

Interviewee: Anita Cobb

Interviewer: Dylan Tucker

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Transcriber: Dylan Tucker

Abstract: Anita Cobb grew up in Western Lauderdale County, and currently resides in Leighton, AL. During her childhood, her mother taught at Mt. Zion Rosenwald School. During the early 1900s, Julius Rosenwald constructed schools for African-Americans in the rural south. There were over 400 Rosenwald Schools in Alabama. Anita tells of her time attending Mt. Zion Rosenwald School and all the different activities that went on. Anita has also done thorough research on other Lauderdale County Rosenwald Schools and the students who attended them. Anita plans on putting together a National Register of Historic Places nomination for some the Rosenwald Schools in the area.

Dylan Tucker: Today is September 9th, 2014. It is 11:20am. I am here with Anita Cobb. Anita, if you can tell me, where and when were you born?

Anita Cobb: I was born in Western Lauderdale County, March 9th, 1934.

Dylan Tucker: What are the names of your parents and siblings, if any?

Anita Cobb: My parents were George Smith and Hattie Pride-Smith. My brother is William L. Smith. There are only two children in our family.

Dylan Tucker: What did you parents do for work when you were growing up?

Anita Cobb: My father worked for TVA. He started working for TVA about 1938. My mother taught in the public schools of Lauderdale County, and then she worked in the city schools of Florence.

Dylan Tucker: What was the neighborhood or area that you grew up in like?

Anita Cobb: I grew up between my grandparent's house in Western Lauderdale County, and West Mobile area near what is now West Mobile and Washington Street. We lived, what I call, in the middle of the hill. If you know anything about that area there's hills on both sides of Mobile. We lived on the southern part of that. We lived between a very small street called Turner Street that was located between Washington St. and what we then called Spring Road. It is now Morencio Street. Our house was located right there at that corner. We had to go either up a hill or down a hill to get anywhere that we needed to go.

Dylan Tucker: What was your schooling like in the Rosenwald area schools?

Anita Cobb: My mother started working at a Rosenwald school in 1939. At that time, I was probably four or five years old. There was no stipulations as to when kids could go to school or be carried to school. I didn't like staying home so my mother allowed me to go to school with her. While she taught the primary grade one through three, I could not talk, I could not play, I could not disturb anyone. I sat there and I learned from the other children.

So I cannot remember not knowing how to read or how to do arithmetic. We went to the [inaudible] Rosenwald School. That's where she worked. She worked there for I guess six years. I think she left there in 1945.

And during the summer, if they had summer school I would go to school with her, even when I was in higher grades. That's where I had my early education.

Dylan Tucker: What can you tell us about the Rosenwald Schools?

Anita Cobb: The Rosenwald Schools were started in the early 1900's. If you have done any reading on them, you will know that that was kind of a philanthropic effort on the part of Julius Rosenwald, who was the chief executive officer of Sears and Roebuck. Julius Rosenwald was Jewish, and I think he sympathized with the plight of the blacks in the south, because their schools were just in such disarray. They only went to school three or four months a year, and very poor housing.

He, having lots of money, was able to partner, I don't know whether partner is the right word, he and Booker T. Washington were friends. Booker T. Washington explained to him the plight of black elementary education in the south. Rosenwald gave millions of dollars to help that effort. He primarily was interested in the building end of the educational program. He worked through Fisk University in Nashville, TN, and Tuskegee Institute, which is now Tuskegee University, to get this program going, to execute this program.

These supervisors would more or less come up and give advice and more or less give administrative services to these areas that were building Rosenwald Schools. That generally gives you some background as to the Rosenwald Schools. I understand that in Alabama there were 400 plus Rosenwald Schools built. I primarily know about the ones in Western Lauderdale County, although I only attended one. Generally, they were run pretty much the same. I knew the people who worked in them. They were friends of my mom's or fellow co-workers and that kind a thing. That generally gives you some idea of my connection with them.

Dylan Tucker: You went to Mt. Zion School?

Anita Cobb: Mt. Zion School. It is located, the location is still there, the building's not. It's on County Road 189, which is about a mile south of the Rhodesville. If you were to take the Waterloo Road, which is county road 14, and go out to Rhodesville and make a left, go down about a mile, maybe a mile and a quarter, on the right. The Mt. Zion Church is still there, but the Mt. Zion School was right across from the church. The pillars to that school are still there. The bathrooms, or the remains of the bathrooms, are there. The bathrooms are in the back. You'd have to go through some woods to find them. I have seen them recently. That's all of the school that's left.

