
PETERSBURG
VOICES OF CIVIL RIGHTS:
THE ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW OF THELMA BETHEA

conducted by

Hermanze Fauntleroy

Petersburg, Virginia

HALASZ REPORTING & VIDEOCONFERENCE

P.O. Box 1644

Richmond, VA 23218-1644

(804) 708-0025

Transcribed by: George M. Halasz, RDR

(Interview of Thelma Bethea
conducted by Hermanze Fauntleroy.)

BY MR. FAUNTLEROY:

Q I am Hermanze Fauntleroy, and I'm with the Petersburg Oral History Project. I shall be interviewing Mrs. Thelma Bethea concerning the civil rights era or civil rights struggle as far as Petersburg, Virginia is concerned. Mrs. Bethea is a Petersburger and attended Petersburg public schools, graduated from Peabody High School, which happens to be the oldest African American public high school in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Mrs. Bethea, you were quite involved in the civil rights struggle as far as Petersburg is concerned, and worked with a number of persons and a number of students. What recollection do you really have in reference to the civil rights period as far as your life is concerned?

A What I can remember at that particular time in the late fifties and early sixties, that the nation was very connected, and under Martin Luther King's guidance there was a lot of love and a lot of organization. And Petersburg, the organization went by wards, and each ward had a ward leader. This

1 ward leader would get people that they knew would
2 carry out the instructions of contacting people for
3 meetings.

4 And it first started that we were
5 meeting in homes, and you could just call -- the
6 ward leader could just call all the persons and say
7 call five people. And at that time everyone was
8 loyal to each other. It was just a wonderful
9 feeling to be working in the movement, and I've got
10 just a great feeling about that movement still
11 today.

12 Q Do you have any specific reaction to all
13 that took place that you just described?

14 A Yes, I do. On the trip to Washington,
15 when Martin Luther King made the speech, "I Have a
16 Dream," it was just the most wonderful feeling when
17 we arrived there early in the morning, and the song
18 was ringing all in the air when the buses pulled up,
19 "We Shall Over Come."

20 And as we gathered around the Lincoln
21 Memorial I saw many movie stars that I had never
22 seen in person, and it was thrilling. And even the
23 long walk, you didn't get tired. And there were
24 older people there, even in wheelchairs. It was the
25 most exciting thing I think that I have seen in my

1 lifetime. And it gave you such a wonderful feeling
2 that you were there.

3 Q As a part of what you've been describing
4 in the City of Petersburg, do you recall any
5 incidents of any type that took place when citizens
6 in Petersburg were involved in the struggle?

7 A Yes, I can. One incident, there was a
8 clothing store, very upscaled clothing store for
9 women, on the corner of Sycamore and Washington
10 Street. And the name of that store was Spiro's.
11 And as the picketers went to picket around Spiro's
12 they said they would never hire an African American,
13 at that time we were called negroes, that they would
14 not hire a negro as a salesperson. And they picket
15 around Spiro's, and when they did, as I said, it was
16 a togetherness, no negroes went into that store.

17 So the first person that they hired,
18 they did hire a negro, and she has passed away now,
19 and her name was Glaydora Harding, was the first
20 person hired by Spiro's. The store is no longer
21 there now.

22 Q Did all of this have any particular impact
23 on you as an individual?

24 A Yes, it did, because I just -- I was so
25 thrilled when we were able to put a picket line

1 around stores, and then accomplish the point of one
2 of us being hired. It was just a thrill that you
3 had. It's hard to describe the feeling that you had
4 because we knew at that time that we were
5 accomplishing something, and something that was
6 supposed to have been rightfully ours anyway, so it
7 was a great feeling.

8 Q I know that you have children, they are
9 not children so to speak at this point in time I
10 know, but they were growing up at that time. Was
11 there any particular impact that all of this had on
12 your children at that point in time?

13 A Well, it seems as though only two of my
14 children -- only one of my children really got a
15 lot -- I think my oldest daughter, she went to
16 Peabody, and then she went to -- when she graduated
17 from Peabody, I think they had changed it, she
18 became a teacher, and she wind up teaching at
19 Peabody and Petersburg High.

20 My other two kids was like in an
21 integrated situation, but it didn't -- I never had
22 too much problems with the system and my kids.

23 Q When the school system was integrated in
24 the City of Petersburg, do you recall any situations
25 that developed as far as the students were concerned

1 at that time as they came together in one setting?

