to go to other cities and give plays, and I got to travel with them. I did not make the choir. I never could sing, but I was interested in dancing and I used to do ballet dancing. I used to belong to a dance group with the physical education department.

I worked hard at Hampton. I used to wait tables in the teachers' dining room. Many of the teachers lived in the dormitories in those days. You got so much a month for cleaning a teacher's room, and you had to go every morning and clean up the teacher's room, make up the bed, and once a week you had to do general cleaning in the teacher's room. Then there would be a matron to check behind you to see that you had done it correctly, and I used to work in the Hampton Institute Library. I remember I used to make eighteen cents an hour.

I enjoyed Hampton. I did very well in my studies there, and made a lot of friends. I kept my grades up so that I could keep my scholarship because I could not have stayed there if it had not been for the scholarship. I would go home in the summers, but we never had money for me to go home at Christmastime. That used to be sort of sad. All the other kids would be going and I could not go, but I would stay and work during the holidays and I would make extra money that would help me pay my bills. All in all, I liked it very much. I had been very unhappy living in Saint Louis, and this was quite a relief to go where I enjoyed being. Many students did not like Hampton, because they had very strict regulations about your behavior. This never bothered me very much, because my mother had always been very strict with me, and I did not rebel against that. . . .

FB: Now, it seems as though the opportunities in library service would have been limited for blacks at that time. Were they? Were there opportunities? Why did you choose library service?

VJ: There were opportunities. Not as many opportunities as there were later on, but there were practically no professional black librarians. I had enjoyed the public library in Clarksburg. I had enjoyed the public library in Saint Louis, Missouri, and I worked in the library in the high school in Clarksburg my first two years there, and at some time or other was a student assistant in the high school library at Sumner High School in Saint Louis.

I think one of the things that really caused me to say I did not want to be a teacher was that I was very unhappy living with my uncle and aunt. There was a

citywide essay contest in Saint Louis, citywide among blacks, an essay on why you should go to Sunday school. I entered the contest, and went to the Saint Louis public library to read materials to write that essay. Well, the Clarksburg library was a small library, and when I went in this big library, the reference librarian showed me how to use the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and the various indexes and all that kind of thing. And I went Saturday after Saturday to that library to read the periodical literature and to write that essay. I was just thrilled with the fact that I could go in a public library with a subject and someone would show me all of these tools that would open up all of this information and ideas to me. That, I think, was the thing that made me determined that I wanted to be a librarian. Strangely enough, I won the first prize in that citywide essay contest. I do not think I ever went back to Sunday school any more afterwards! But I knew by then that there was no question in my mind that I wanted to be a librarian.

FB: All right, you went to Hampton. You were in library school. You were in college and in library school, and you were back in college again, getting another degree. What kind of people usually got a chance, what kind of people did you meet at Hampton? You had been in a small town, and now you'd gone to this big city, and you had run into this criticism.

VJ: At Hampton there was a mixture of people from large cities and small towns and rural areas, a very diverse group, very interesting group, and there was none of that clique business based on family background, color, and that kind of thing which I did not like.

FB: All right, you said that there were hardly any professional black librarians when you were in high school . . .

VJ: Very few.

FB: . . . and that there were some opportunities. Where were the opportunities?

VJ: The opportunities for the most part were in black college libraries, and a few in public libraries. They were just beginning to have black school librarians. But at that time the real opportunities were in the colleges, because the foundations, the private philanthropic foundations, were giving money to colleges to develop their library resources, and of course to do this they had to have professionally trained librarians.

FB: All right, now you got out of college, and what did you do next?

VJ: Well, when I got out of college, I was offered a job as a school librarian back in Saint Louis, at a salary of \$2800 a year. Now that was a big salary back in those days. I did not want to go back to Saint Louis, and the dean of the library school at Hampton Institute told me that if I wanted to go on and advance in the profession, I would do better to go on into college library service, because that was where I would get the opportunity to get fellowships to do further study. She pointed out that money was not everything in getting started. It was important to begin in the right place.

Well, my second job offer was in Clarksville, Tennessee, as a school librarian. I turned that down. Then I got a job offer to go to the Louisville Municipal

College Library as assistant librarian, in Louisville, Kentucky, and that is what I took. Because Dr. Clement, who later became president of Atlanta University, was the dean of that college, and his father was a bishop in the A.M.E. Zion Church, and I took that position. That was being in the right place at the right time. That moved me along to other things that have happened in my lifetime, and it was a very wise choice. I worked there '33 to '34, '34 to '35, and then the fall of '35, I went back to Hampton and got that other degree, the Bachelor of Science in Education.

Then, I went back to Municipal College. The woman who had been the head librarian had left, and I went back as head librarian. Now that was the black branch of the University of Louisville. See, at that time, Negroes could not go to the University of Louisville, but they had a separate college called Louisville Municipal College, on a separate campus for blacks. I went back there as librarian. My first year there I lived in a private home, and then other years I lived other places, but I got a General Education Board fellowship, after one year there, to go to the University of Illinois to get my master's degree. The General Education Board said that they were going to give a scholarship to a person on the faculty or staff at Municipal College, and Miss Florence Curtis, who was the director of Hampton Library School, suggested to Dr. Clement that it be given to me. Dr. Clement said that if anybody got a fellowship for further study on his staff, he would rather have it be a teacher instead of a librarian. Well, this hurt my feelings very much, but Miss Curtis went back to the General Education Board and asked them to give me a scholarship separate and apart, with no strings to Municipal College, because I would make a significant contribution to librarianship in general, not just to Municipal College. They gave it to me.