Dylan Tucker: What subjects did you take during time there at Zion School?

Anita Cobb: It was a self-contained classroom. You had grades one, two, and three. The teacher taught everything. Primarily the emphasis was on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Kids that need a lot of science, because they were agricultural children, they knew about animals and plants and all of that kind of thing. They did not have the basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. The way that classroom operated was that the children were grouped according to their ability and how many years they'd been in school.

If you were a good reader, and you might have been schooled only two years, but you might have been with the third grade group. If you were a slow person you might have been in school two years, and you might have been with the first grade group. I guess a combination of achievement level and age. While one group was being taught the other group was doing studying. The assignments were given, and each group had a certain schedule. I don't remember that schedule, but I can just remember that one group recited and read and did things of that sort with the teacher while the other two groups worked on problems in math or reading assignments, answering questions, or did workbook questions or something of that sort.

But the advantage of the one room school is that when you get through with your assignment you sat there very, very quietly, paying attention, and you learned from the group that was performing, that was reciting. As I said, you learned to read, you learned math. The kids would have to go to the blackboard and put up the problems with chalk. You learned your multiplication tables very easily because they were repeated. You learned them, and then you heard them repeated by the other kids, and you saw them on the board and that kind of thing. It became pretty easy to learn because of the kind of setting you were put into.

There was a schedule the first thing in the morning, after we ate. I'll go back and I'll tell you a little bit more about that. Then we had an assembly, the assembly usually was kind of religious. They would have the singing of songs and a prayer and scripture, and sometimes there were performances put on by the various grades. Every day we didn't have a

program as such, we just had maybe just the preliminary kinds of things, the singing, and the praying, and the scripture. If there was maybe once a week, or once every two weeks, the students had been given assignments. They read poems and did songs and did little dances. That kind of thing. In a more formalized setting.

In the Rosenwald School, and when you take a look at these photos here, these layouts, in one of the classrooms was a stage. It was one step up from the regular floor. That stage was used as the place for the lectern was and the piano was. That's where the kids came to perform. Usually the older students did the leading of the songs and the reading of the scripture. Sometimes the prayer, it all depended on who it was, if it's the Lord's Prayer, they just let the Lord's Prayer. If it were a customized prayer, than I guess there were certain folk who were able to do that.

Every morning started off with the food first. Then the assembly. After the assembly each group went to its respective rooms and started classes. Usually that started about 9:00am, a little after 9:00. They went until about 10:30 or 11:00 for recess, after recess than they would reassemble. School was out about 2:30pm, I guess. Something like that.

Dylan Tucker: That's actually not too bad.

Anita Cobb: No.

Dylan Tucker: Very similar to today's schools it seems, with the time period. You were mentioning the project that you were doing. Can you explain to me again your gathering of information on the Mt. Zion School? All of the items you collected?

Anita Cobb: In the early 2000's I guess, I can't even remember when I did this. The church was going to build a fellowship hall. As a part of a fundraiser to pay for this hall I decided that I would do a booklet. It started off just being something just a group of advertisements and that kind of thing. Then I thought, but I had a lot of pictures that my mother had. It would not really be fair not to share those pictures with other folk. What I did was to begin to collect these pictures. I began to rethink this whole matter of a history of the church and a history of the school. The two were pretty closely related. They were pretty much connected.

I did this project with a fundraiser in mind, to start it off. It really evolved into a historical project where a lot of information was gathered. I have pictures, I have some letters that were written by people who went to that school, and later taught at that school. I have some just general people in the community who might or might not have attended the school. I also have the layout of the community and there's a map showing the area from

Rhodesville around 189 up. I think that's county road 15, which is Oakland. I think that road is county road 62, I'm not absolutely sure of the number. It's what we call the Canaan road. If you were to go down past the school and the church to the Canaan Methodist Church, which was a white Methodist church, and turn left, people lived all through that community and there were lots of people there, enough to populate a school, pretty much. They were many children. The rest of them came from the Spring Hill Church area, which was going west toward Prairie Springs and toward Waterloo. Not as far west as Waterloo, but probably ... Maybe as far west as right, I'm not sure where all of the houses were located on that end. I did not try to map those, I did the ones that were from Rhodesville to Oakland.

