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Oral History: Adventist Church and Civil Rights

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HIST 155, Fall 2016 / Tatiana King

Student Interviewer's Name: Tatiana King
Interviewee Name: Allie Valentine

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted on the phone and in person in two different sessions on October 27, 2016 and November 3, 2016. It lasted a cumulative of 2 hour and 35 minutes. At the time of the interview, Allie Valentine was in his home in Collegedale, TN. The interviewer was in Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, TN. Then the second time was conducted at the interviewee's home.

About Allie Valentine:

Allie Valentine is an African American citizen, born in Cleveland, Ohio in January 1927. She stayed there the first 16 years of his life until she moved to boarding school in Huntsville and graduated from high school in 1945. She stayed in Georgia to start a college education at Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama, and graduated in 1949. She served the South Central Conference for many years until she married. They had two girls who are now married. She went back to school in 1965 and got her masters degree in Education Psychology and Guidance Counseling. She then worked for 10 years as a guidance counselor before finally retiring.

Interviewer: Tatiana King (TK)

Interviewee: Allie Valentine (AV)

First Interview

TK: Let's start of with the basics: Your name, when were you born, where did you grow up? Just tell me your story from the beginning.

AV: Well, my name is Allie Valentine, my maiden name is Terrell. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. My birthday is January 21, 1927. I grew up in a family with 10 brothers and sisters. My parents were originally from the south. My father grew up in Mississippi and my mother spent a lot of time in Decatur, Alabama; in her adult years she lived in St. Louis, Missouri. I went to school in Cleveland, Ohio. I went to public school first, then I went to the Adventist school in about second or third grade. Later we moved a distance from the church, so I was back in public school by the time I was in the fifth grade. I stayed there till about seventh or eight grade, then I went back to the church school and stayed until about 10th or eleventh grade. Then, me and a few of my friends decided to go to Oakwood, which is in Huntsville, Alabama. We all went down there to the academy. I graduated from high school there in 1945. That was an unusual experience because we grew up pretty free in

Cleveland, you know. Our parents weren't very strict, so we sort of came and went when we felt like it. Sometimes we got home late, and that type of thing, but at Oakwood [Academy] they were strict. Girls had to stay one side of the campus and guys on the other, you know, until they came to lunch or they had job. There was a fountain in the middle of the campus, and you weren't supposed to go beyond that (laughs quietly). They were pretty strict with our bedtime. They turned off all of the lights in the dormitory at 9:30 but sometimes if you had an exam the next day you'd stay up and cram. You'd have to go down the hall to sit by the restroom because that was the only light. There were trying times, especially when the water would go off; sometimes we could go three days without water. That was bad, it messed up the restrooms, that was really bad. One thing we enjoyed was walks, we'd go out for walks on Sabbath. They allow us to go to town once every two weeks. We were five miles from the city limits and the school had all dirt roads. There were no paved roads until about five miles close to the school from the city. The school had a farm, in fact the theology students {at Oakwood College} had sheep, I guess it was to teach them patience. When I graduated in spring of 1945 there were a few four year degrees, Oakwood was a two-year college, but around that time they had had eight. That was the year that they starting giving out the four year degrees. I remember my parents going to camp meeting in Mt. Vernon, Ohio; at that time there were no white and black conferences. One time while we were at camp meeting, the president of Oakwood College campground to recruit students. All he had was a small 8.5 by 11 sheet of paper folded into threes (folds piece of paper), you know what I mean [referring to a brochure]. He told us one thing that I will never forget, I was maybe 16 or 17 at the time. He said, Oakwood makes everything that it uses, except for salt. They had a mill where they would grind their corn meal, they had a peach orchard, it was nice. They had a lot of work to do once you got there, which was good. I feel sorry for students who nowadays don't have any work, which to me cheats them something that can help them develop a good character. Hard work teaches responsibility, in fact the work the ethic is kind of gone in some situations. (pauses) Let me see what else can I talk about? As a student I majored in Business Administration and I minored in Religion Education. After I graduated I went to the South Central Conferences to work, in fact the black conferences started in '45. Lake Region [Conference] was the first one, then the South Central, South Atlantic, Central States, North Eastern and Allegheny Conferences. All the rest of the country didn't have them. I stayed there for a while at the conference office. I was secretary to the president's secretary, I worked with her. Then with our bible correspondence school, something like Voice of Prophecy, and we would send out lessons to people and grade them and send them back. While I was there I was sent away to play the piano for some evangelistic meetings. I went first to Pensacola, Florida for a tent meeting, that one only lasted for a month because they couldn't get a permit for longer than that. After that I went to Louisville, Kentucky to replace a young lady who playing for that meeting but she had to return to New York. I stayed there for that meeting and continued to stay for (pause), not quite a year. After that I went to Mobile, Alabama to play for a meeting by E.E. Cleveland, he was quite famous. That meeting I will never forget because he was such an excellent speaker. Years later when I was married and had children and living up at Andrews [University], they gave him a doctorate because he was just so successful. After I left Mobile, I went home to Cleveland and there I got married. We moved after we got married to Dayton, Ohio and there I work for Headquarters of the United States Air Force. They had three large facilities there and I