2 A Yes. I had one experience that I didn't
3 like at all, and like all parents that cared for
4 their children, they try to protect them, and they
5 really don't want them to be mistreated. My
6 youngest daughter was going to Virginia Avenue
7 School, and she was kind of obese. And at recess
8 time they told the kids they could chew gum, so they
9 were outside at recess time, and she had some gum in
10 her mouth. And her teacher decided to make her
11 run -- she also had asthma -- to run around the
12 field maybe about five times because she was chewing
13 gum on the playground, so of course I had to go up
14 there.

15 And I just went up there and I said,
16 I am going to the school board, and this and that
17 because I already sent a doctor's slip saying that
18 she had asthma and she could not run, you know, for
19 long periods of time. That turned out to be so
20 nice, because the teacher in turn, just because I
21 went up -- so it is important for us to show our
22 faces, and not just believe what our kids say, but
23 also listen to the teacher. It is two sides of it.
24 And so she said she was sorry.

25 And then later she wanted to advance

1 her. She wanted to skip her to the next grade.

2 And I said, well, if you do that,
3 when she gets to college, she will be so young, and
4 I don't want her skipped. You know, at that time
5 her grades were very good. I said, I don't want
6 her -- I don't want you to skip her to another
7 grade, advance her. I want her to go through all
8 the grades, and that turned out nicely, because a
9 lot of the teachers had not been exposed long enough
10 to really know how to deal with the situation.

11 Q In reference to what took place with other
12 stores, the five and dimes as they were called,
13 places like Ruckle-Rosenstock's, were there picket
14 lines and sit-ins set up there?

15 A Yes. One that sticks out in my mind, this
16 kind of -- it makes me laugh sometimes, was the five
17 and dime store, I think it was called Woolworth's.
18 And my oldest daughter was just -- she just loved to
19 go in there and get a hotdog. And I could not
20 explain to her that we could not sit. And I said,
21 we can buy the hotdog, but we have to come out.

22 And she would come out and she would
23 just throw a temper tantrum because she could not
24 sit on those -- they had like high-stools at the bar
25 there. And the food was real good. So that's one

1 story about a five and dime.

2 The other, they put a picket line
3 around there, and no one was going in there. For
4 some reason, they knew when the picketers were
5 coming, so what they would do is rope off the food
6 court so no one could eat, or close the store. And
7 that was something that we knew then that we were
8 really -- we were really advancing.

9 Q Were there many people in terms of the
10 citizens of Petersburg involved in the civil rights
11 struggle in Petersburg?

12 A Oh, yes. They had -- in the beginning of
13 the movement, it snowed so badly that night when
14 they had the first meeting that they formed the
15 Petersburg -- a Petersburg organization, and they
16 did not think that people were going to come out
17 because it would have been very hard for them to get
18 there. And the church was packed. And this meeting
19 was at Zion Baptist Church on Byrne Street.

20 After that, as I said before, we were
21 so organized, and you could depend on other people
22 to help you. And there were people who were having
23 meetings in their homes, and when they said there
24 was going to be a meeting, most of the Petersburgers
25 came out. It was really a lot of support behind the

1 movement, and I think by that, that's how we gained
2 so much in the city.

3 We have not gone all the way, we are
4 not where we should be, but we have come a long ways
5 in the movement in this city.

6 Q In addition to the picketing and the
7 sit-ins, do you recall any specific situation that
8 helped bring the people out on that snowy night in
9 Petersburg? Did we have any arrests that had taken
10 place in Petersburg at that time?

11 A That, I can't -- I can't really remember
12 exactly what brought us out. Something had to
13 happen that would cause such a mass meeting. At
14 that time Martin Luther King had not come on the
15 scene in Petersburg, but it had to be something that
16 happened, and I really can't remember what it was
17 that brought those -- that brought most of the
18 Petersburg people out.

19 Q Were any of the ministers in Petersburg
20 involved in the struggle?

21 A Oh, yes. At First Baptist at that time,
22 which is -- I'm a member of First Baptist, Harrison
23 Street, and that is the oldest African American
24 congregation in this country -- at that time we had
25 a minister by the name of Reverend Reid, and he was

1 very much involved in the movement.

2 I can remember one time when we --
3 someone was jailed and we went down -- I think it
4 was Reverend Reid -- and we went down and sang on
5 the courthouse steps. So he was very much involved.

6 Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker who was
7 really, really involved, and I was fortunate enough
8 to see him on this past Sunday, and he was going
9 through some of the old African music, and our choir
10 just sang, like he would start us off and we would
11 repeat, and that was a wonderful program. But he
12 was very, very into the movement when he was a
13 minister of Gillfield. That's Reverend Doctor Wyatt
14 Tee Walker.

15 Q Do you recall whether or not Reverend
16 Walker and any of the other ministers participated
17 in an effort to try to integrate the Petersburg
18 Public Library?