I tried to remember the folk who lived in each house, and to list those in the book. I also tried to do the general cemetery, there was a community cemetery there, which is in real bad shape now. What we found, I put in the book.

Dylan Tucker: Looking at the plans of the Rosenwald Schools, they're pretty straight forward and basic, I guess you could say.

Anita Cobb: Very. Very utilitarian.

Dylan Tucker: Two classrooms and one bathroom I guess?

Anita Cobb: No, the bathrooms were outside.

Dylan Tucker: Oh, outside? Okay.

Anita Cobb: You're talking much, much earlier. The bathrooms were to the west of the school. They were male and female. There were female's bathrooms on the south part, and the male bathroom was on the north side. Now as I said, this was a connected situation, so that they were also the bathrooms used by the church.

Dylan Tucker: Kind of for both purposes, then.

Anita Cobb: Yep. They were around the week used around the week. Whether in the school, [Inaudible] then on Sunday. The school dates and then on Sunday. At any rate the building was wood sitting on brick pillars. When you walked in the building there was a little vestibule. You came into the classroom and went around to the cloak room. The cloak room was where the coats were put, and the boots, and the lunches. Everybody brought their lunch, they had to put them somewhere. The lunches were put back there.

In the middle between those classrooms and to the front was what is described on the diagram as the industrial room. In the case of Mt. Zion school that was used as a kitchen. There was a cook stove and cabinets and that kind of thing in that kitchen. In the morning there was a man who came and made the fires. There were three heating units in that building. One was the cook stove in the kitchen. The other two were potbellied heaters in each classroom.

In the kitchen they had the supplies. I think those supplies might have come either from the county or from WPA or PWA, or whatever New Deal agencies were supplying food. We would have a breakfast. There would be various kinds of meat and grits or rice or sometimes just cereal. Those older girls, the one who were in the seventh and eighth and ninth grade, were the ones who were preparing the food. They would come in after the fire had been started, cook a big pot of grits and fix what we call strickalean, bacon with the rind on it, with the outside skin. Put it in the oven and let it cook. They'd have pot of grits and biscuits. Sometimes you just have biscuits and jelly and bacon. It all depended on what was available.

And any way, those girls would come in and get the food done. The little kids ate first, then the big kids. Sometimes there was no breakfast, it all depended on what was available and that kind of thing. For lunch those girls, while they were doing the assembly, would usually get started with the food. They would cook things that could be left unattended, like a big pot of brown beans or a stew, or soup or something of that sort that could just be taken care of go and stir it. And any way, they would put that food on the burners then go to class. I guess someone would go check on it during the time. By lunch time, and we usually had lunch every day that food was ready to be served. Again, the little kids always ate first. Those were the best brown beans that I've ever tasted in life.

Dylan Tucker: Those do sound pretty good.

Anita Cobb: They had been simmered, had been boiled and simmered. Just before we ate they would do what we call hot water cornbread. I don't know if you know anything about hot water cornbread, but hot water cornbread is usually fried. Sometimes it's baked. It all depends on, for the most part it is fried. You'd take the cornmeal with a little sugar in it. Put your milk in it, or either your hot water. You could either heat the milk and make it hot or use hot water, and that hot water just about cooks that concoction of cornmeal and sugar and whatever else you've got in. I think by this point in time they had to put salt and baking powder and soda in it, because self-rising cornmeal wasn't available, I don't believe, at that time. At any rate, after they put the ingredients and mixed up this cornbread, they would put this hot water over it and stir it, and make it into the consistency of

probably a pancake. Either pour it in this hot grease that was in a skillet on top of the stove, or either roll it, pat it like you do a hamburger, and put it in the hot grease. Just turn it, flip it like you do a pancake.

Dylan Tucker: Just like a pancake.

Anita Cobb: Yeah.

Dylan Tucker: It's a cornbread pancake, in a way.

Anita Cobb: Yeah. Generally that's what it was. We would have milk, beans, and the cornbread, and something to drink. Usually kool-aid, sometimes just plain water, sometimes we had buttermilk or what have you. That was always lunch, soup or some kind of stew or beans. You had northern beans and brown beans and all kinds of ...