worked in the Fuel and Systems Department. We took care of any airforce jet problems that had to do with the fuel part. We used to get reports on all the accidents. It used to bother me when a lot of these men would get killed because most of them were under thirty years old. They had to be pretty healthy, even their eyesight had to be 20/20. It would break my heart to hear that some would get killed. Then my husband got a call to go to Oakwood College to run the store there, and shortly after that my first child was born. That was pretty nice, but then later I wasn't doing so well, so I left Oakwood and moved back in with my mother in Cleveland and my husband later joined me. That resulted in us staying in Cleveland until 1965. My husband then decided that we would go to Andrews [University] and so we moved to Berrien Springs, Michigan and he started attending. I figured while I was there that I would take up some classes, so I took up some psychology. I wasn't planning on getting a masters' degree, but just kept taking classes so my advisor, she said you should get your masters, and I did. I graduated with a masters in Education Psychology, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do with it so I went back to school and got a masters in Guidance Counseling. The Lord brought me through and I passed all my certifications. After that I started working in Niles, Michigan, which is only 10 miles south from Andrews, at a junior high school as a guidance counselor and I stayed there for 12 years. After that I got an opportunity to get a guidance counseling job in Berrien Springs, where I was living, which meant I was only five minutes away from my job. I loved that job. Our principal was great, because he gave the teachers so much freedom but yet he still held the reigns. I stayed there for 5 years and decided to retire. After I retired they didn't replace me in that building. I had a partner in the counseling office and he didn't particularly like to counsel the troubled kids. So when I went up the school, after I had retired, to move my plants from my porch into the library for the winter, he stopped me. He said he'd been meaning to call me and asked me to come back and work part time. I went back part time, and I thought I was only going to work for one more year, but I ended up working for five more years. I stayed in Berrien Springs for a while after that but around that time my husband developed a heart problem. He passed away in '92 and I stayed in Berrien Springs for five years after he died. Then my daughter was down here [Collegedale] working for McKee's and my oldest was teaching at the church school in Chattanooga. So, since they were here I moved down here and that was New Years of '97, and I've been here ever since.

Second Interview

TK: You lived through an incredible time in American history, starting with the Great Depression around 1929. How did they impact the way you grew up?

AV: It effected my entire family because we were very poor. We were living in Cleveland and my father was a plumber but he wasn't educated, so he couldn't become licensed. Growing up in Mississippi he had only been to elementary school for 2 years. He could never earn enough money to take care of all of us and pay the rent, so we were constantly moving from this house to this house to that house. I was hard having to pack up

everything again and again but we had a lot of kids so we had to make it work. Roosevelt did a lot of good for America, because there were so many poverty-stricken people and so many people didn't have jobs. Cleveland is right by Lake Erie and my father with others were given the task of filling in part of the lake to start to make a highway. That highway is still there and that's still the widest highway in Cleveland. Then, the Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. Around that time my brother was 18 was already involved with the CCC, which was like the army but it wasn't. So, when the war came he just transferred from that into the army. He went overseas to the South Pacific and at that time the military was segregated. There were black divisions and white divisions, and of course was in the black division. They were large, there were like one thousand to two thousand men in each division. His division went over to go fight the Japanese in the South Pacific. Roosevelt was the president at the time and he declared war after that [Bombing of Pearl Harbor]. In the meantime, Hitler was going crazy on the other side and trying to take over the world. I was in about the eighth or ninth grade when that happened. Our teacher, at the church school, brought his radio so that we could hear Roosevelt give his speech to Congress on his decision to declare war on Japan and Germany. I can't remember if he did them both at the same time, but anyway. Roosevelt was a good speaker.

TK: You mentioned your brother going off to Japan and fighting. What was that experience like personally? Were you ever afraid for his life?