Then after I got my master's degree from the University of Illinois, I went back to Louisville for one year. I had an assistant librarian there who was the wife of a local doctor. She had gotten her master's degree from Illinois, and she would not do half her work in the library. She would sit up and read, and she would leave the job and go to meetings, and go downtown, and play bridge. One day I got after her, and told her (this was after Dr. Clement had left to come to Atlanta University) that she had to stop this, and she had her job description, she had her duties to perform, and that I could not tolerate that any longer. And she said, well, she would do what she wanted to do, and I said, "Well, you know, if you are not going to cooperate and carry your part of the load," I would have to report her to the dean. So she said that was very well, I could do that, because she would do far more over the bridge table and the cocktail glass with the dean than I would ever do officially over the dean's desk. So I said if that is so, let us go see the dean this afternoon and ask him. So I called him and got an appointment and we went in, and when we went in I found that she was right, that she could do more with the dean over the cocktail glass and the bridge table than I could do officially. So I came back that afternoon and wrote my resignation before five o'clock. I did not know where I was going, I did not

have any place to go, but I knew that it was my time to move, because I was not going to do all the work and she not do anything, and if she was going to work, she was going to have to do what was outlined in the procedure for her to do. So, I resigned, and that evening before he left, the dean had my resignation. I knew by that time there were more library jobs; I did not know where I would go.

The next morning when I went to work, Dr. Clement was in my office. I never will forget, he was sitting on my desk swinging his feet, and I walked in, and I said, "Dr. Clement, what are you doing in Louisville?" You see, he had come to Atlanta, and he just laughed and he said, "I came by to offer you a job." He did not know anything about what had happened the day before. He said, "At Atlanta University we are going to have a library school, and I want somebody in my employment that I can send throughout the country to visit other library schools to see how they are organized and put together and could do the spade work to start a library school at Atlanta University." And he said, "I have just come from Chicago, and I have talked with the people in the American Library Association, and they told me that if I plan to start a library school that I ought to have you on the staff." Then, I started asking him what he was going to pay me, and he said \$1800 a year, and I said, "Well, I would like to have \$2000." Anyway we laughed, and I never told him that I had resigned the day before; he did not know it.

My first job here was head of the cataloging department in Trevor Arnett Library of Atlanta University. I worked here those two years, and President Clement sent me to visit other library schools and libraries. I went to Columbia, to New Jersey College for Women which later was merged with the Rutgers University and it is now Rutgers Library School. I went to Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, I went to Catholic University in Washington, I went to University of North Carolina, visited the classes of a very prominent and distinguished professor by the name of Susan Grey Akers because I knew that when the library school opened that I would be teaching cataloging, and she had written a book at that time that was used in teaching cataloging in library schools. I was visiting classes at Emory University, and visited many libraries.

World War II was going on then and there were army camp libraries. We had the idea of training librarians to work with special collections in army libraries. I visited some of them, Fort Belvedere up in Virginia, and Camp Dix in New Jersey, and visited their libraries, and I got to go a lot of places to collect materials and lay the foundations for the opening of this library school.

In the meantime, the woman who had been head of

the library where I took my first job in Louisville was Eliza Atkins Gleason, and she had gone on to get her doctorate in library service, and was the first black person to get a doctorate in library service. She got her doctoral degree, I think, in early '40 or '41, but I was already here, and she was employed in Talladega, and she came up and was appointed dean of the library school; and a man by the name of Wallace Van Jackson was hired on the faculty of the library school. I was on [the faculty of] the library school, and Eliza Gleason, so the library school was opened in the fall of '41 with just the three of us teaching and Lillie Daly Casper, who had been a friend and classmate of mine at Hampton, was the librarian and secretary. And the whole operation was done on the third floor of this building. . . .

FB: Dean Jones, why don't you tell me something about how being black and female affected the choices you could make, the career choices and other options you had.

VJ: I cannot say that being black or female had any great role to play in my choice. I never had a hangup about limitations of being female, never. My mother, I think it was because my mother was a very domineering, aggressive kind of woman, and the women in my family were strong women, and I identified with them, and it just never bothered me. I never had a feeling that being a woman was a barrier in anything I wanted to do. And, another thing—I have never sought a position; every position I have ever had has been offered to me, so I never felt the competition of vying for a position with a man. Now, one of the reasons that positions were offered to me, I think, and certainly after I got my doctorate, was because there were no men, no black men, with a Ph.D. in library science. It was a long, long time before there were any, and I was the second black person to get a Ph.D. in library science. Dr. Eliza Atkins Gleason, the first dean at this school, was the first, and I was the second. It was a long time, then, before anyone else got a doctorate in library science, so I did not feel that kind of competition. . . .

FB: You mentioned that you had been active in the American Library Association. I know you have been active in several other library organizations, and then been dean of a university library services school. What do you think is the most important achievement that you have made?

VJ: I have gotten a lot of honors on the national level for the work that I have done. But my own feeling of achievement is a feeling of gratification for having helped and touched the lives of so many young people who come through this school, many of whom have gone on to very important and responsible positions, and are rendering a great service as professional librarians. I feel that what I have done to help them represents my greatest achievement. . . .