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Oral History Report-Melba Stafford

Macy Fisher

Southern Adventist University, macyfisher@southern.edu

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Student Interviewer's Name: Macy Fisher
Interviewee name Melba Stafford

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in two sessions on 10/15/15 and 11/4/15 and lasted approximately an hour and a half. It was conducted in the home of Melba Stafford in Ooltewah, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Melba Stafford:

Melba Stafford was born in her parent's home in Hamilton County, TN, USA on March 19, 1937 and has lived her entire life in Hamilton County. Mrs. Stafford got married at the young age of fifteen to Mr. Stafford who was five years older than her. She lived through The Civil Rights Movement in the South as well as her husband being sent to France during the Korean War. This interview covered topics ranging from her everyday life during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950's and 60's to what it was like for her while her husband was in France, and was conducted on November 4, 2015 at her home in Ooltewah, TN.

Interviewer: Macy Fisher (MF)

Interviewee: Melba Stafford (MS)

MF: During your 20's, during the Civil Rights Movement where did you live?

MS: In East Brainerd on Morris Hill Rd.

MF: Ok, so close to here but not exactly. So living here, in the deep south, what was your everyday routine? Did you go to college, did you go to work?

MS: No, I got married at fifteen and had my first child.

MF: How old were you when you had your first child?

MS: Fifteen. I turned fifteen the 19th of March and he was born the 25th of March. So they are making me old. (chuckles)

MF: (chuckles) Well you were young when you had them so not too old!

MS: Yeah I guess so! And I had four children. Two boys, two girls. My last ones were twins, a boy and a girl and they are 56 now. But during that time, what I remember most. I was working at Dott and Peg, it was a place were they made house slippers, women's house slippers, down on I think it was Sholler Ave. and I would ride into work with my husband and there was a lot of uprising going on you know at that time and one day when we got almost to where he would let me out to go to work there was an old lumber yard down there and I don't know who had set this fire in that lumber yard, but I was so scared that morning because there were armed guards

standing on the sides of the roads and everything. It was like a war zone. And I can always remember that going on in my mind at that time.

MF: Were the armed guards the National Guard or just the police?

MS: They might have been the National Guard? I don't really know but it was just a scary time. At that time of morning right before daylight and all of that going on, it was scary.

MF: At that lumber mill was it mostly blacks working there or white people or mixed?

MS: I'm not sure. Everyone was uprising during that time it seems like.

MF: I guess the news wasn't quite the same as it is now were everything is instantly reported so everyone knows everything. (chuckles)

MS: Right! (chuckles)

MF: Ok so you got up early and went to work. Who took care of your children while you were at work?

MS: They were all in school by that time.

MF: Were their schools all white schools?

MS: Yes.

MF: Do you remember how old they were when they integrated their schools?

MS: Well, my twins were in Junior High School when I remember the first black lady bringing her children there to enroll them and that caused a big stir you know and you know it just went on after that.

MF: So they were in Junior High School, was it just one black family or were there more that were trying to enroll?

MS: There was just this one family. And it was up at Tinner High School, just twelve or fifteen minutes up the road, where my kids went to school.

MF: When they integrated the school did you have any feelings for or against that? Were you hesitant or anything like that?

MS: I was always, I have always been for the "down and outer". (chuckles) And sometimes that's got my in trouble but no I've always felt like that they have as much rights as we do and I think they do now and you know I have some good black friends.

MF: That's great. So when that one family integrated were your children friends with them or anything?

MS: No. They kind of kept to themselves.

MF: Ok, so I know you are very active in your church. Where there any black people that attended your church at that time? Or was it only white people?

MS: It was only white people at that time. But I do remember a young black man that work for a man by the name of Allan Noff, he had a farm and this black boy worked for him and he lived in a little old shack, a brush shack down there around where the Collegedale Merc is now. Back there in the woods he lived, up there on that hill in a little shack made with brush. And all the teenage boys around Apison would gather in the church yard up there and they was gonna go down there and beat this guy up and I remember thinking that is so sad, you don't want to beat somebody up! And he was the first black man that ever came to our church up here at High Point and he was accepted well up there. Yep, everybody just took him in as being a part of us. And he never caused any trouble or anything. He just came to church. And some of the black ladies that I worked with at Dott and Peg, one of them is dead and I always called her Flip Wilson (chuckles) you probably don't remember that show on TV but it was a black man and he was a comedian.

MF: Oh ok!

MS: And at work I would always call her Flip and she did not care at all! She was the best friend. And another woman there, she was a real good friend and I stayed in touch with them for several years after I quit work.

MF: So your work was not all white people then?

MS: No, it was both.

MF: How long did you work there?

MS: I'm gonna say about two years and then I stayed home and raised my kids.

MF: Ok so besides the instance that you told me about with the lumber yard fire did you ever see any of the KKK or burning crosses or any of that type of stuff?

MS: Yes.

MF: Yes to which one?

MS: All of it.

MF: You saw the KKK?

MS: Yes.

MF: Well tell me about it!