AV: I wrote letters, but actually two of my brothers went off to the army. My second oldest was married by then and the rule was if you were married with 4-5 kids you didn't have to go to war. The third oldest also went to the South Pacific but he wasn't in the 93rd division. The Lord brought them home without a scratch. It was dangerous. Back in those days, soldiers did most of their fighting on foot. They didn't have all of these automatic rifles and that fancy stuff. They had those huge guns that you see guys use for hunting deer (laughs). They both came home though.

TK: From the way you spoke of President Roosevelt it sounds like you admired him a lot. What was your reaction when he passed?

AV: I actually visited his home once in New York. I was in college when he passed away, at Oakwood. Vice President Truman immediately became president after that. Roosevelt had had polio so something was wrong with his legs. That's why with his pictures they would always shoot him from the waist up. He was pretty good and his wife [Eleanor] was pretty good too. She was an inspiration for a lot of women. One woman in particular, her name was Mary Mcleod Bethune. She started a school in Florida for black women. I got to meet her once.

TK: What was that like?

AV: It was special. She was very polished like she was trained. She was very highly educated. Back in those days, there weren't too many highly educated black people in this whole country; especially male. The first black person with a PhD that was a woman, in fact the first three were women. The first PhD professor at Oakwood College was a female

over in the English Department. She had previously taught in Washington D.C. at Howard University for years before she came to Oakwood.

TK: What was it like going to school during that time because that happened before Brown v. Board of Education? Was your school segregated?

AV: Well I shifted from church school to public school a lot over that time, because I moved a lot. In Cleveland during that time they had public schools in every neighborhood. The school was so close you could walk to it. No one ever heard of taking the bus to school. In fact, it was so close you could go home from school for lunch and then go back. But, we went to schools according to our neighborhoods because that was the requirement. So because of the neighborhoods majority of the school was black but there were a few whites that went to that school.

TK: So mainly the neighborhoods were segregated, which impacted the school?

AV: Yes, they had black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods. That's why majority of the schools I went to had black kids.

TK: Besides the few white kids that went your school, what were your interactions with white people during that time?

AV: My piano teacher, was an Irish immigrant. He taught me at my house from the time I was seven years old right up until about the 5th grade. He got to the place where he didn't charge my mother for lessons anymore. He would have recitals all over the city and he would feature me at his recitals. I was so immature and I didn't bother to practice all that much but he would visit me during my lunch hour and made me practice. He was the one who really taught me. But I also remember in first grade my teacher was really awful towards me. I was late for school because I would always go through a short cut to get to school and this time I came through and they were doing a whole lot of construction. I couldn't walk that way and I ended up getting lost. I went back home and my mother wrote me a note and sent me back off to school. I handed the note to her and she read it front of the whole class and laugh at me. She laughed and said she got lost, poor stupid girl. That broke my little heart because I was embarrassed. Situations like that it really hurts you. When I was working up in Niles, Michigan I went to the Black History celebration in South Bend, Indiana to celebrate Black History Month. I will never forget a lady who grew up in Arkansas and all of her education was black because all the schools were black. They couldn't even go to white school if they wanted to. She said in her speech that she was glad that she went to an all black school because we never insulted, we were never discouraged, no one every looked down on us but some of the black kids that went to white schools had some bad experiences. I won't forget that.

TK: Do you believe that the white schools still had a higher quality of education and more resources available to them?

AV: Oh yes, of course, especially in the south. However, there were a few teachers that would strive to work against that. I had one teacher in the 5th grade who was white and Jewish. She'd give the classroom a subject and she said we are going to write about this thing. Then the classroom as a whole would write this essay, line by line. She was really good. She cared about us.

TK: Did any of your siblings go to more integrated schools and experience those forms of discrimination?

AV: My youngest sister, my mother had so many children (laughs), went to a more integrated school but she did ok because she had good singing voice so that made her a little popular. She was a part of the school choir and other things, so I think that saved her. My brother had a bad experience here at Southern [Adventist University]. He was visiting as a part of a quartet that came to sing here. That was back in the day when blacks were not allowed to attend Southern. They were not allowed to eat in the cafeteria and someone told the school if you let those colored boys eat in the cafeteria we're going to burn it down; that sounds nice doesn't it (rolls eyes).

TK: Did Adventist ever shift their mindsets during the time of the Civil Rights Movement, white Adventist in particular? Did you know of any advocated for black civil rights?

AV: (Shakes head) No, they stayed separate and that's why we still have black conferences to this day. It will be that way until Jesus comes. There are people today, like Dwight Nelson who pastors up at Andrews, who want to see that changed but it's too late. It's bad.