Dylan Tucker: Just beans?

Anita Cobb: Yeah. Lima beans, green beans, all kinds of things. Those were good lunches.

Dylan Tucker: Compared to today's lunches.

Anita Cobb: Not every kid did not eat, some kids, I don't know what happened, but sometimes they would just bring their lunch. If they brought their lunch, maybe there was something at home they wanted to have for lunch, but they had what we call little tin buckets. In those days farmers bought large quantities of things because they didn't go to the store often. They had large families, so they needed large quantities of food. The jelly, usually grape jelly, would come in what I guess was probably a five quart bucket. Maybe bigger than a five quart bucket. Any rate, it was a tin bucket that had a top on it and a handle. When that jelly had been consumed, those buckets were washed and used for lunch pails. Those kids would bring their lunches in those lunch pails. Sometimes there just weren't lunches available, because there was no food at the school. They would bring biscuits, ham biscuits, and jelly biscuits, and peanut butter and jelly biscuits, and all kinds of things. And any way, that was lunch.

Usually there was an hour allotted for what we called recess and you ate. The rest of the time you played games, hopscotch, hide, and seek and all the little kinds of games. We jumped rope a lot. You had plenty of exercise, you didn't need gym.

Dylan Tucker: Just use your recess time?

Anita Cobb: Yeah. Between recess time and walking, because everybody didn't ride the school bus. It all depended on how close you were to the school. If you lived within a certain proximity of the school you walked to school. If you're walking a mile or a half mile or whatever, you didn't need gym.

Dylan Tucker: No.

Anita Cobb: When you got home, you had to pick cotton and chop cotton and corn and all of those kinds of things. Gym just wasn't something that people needed. They were getting plenty of that through their work and their regular activities.

We probably have gone off score here.

Dylan Tucker: No, it's fine. Since your mom was a teacher, did she ever emphasize importance of an education to you?

Anita Cobb: Definitely, yeah. There were other folk in our family who were into education. That was a very important factor. Getting your lessons and making good grades and being on time and not being absent, and that kind of thing. Yeah.

Dylan Tucker: During your childhood in the school, were there any major events or important significance that happened during your time period there?

Anita Cobb: There were a lot of things that I remember. If you're talking about historical kinds of things, I guess the main factor was in '41 when Pearl Harbor was bombed. That was a major factor, and you just remembered that. The young men were drafted into the Army or Navy and that kind of thing. So that was a big thing. If you've ever lived through a war and you were observing, it's something you never forget.

World War II sticks out very vividly in my mind, in terms of what went on and how people reacted, what you didn't have and all of that kind of thing. That was, I would think, would be the main thing that I remember.

Probably the second thing that I can remember was the day that Franklin Roosevelt died. We were having a spring play, at the end of each year they put on a graduation exercise kind of event. There were really two parts to it. There was an actual graduation where they got the certificates and that kind of thing. Before then there were plays that were given by each division. The kids performed, and the parents came and applauded and all of that kind of thing. We always had homemade ice cream. They would make these big freezers of homemade ice cream. We would serve them. I can remember that we didn't have television, we had radios, and they had announced that Franklin Roosevelt had died. When we got to the school,

this was the buzz. The president has died. Instead of having the usual hoopla it was kind of a solemn occasion. We just ate the ice cream. We did the program, and we ate the ice cream, and went home, instead of having the usual dancing and that kind of thing. I can remember that like yesterday.

The other events that were local, I guess, were primarily the picnics. Every summer, every Fourth of July, the church gave a big picnic. People would come from all over Western Lauderdale County to that picnic. We would have probably two or three hundred folk out there. They would come in wagons, bicycles, mules, or whatever they could do to get there. That was always a big event. Again, they had the homemade ice cream, and the homemade lemonade, and they would barbecue the pigs down in the ground. Whole pigs they would barbecue at night and sell the sandwiches. They would have candy and other little snacks. This was a big, big deal. I guess to cap it off they would always have a big baseball game between rival communities. The young men and this was always a big thing. People, those who had cars would hitch rides, would ride and bring folks. Those that couldn't would walk or come on bicycles. It was a big event.

Dylan Tucker: Sounds like it. Are there any more comments or things that you need to say on the Rosenwald School before we end this?