19 A I can't recall -- I can't recall it. It
20 may have been that they did at a certain point. I
21 was just more into like the picketing, taking people
22 down to vote, and that, but I don't really remember
23 any of them in, you know, involved in the school
24 situation.

25 Q Was the library, to your knowledge, the

1 public library segregated at that time?

2 A Yes, it was. Going in the front door, we
3 were not -- we, as negroes, were not allowed to go
4 into the front door of the library, but we had to go
5 around like the annex part which was around on the
6 side and like down in the basement.

7 Q Did you ever have that experience in terms
8 of going into that particular door in the library?

9 A Yes, I did.

10 Q How about your children?

11 A No, they did not.

12 Q Was Reverend Walker and Reverend Reid
13 involved, to your knowledge, in terms of helping to
14 integrate that library?

15 A I think that Reverend Reid and Reverend
16 Walker was involved in that.

17 Q Do you recall whether or not at that point
18 any outsiders, if you will, as they were called,
19 came to Petersburg to help?

20 A Oh, yes. There were lots of outsiders
21 that came to Petersburg. There were people from New
22 York, and they were -- there were whites that came
23 to help us, and they were just as busy helping us,
24 and almost just -- they felt like one of us because
25 they were dedicated to what they were doing. And I

1 was fortunate enough to like, say, we would take
2 turns to fix snacks for them, they would help us
3 take people down to vote, to register to vote, and
4 at that time there was a poll tax test. And they
5 would also go from door to door knocking on doors to
6 try to gain more voters.

7 Q Do you recall whether or not during that
8 period of time Martin Luther King visited
9 Petersburg?

10 A Oh, yes. I remember there was -- the
11 first SCLC convention, which Martin Luther King
12 organized, was held at First Baptist Church,
13 Harrison Street. As I said before, that's the
14 church that I belong. And there was a dinner given
15 for him. Many times he came here and walked the
16 streets. There was a dinner given for him at Forest
17 View. I don't know whether they are still there or
18 not, but at that time because we were not able to go
19 into many restaurants, Forest View had a beautiful
20 dining room. It was -- the proprietors were black,
21 and that was where they would have the dinner for
22 Martin Luther King, and many of us working in the
23 movement would have dinner with him.

24 They also had like mass meetings, and
25 Martin Luther King came over to Virginia State, at

1 that time Virginia State College.

2 Q Do you recall whether or not any of the
3 students from Virginia State College came to
4 Petersburg to participate in the movement?

5 A Yes, they did. Some of them were working
6 in the field office, and some of them did come to
7 picket with us.

8 Q Were there any other types of problems
9 that you know of that developed in reference to
10 Petersburg, and the picketing and sit-ins?

11 A I cannot remember any serious problems.
12 It seemed as though because it was a non-violent
13 movement, and it seems as though white here in
14 Petersburg were a little different than the ones in
15 the deep south, that it seems as though they
16 respected the point of us picketing. And some of
17 them made it -- may have thought that we were only
18 trying to gain what we were supposed to have anyway.
19 So we did not -- I do not remember any real serious
20 problems, like other places in this country had, in
21 Petersburg. I think they accepted the fact because
22 they felt like we were winning and we weren't going
23 to turn back.

24 Q You mentioned non-violence in terms of the
25 movement in Petersburg. Do you recall how the

1 people were convinced that it really should be a
2 non-violent movement as Dr. King had preached on
3 many occasions?

4 A Well, most of the people -- as I mentioned
5 before, the city was -- we had assigned each area of
6 the city with a ward leader. I was chosen by SCLC
7 and sent to Dorchester Academy, which was in
8 Georgia, to study and to learn about the non-violent
9 movement. Dorchester Academy was -- they had a dorm
10 for the males and a dorm for the females, and our
11 sessions were like early in the morning until 12:00,
12 we stopped to eat, and after that it was sessions
13 all day, classes all day. And classes in the
14 evening until dinner. And then after-dinner
15 classes, and then you would go to bed, and you had a
16 certain time to get in the bed. It was nothing but
17 teaching us non-violence.

18 At that time Andrew Young was one of
19 the instructors. Dorothy Cardon, was a young lady
20 at that time, who had lived in Petersburg, had given
21 up her job and had gone there to be one of the
22 teachers. Josea Williams was one of the teachers,
23 and when he came back we were supposed to within
24 these different areas have meetings to try to teach
25 people who could not read and write how to be able

1 to recognize the questions on the poll tax test so
2 they would be able to become voters, and in the
3 non-violent movement that we had been taught we were
4 supposed to bring it back to the city and teach it
5 to everybody who was in these different areas across
6 the city. Like Blandford was First Ward, and areas
7 over in Bunker Hill was Second Ward, and we were
8 like in different wards. And each one of those
9 wards had a ward leader, and that was a very
10 exciting and wonderful thing when we came back. And
11 many people who couldn't read and write, they were
12 able to pass the test that was given in order to
13 vote. And of course, later on that test was just
14 outlawed, you know, the poll tax test.