TK: Having lived all across the country can you compare living as a black in the south to living in the North?

AV: (pauses) Well, I was working at the South Central Conference which was under the auspices of the Southern Union, which was all lead by white people. Everyone who worked in any Adventist Union were white, even in the North. It wasn't until later on that that we had our first black Union president of the Lake Union in the Michigan area. The president after him was white I recall one other black president but he died from cancer; ever since then all the presidents of that Union have been white. The relationships between black and white Adventists were bad. It took them a while to recognize that we were all part of the same church. My niece, who was going to Oakwood at the time, and group of students had a sit in at a white Adventist church. They were asked to leave the church but they refused. They even had television coverage of what they were doing. My brother who was in the quartet also went to a white church in Cleveland to sing, and they were told to leave. They pointed them to where the black church was. I remember working for the conference and we had a big meeting in Chattanooga, Tennessee. In that time blacks could not stay in motel at all so they had to put us in people's homes. We met in the large auditorium and you sat according to your conference and our conference was all the way to the right of the auditorium. Of course everyone on our side of the room was black, but everyone from all the other conferences were white. You could never get them to speak to you. Then one day someone got on the rostrum and said, we would like our colored brethren to sing for us.

Blacks in those days were known to sing very well, the white people just didn't sound as good. What struck me was all those who wouldn't speak to us and wouldn't look at us, all of a sudden all of the necks of the white people turn in our direction. I will never forget that, it was as if some just took all of their heads (makes turning motion) and just, you know (laughs). I will never forget that as long as I live. We sang a spiritual for them and they were happy. They couldn't say 'good morning' or anything, but those necks (laughs). Even at Andrews they would only accept a few black people a year, they had a quota; it changed a little bit. During the 60s there was no love between black and white Adventists anywhere.

TK: Even with all the change that was going on in society?

AV: Yes, even with all of that they didn't change and nothing has changed. There was no acceptance anywhere, except for California (laughs). Well, not anywhere that I knew of, but California did not have black Conferences. There was an effort to have them but I had a friend who had found an old book by Ellen G. White who had written to show the Adventist how they should treat black people. The church had stopped printing it but my friend got a hold of it and decided to reprint the compilation. Ellen G. White said that they should take them under their wing until they could provide for themselves. The didn't have any experience being church members or administrators, even being regular members of society. They didn't do that though. They took that book to the general conference in San Francisco and they gave it away for free; and California never considered a black conference again, that had to be in the early 50s.

TK: During that period in time there were a lot of significant figures who made a difference in the black community. Besides, Ms. Bethune, who you mentioned earlier, who else from that time period did you look up to?

AV: Of course, I admired Martin Luther King, but I also liked E.E. Cleveland. Martin Luther King was pastoring a church in Montgomery, Alabama and at that time Elder Cleveland was having an evangelistic series in Montgomery. From what I understand, Martin Luther King used to attend Elder Cleveland's meetings. Martin Luther King never became Adventist and I don't know whether or not he agreed with what Elder Cleveland said. He was in his prime during those years.

TK: Where were you and what was your reaction when he was shot?

AV: I was teaching music at public school in Benton Harbor, Michigan the day that he got shot. I was shocked. I can recall a story of a white dentist in the area who had a patient in his chair when he heard the news and he made a remark about he getting killed, as if he were glad. In fact, the dentist commented to the patient, "Well we got rid of one of our [problems] today", and the patient didn't like that at all and immediately got up and walked out of his office. He didn't even stay to get his dental work done. He was so mad that this mad had the audacity to say something like that. Those were some trying times. You had the Black Panthers and Malcolm X. Malcom X was strong. You know, once Malcom X was killed is when he really became famous. I was in a book store one day and

right there are all these books about Malcom X. He was a highly respected man. He was honest person and outspoken. He was converted to non-violence and started preaching that all over. He was highly respected, highly respected, but I guess everyone didn't like as much as we thought.

TK: There was a lot of violence and tension during that time, as well as protests. Did you ever participate or was in close proximity to those events?