Anita Cobb: I think that they definitely served a very useful purpose in black education. Had it not been for those schools, a lot of people would not have gotten as far as they did. Let me just go back a little bit and tell you a couple of things.

Number one, the Mt. Zion School was built in 1916 I believe. I haven't reviewed my notes here. I believe it was either 1916 or 17. The first Rosenwald in Western Lauderdale County that I had been able to find was a Bethel school, which was probably about five or six miles south of Mt. Zion. Bethel sits in the Smithsonian community, which is right on the edge of the Tennessee River, across from Barton.

That was the first school. My grandfathers built that school. You see, the Rosenwald School was not an all out gift. It was an effort between the fund itself, the supervising college that did it, and the community. The community had to provide certain things in order to get the school. Number one they had to provide a location. In the case of the Mt. Zion school, my grandmother's father gave them the property that the school sat on. In the case of the Bethel school, he did not give the land, but he and my maternal grandfather built the school. As I said they had to build them according to these specifications and my dad said that he would go over to the school where his dad was doing the carpentry work, and watch them build the school. The Bethel school was the first school. By my maternal

great grandfather working at that school, he knew all of the ins and outs in order to get Mt. Zion school. They also built the Mt. Zion school.

The men cleared the land, and then they brought various materials. They worked as a group. It was a community effort. These men were there to help. The women did the dinners. The women would bring the food and feed the guys, or they would cook something there onsite. We didn't have grills and stuff like that. They made little pits, and they would cook the food on the pits. Fish, fry the fish and that kind of thing. They either did them onsite or they brought the food. There was no facilities to cook.

It was a community effort. I don't know the order of the rest of the schools, but there was a one-room school in the Rock Church community, and it was called Coffee school. There was a one-room school in the Zion Shiloh area. Bethel was a two-room school, Mt. Zion was a two-room school. There's a school out the Savannah Highway that's called Anderson school. It was a two-room building.

The other schools that were in operation were not Rosenwald Schools. They were other schools in the Western Lauderdale County, but they were not Rosenwald Schools. Those were the Rosenwald Schools that I remember.

I have diagrams of both the one-room school and the two-room school. The Mt. Zion School probably became your leading school. I think it had to do something with the church. The church, being an AME church, was not a locally supervised church as such. The bishops and the presiding elders were in and out. They sent people who had usually had had some educational background, where some of these other communities were Baptist churches, and somebody was just self-ordained as a minister, and they became the minister. The Mt. Zion School raised a lot of money, and they had what they called box suppers. What would happen at this box supper, it was really a party. They would open the doors. The two rooms were separated by a folding door that was on a track at the top and at the bottom. And this door rolled back so that you had an auditorium.

So they would put up tables and these women would fix boxes, boxed lunches, that would be auctioned off. The guys, especially if they were young, were trying to court a girl or attract a girl, he would be prepared to bid on her boxed lunch. Whoever bought your boxed lunch, you were obligated to have that lunch with them, to share that lunch. That was kind of a social thing. After the eating and the bidding was over, then they had dancing. They had guys who were ... I call them some of the most talented people I've ever known. They were the BB Kings, the local BB Kings, the blues and jazz folk. And they could really, really play those guitars. They

would have guitar music sometimes, and sometimes they would have Victrola music.

I don't know if you know anything about the Victrolas, but they were wound up by a handle, and they were the forerunners of modern record players. What do you call those things? The round things that you play them on the turntable? They had those thick, I guess they were 78 records. You'd put the record on with this needle and play, but you have wind it up to keep it going. Sometimes they would have guitar music by the local guys who were musicians, and other times they would have the Victrola music with the black records. They were black. They were thick. They are strange looking. I have some of those, I have some of those that I kept.

And any way, that was the big fundraiser. People from all over the area would come and participate in that fundraiser. Then they would do dinners, boxed like the lunches, plate lunches, and things of that sort to raise money, so that those children were able to probably have more supplies and that kind of thing, more so than some of the other children.

Also, they were the children who mainly went on to high school. Now my mother finished Mt. Zion Rosenwald School in 1920 ... I want to say 27. Yeah, around 26, 27, at sixth grade she and some of the other community girls had to go into Florence to go to Burrell School. At this time, Burrell was a private school. They had to pay room and board to live with somebody, and they had to pay tuition, and buy their own books.