15 Q Do you recall any of the churches who were
16 actually involved? I know you mentioned First
17 Baptist, Harrison Street, and you mentioned Zion
18 Baptist where the first mass meeting was held on the
19 night when it was really snowing. Were there any
20 other churches in Petersburg that were involved?

21 A Yes. I think Gillfield was involved,
22 also, because at the time Wyatt Tee Walker was the
23 pastor of Gillfield so Gillfield was involved.

24 Q Do you recall as far as the movement in
25 Petersburg was concerned any effort on the part of

1 the police department in Petersburg becoming
2 involved in attempting to stop any of the action
3 that was going on and being put forth by the African
4 Americans at that time?

5 A I do not recall any incidents where the
6 police, you know, harmed anyone. I think it was
7 like the time when they were out and the picketers
8 were marching around certain buildings, they had the
9 dogs to frighten them I think. Now, some of the
10 dogs may have pulled at some pants legs or
11 something, but no one that I know of was hurt.

12 Q Do you know of any of the facilities in
13 the City of Petersburg that were not segregated in
14 relationship to theaters or stores where you were
15 talking about people trying to go in and sit at a
16 lunch counter and eat, were there other stores that
17 were segregated or other facilities that were
18 segregated, restaurants?

19 A At that time, I think all the restaurants
20 were segregated except for the ones that were owned
21 by African Americans. And all of the movie
22 theaters. The two on Sycamore Street as I can
23 remember, we could not sit on the main floor. We
24 had to sit in the balcony. There were two around
25 Halifax Street, one on Harrison Street and one on

1 Halifax Street which was Gem Theater and Barney's
2 Theater that really was supposed to be for African
3 Americans but did not show really good movies. In
4 order to see a good movie you would have to go down
5 on Sycamore Street and you would have to sit in the
6 balcony.

7 Q Did you ever experience that kind of
8 action, if you will, as far as theaters were
9 concerned?

10 A Yes, I did. And it seemed as though, and
11 I can't speak for other African Americans, but I
12 know the feeling I had when I had to pay my -- pay
13 the same money that whites were paying, and I had to
14 sit upstairs, but it was a situation where if you
15 wanted to see the movie, that's where you have to
16 sit. And I think what happened in the City of
17 Petersburg, we just got tired of the type of
18 treatment, and I just think we did a wonderful job
19 in turning the city around. Many places that they
20 said would never -- blacks would never come, now
21 they are even named after African American.

22 Q As far as the medical facilities were
23 concerned at that time in the City of Petersburg, do
24 you recall whether or not there was any difference
25 in terms of the Petersburg hospital as it relates to

1 where blacks, African Americans would have to go in
2 terms of being treated medically as compared to
3 whites who would go in for similar treatment?

4 A Yes. But I didn't have any experience in
5 being admitted to the hospital at that time.
6 Petersburg Hospital at one time was segregated to
7 the point they had like one floor for blacks and
8 then if all the beds were occupied then they would
9 put blacks in the hallway. I had the opportunity to
10 see this, but I did not have -- I was not
11 hospitalized at that time.

12 Q Did you by chance have an opportunity to
13 go to Washington, D.C., for the March on Washington?

14 A Yes, I did. And it's one of the most
15 wonderful experiences I have had in the movement,
16 the feeling of the March on Washington.

17 Q Later on during the movement, of course
18 Martin Luther King was assassinated. Do you recall
19 any specific incidents in terms of Petersburg at
20 that time?

21 A No, not really. I think that -- I think
22 there are some wonderful people in the City of
23 Petersburg. And I think with good leadership they
24 come together in love, and now whites also join us
25 in efforts to make the city a better place. I do

1 not remember any incidents that happened here with
2 the death of Martin Luther King unlike the terrible
3 things that happened up north, the looting and stuff
4 like that. It did not happen here.

5 Q Can you think of anything else as far as
6 Petersburg is concerned that happened as a result of
7 the city being segregated and African Americans not
8 being able to fully participate in the city itself
9 really?

10 A Yes. Two come to mind. One is Lee Park.
11 where there is a tennis court there now. At one
12 time was segregated. We really couldn't go there to
13 play any tennis at all. And now we're able to go to
14 Lee Park.