AV: No, but I knew of the riots, especially in Detroit. They were burning stuff and they were doing all kinds of stuff. There was a town in Texas at the time that didn't want their city to be burned up. So, they decided to set up this facility for giving blacks jobs and during that time that was different, but they didn't want to get their town burned up. In that time white Adventists still didn't want black Adventists in their churches or their children in their academies. There was this one school in Mississippi, called Bass Academy. They would not accept any black students, Adventist or not. Then there was this one black pastor in Mississippi, in fact I taught him in junior high in Cleveland, who told the school if they didn't start accepting black students he was going to take them to court. Guess what they did? They starting letting in black students. From then until now black students go to that academy, in fact I have two nieces who graduated from there. It's too bad that that they had to be forced to do that. There was an academy in Ohio, one of our oldest academies, Mount Vernon Academy only had a few whites. One girl who looked like you [references interviewer], Anna Knight, she was a super super woman. She was born in Mississippi. He father was white and her mother was black. They were farmers and all she knew was hard work. She got a hold of some Adventist literature and went to an Adventist school got her education. She then opened up an academy in Mississippi for black children. She taught with a gun on her desk because they wanted to destroy her. One of her relatives later on took me to visit her grave, right next to some black slaves. She was famous amongst the people who grew up during that day.

TK: How did segregation effect your way of life on a daily basis?

AV: Well, there was separate everything restaurants, bathrooms, parks, you know. There was only one park growing up where blacks could go and my church would have a picnic there every year. Other than that it didn't really effect me because we had our own and they had their own but what got to me was the church. There were a lot of leaders who really didn't know what was going on and with the guidance they could have done a lot better. I just think that it's so sad that they had to trudge along because their parents weren't educated. They didn't have father and grandfather who had been in the church for generations to guide them along; not so, with us. It wasn't until my kids went out to college that kids in that church started all going to college. The black pastors had the talent they just needed the leadership and if they had gotten the help, more people could have been won for Christ.

TK: Do you think that the whites were jealous of the success of the black Adventist pastors?

AV: I don't know, but I know that we were not treated well. There was one pastor in Cleveland, Ohio, his name was Walter Starks. He was a successful evangelist, plus he was a highly successful pastor. There were very few who could do both, and do them both well. I played for one of his outdoor events and I'll never forget it. He was so powerful. He was later asked to be the president of the Allegheny West Conference after they split into west and east. He didn't stay long because the General Conference called him to Washington. I resented that because he was one of our best; I wish he had never gone. I wish he had stayed. He went to Washington was heavily mistreated by the General Conference. He never got over that. I remember being in Huntsville and Elder Starks came down. He had lost a lot of weight, he looked so thin...it was sad. I asked him, "Do you remember me?" and he said yes (sighs). He died in a state of depression because he went to Washington. He founded the Stewardship Department in the General Conference. I don't know the specifics but I know something bad happened to him up there. It was awful. I wonder how the Lord is gonna deal with that. I wish so much that he hadn't gone. He was one of the best. He was brilliant and very effective. A friend of mine also went to the General Conference in the Community Service Department and they were working on this film that was supposed to be sent out to all the churches. He got upset because everyone in the film was white so he sent it back to be revised. When they brought back it was about as bad as the first time and he got angry, very angry. He said few bad words to them and walked out, quit his job. I feel sorry for them, because they were so determined on staying lily white. I'll tell you another bad thing that happened. There was a lady that I knew who had twin girls and she was living in Maryland. She tried to enroll them in Tacoma Park Academy but they would not accept them because they were black, can you believe it an Adventist school. One person told the mother that if you just say that they are Spanish we'll take them. Those twins went to public school and became nurses. They ended up teaching the kids that they would have graduated with. Did you hear about the black lady that died because they wouldn't accept her at the [Adventist] hospital in Maryland? She was extremely ill and she should have had emergency surgery. They wouldn't treat her, they wouldn't help her and that hospital is still there. Yea, we've had a time.

TK: There has been a lot of attention in the media with the Black Lives Matter movement and such. Even in our own church we are trying to blend the black and white conferences. Do you think that the Civil Rights Movement ended in the 60s? Do you think that we are able to make more progress?

AV: No, it hasn't ended. I regret that they [black conferences] ever started. There are some nice white members now. But, we got them now and we got them because the white folks wanted to be separate. It wasn't good for black conferences because they didn't have much experience. It wasn't like the white folk whose dad was minister and grandfather was an administrator and great grandfather was a missionary. Their rearing was so much more handicapped. They struggled and pressed on. Some made some costly mistakes. There was one president of the Lake Union Conference, he was bad and made some costly decisions. He was too young, too inexperienced for the job. I don't think there will be anything different now. Once you let the dog out the yard it's hard to get him back in, because the door slammed when he left (laughs). I don't ever think there will be a coming together. I wish we could but I don't think that it will ever happen, especially in the church; and the world

knows this. There was this one gentleman that said your church couldn't be the right church, because you all are segregated.