Dylan Tucker:

Wow.

Anita Cobb:

Can you imagine a seventh grader having that kind of responsibility? One person in the community would carry the group up on Sunday afternoon, or early Monday morning, those girls would room with various people who lived close to the school, and have to wash their own clothes, cook their own food, manage themselves from the seventh grade until the twelfth grade, that's the way they had to do that. A lot of people could not afford that kind of expense. Many, many people stopped school at sixth grade once at Rosenwald School, once the educational levels were completed. They just stopped school.

A lot of them got married at 15, 16 years old just got married and raised families. Others who were able to go on to school went into Florence and boarded with people. As I said they would go up either on Sunday afternoon or early Monday morning and someone would pick them up, either on Friday or Saturday. Friday after school was out, or Saturday morning, and bring them home. They would spend the weekend at home. A lot of them would get themselves ready for the next week at school.

That's a lot of responsibility for children that age. Primarily they educated the girls, and I never quite understood that. The boys were not sent into Florence and boarded, the girls were, and there were probably eight to ten girls who received a high school education that way. The earliest one, I think graduated from Burrell in 1929. I have a picture of her in this group. My mother graduated in 1933.

The tragic part of that whole thing was that her sister was also in school. At age 16 that sister died, and the reason that sister died is because the family that they boarded with had an older person in the house who was an active TB patient. They had no idea, there was no way to know that this person had TB. This child contracted TB and died. There was no cure at that point for tuberculosis. That was the downside of that, because those children were taken away from their homes and their regular environment, into another area. They had to survive on their own. Their parents weren't there. They did the best to just get them there and pay their expenses.

My mom talks about having to write essays. Burrell was a college prep school pretty much so. They did a lot of essays and classical kinds of stuff. She'd do all of the major poets and the major symphonies, and the major classical musical pieces, all of that kind of stuff. That was part of their curriculum. And anyway, she talks about having to be in school during the Depression. The Depression hit in 1929. The major part of that Depression was 29, 30, 31. She talks about having to write essays on lined paper. You didn't have enough money to do your rough drafts on lined paper. She used brown paper bags and she would write all of her rough draft and get everything like she wanted to, before she'd copied it to the line paper to be turned in for the assignment.

She always had a problem with kids who would take a piece of lined paper and write two or three lines on it, make a mistake or something, just take it and ball it up and throw it in the wastebasket. That just bugged her to death. She had gone through that dirt, whatever, anyway, without lined paper. To see kids waste it like that was just more than she could bear. I mean, she really had a problem with that.

For the most part, a lot of those girls not only finished high school, but they went on to college. When I was little, I had an aunt who had gone to Tuskegee as an undergraduate. Tuskegee had a partnership with Cornell. She was an home economics major. These students from Cornell came to Tuskegee, and the kids from Tuskegee went to Cornell. I can remember in the 40's knowing Ithaca, New York. That's where my aunt was ... They would say where is Jim? Her name was James Ella, but we called her Jim. I was little, and they would say where is Jim? I said Jim is in Ithaca, New York. I knew Ithaca, New York, although I didn't know where it was. I knew about Ithaca New York, and Cornell University.

She later went on to work in the state department, and worked at India and Africa and different, other places like that. A lot of those young ladies went on to college. My mother started school. She got married. She graduated in 1933, got married, and I was born in 34. My brother was born in 36. She decided that she was going to college. She left us with our grandparents, with her parents, out in Western Lauderdale County, and she went to Alabama A&M. She went there, I want to say the winter semester of 37. My brother was born in 36, yeah, 37. She went that whole semester and that summer. She was able to get a job working in the Lauderdale system. She worked out there, either one or two years, and then she went to Mt. Zion in 1939. One of the teachers at Mt. Zion died. She was brought in to take her place.

It was not an easy task for these youngsters to become educated. I don't think that youngsters today appreciate the advantages and the opportunities that they have, because they have no idea what it's like to have to really go through hardships in order to become educated. Education is so free and easy, now they don't get it.

Dylan Tucker: They don't.

Anita Cobb: No, they just don't get it.

Dylan Tucker: Okay. Thank you for telling me all this information today. It's been a pleasure talking to you and getting all the information you can. Thank you so much.

Anita Cobb: You're welcome.