15 Wilcox Lake, I think the owner said
16 that blacks would never, ever be on the grounds of
17 Wilcox Lake, and now it is named after an African
18 American, and I must say that I'm using African
19 American, I'm using black, and I am using negro,
20 because at different times when we started out, we
21 were negroes, and somewhere down the line now, in
22 between there we were called blacks and then now
23 we're called African Americans. So when I'm
24 speaking, I sometimes try to speak as what we were
25 called at that time

1 Q If we might back up for just a moment to
2 another situation. As far as the schools were
3 concerned, when the schools were segregated in
4 Petersburg, do you recall or are you aware of
5 situations where at Peabody High School, as an
6 example, that there was a difference in terms of
7 what was being taught or the type of materials and
8 equipment that were available for the black teachers
9 and the black students as compared the Petersburg
10 High School?

11 A I think that we were getting second best.
12 I think that the teachers were -- they were under
13 staffed, but yet they did so much and they produced
14 some very smart people in the time when there were
15 no computers, and no cafeteria. So I feel that in
16 the segregated -- when we were in segregation a
17 whole lot of things we were behind in because we did
18 not have the equipment to use. I think the books
19 were different, the reading materials different, and
20 I'm not sure of that, but I'm thinking that that's
21 what happened, but yet the children had a desire to
22 grasp everything that they could. So the school
23 system put out some very smart people under even
24 those -- under the conditions that they did not have
25 the proper things to use.

1 Q How do you feel today in reference to the
2 conditions in the City of Petersburg as compared to
3 the segregated era?

4 A I feel that -- I don't know what has
5 happened but it is very -- it's very sad what is
6 happening like in the school system, when all of the
7 modern technology is there, and now the school
8 systems are getting computers and all of this, so
9 there is a change, like it's several generation
10 gaps. It seems even though the kids are intelligent
11 and they are smart, but they are into -- not all of
12 them -- most of them are not really into grasping
13 everything that they can when they have many more
14 things out there to grasp.

15 It seems like the interest in
16 excelling is not there as much. As long as some of
17 them can be like on a level and they may be able to
18 go higher that they are satisfied. Like a student
19 who could be an A student is satisfied if they are a
20 B student or a C student, so I think there's been a
21 whole lot of change and it could be there are so
22 many other things that is catching the children of
23 today's mind, the television, with all kinds of
24 things going on, all kinds of -- the music, the
25 style of dressing has a whole lot to do with it, so

1 it saddens me to see where we're standing now as a
2 people.

3 Q Does it appear to you that the population,
4 the number of whites versus the number of blacks in
5 the City of Petersburg has changed as it relates to
6 whites moving out of the City of Petersburg?

7 A Yes, I think it has changed. I think -- I
8 think that whites are really moving out. It's like
9 a white flight, and that can be done as soon as a
10 black moves into the neighborhood in some cases, so
11 we're really losing a whole lot of whites in the
12 city of Petersburg, which is kind of sad, and I
13 think the purpose is -- I mean, I think the reason
14 for that is when a black family move near them, it
15 is almost like they are afraid because some cases
16 they judge all of us the same, they feel threatened
17 they feel afraid, and that's why they move, I
18 believe, when there are some white families that
19 they could -- they may need to be afraid of also.
20 But then when you look at the situation, we as
21 blacks, according to somebody who is moving in the
22 neighborhood, if they are rowdy and they are
23 carrying on, and we have cars, we're concerned, too,
24 so the situation is if they want to run, if whites
25 want to run and move out of the City of Petersburg,

1 that's not really going to keep them from one day
2 looking up and having a black neighbor because
3 blacks are able to move right on out to Prince
4 George, or move right on out to Chesterfield, and
5 that's a good thing, you know, but it may be a
6 little -- it may be a little segregation in that
7 because a lot of times blacks are not shown the
8 houses that whites are shown in Prince George and
9 Chesterfield. Sometime they are running a little
10 higher than what the white pay for, you know, so
11 it's still -- it's still some segregation going on.

12 Q Well, Mrs. Bethea, I certainly appreciate
13 the fact that you've taken time today to come and
14 talk to us about your experiences and how you
15 believe the situation has changed or not changed.
16 So with that in mind, again, thank you very much and
17 we look forward to speaking with you again.

18 A Thank you, Mr. Fauntleroy.

19 Q Thank you.

20 A I enjoyed it.

21 Q Thank you. This concludes our interview
22 and we will of course continue to move on and take
23 advantage of what's there, cause other things to
24 happen. Thanks.

25 A Thank you.

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