MS: Well it wasn't just black people, they did it with white people too! This guy was the town drunk and he lived up at Apison on that hill that goes down through there and they burned a cross out in front of his house one night because he just stayed drunk all the time and they had their white hoods over their faces and everything and you know that was scary too, but, uh, yeah I've seen the Klu Klux Klan. They put up a cross and then they set it on fire and that's a warning to fix whatever they were doing wrong or get out of town or they would come back and do more. And they would cut these big long switches as a warning that they was gonna beat you with those switches.

MF: Wow that's so interesting! Did you ever see them take it farther than that, like lynchings?

MS: No.

MF: Ok. So do you remember any of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches? Hearing them on the radio or the TV?

MS: Yeah. And when I think of Martin Luther King, in my mind, I see him out on that balcony where you know he was always talking to his people and everything. But I can see him in my mind when I think of his name out on that balcony preaching to the black folks and leading the marches and his wife was always right there with him and that just stands out in my mind.

MF: Did you ever see him in person or go to one of his speeches or anything?

MS: No, I didn't.

MF: Ok. Do you remember where you were or what you were doing when he gave his I Have A Dream speech and the march on Washington?

MS: No, I don't, I don't remember.

MF: That's ok! I know it was a long time ago. Were you ever part of any marches or protests?

MS: No.

MF: Were there a lot of marches or protests here in this area?

MS: I don't think so. Not that I ever knew about.

MF: Just some KKK stuff and things like that.

MS: And see I still think they still have those in some places.

MF: Who the KKK?

MS: Yeah.

MF: Yeah I think they are still active in parts of America unfortunately. I've heard of some.

MS: Maybe in Arkansas? Because it was always worse over there than it was here.

MF: Yeah my grandparents grew up there and they remember a sign being posted by the KKK just outside their town warning "Niggers", excuse the language, to be out of town by dark or they would be lynched.

MS: Yeah, they are terrible and I fear they will never go away completely.

MF: Not until Jesus comes I'm afraid.

MS: I think your right.

MF: Were any black people ever prejudice against you or anybody that you knew?

MS: No, just the other way around.

MF: Do you remember any other acts of prejudice against black people?

MS: Not really, just that they weren't aloud to ride the bus without sittin' in the back of the bus and I remember the incident with that lady not moving on the bus for the white people and all the publicity and the papers about that.

MF: Rosa Parks?

MS: Yes, I remember reading about that in the papers and hearing about that. And I think that could have been were part of the women equality movements started too, saying we have a voice too. I think she had a good part in inspiring that.

MF: I've never thought about that before but it very well could be! So you remember the different water fountains and different bathrooms and so on?

MS: Yeah, everything was separated. They couldn't go in the restaurants and eat in there. I think they could go inside and buy it at some places but they had to take it outside to eat it. And, uh, just I know the white people did treat them badly and they

blame us all for that but their own people sold them into slavery. And, uh, I wish they could get over that but just like white people some people never get over anything that's done to them. But, uh, I think we've come a long ways, we've come along ways.

MF: I think we have!

MS: And uh we never thought we'd see a black president and here we are! (chuckles) We've come a long ways.

MF: Do you remember when black people started moving here to live in the same neighborhoods as whites?

MS: I don't remember exactly when it was but I guess the first I remember right around here would be over at Ooltewah there where you cross the railroad tracks there was always a little neighborhood of black people that lived in there but they always stayed to their selves and they never bothered anybody and that's the first that I remember of the black people coming in. But now we have them side by side! (said with a smile on her face)

MF: Wherever they want to live! Do you have any leaders that you remember besides MLK and Rosa Parks?

MS: Um, no I can't.

MF: Were there any local people that did anything for Civil Rights?

MS: Not that I'm aware of.

MF: Do you remember MLK's assassination?

MS: Yes, I don't know what I was doing or anything but I do remember when it happened.

MF: How did you feel about it?

MS: Usually when I hear something about one of our leaders or something like that that dies to me death is a part of livin' and I don't have too many emotions either way. I think it's sad for somebody's life to be taken at the hands of someone else and I don't know, I'm just glad we are were we are today.

MF: Lots of progress! Did you see the Civil Rights Movement affect the economy at all or do you think it did?

MS: I think it moved along pretty regularly.

MF: Did you ever visit farther north during this time?

MS: No.

MF: Did you ever hear about how different it was up there?

MS: No. I've just always been a country girl right around here.

MF: Well that's ok! I'm a country girl myself so I don't think there's anything wrong with that! Hypothetically, do you feel like if you would have lived in a bigger city do you think you would have had a different experience during the Civil Rights Movement?

MS: Probably, probably more encounters with it. But I've always been sort of isolated from, I don't really get mixed up in the world and all it's controversies and I'm thankful for that.

MF: Well it's interesting because even though you lived out in the country and minded your own business you still have quite a few big experiences with it.

MS: Yeah, there was no way to escape it really. My husband's mother, we used to love to come up here and visit her, you know we got married at 15 and we'd come up here and she would sit and tell story after story. She had to take her first husband to Arizona because he had TB and she'd tell stories about that and how she worked with the govern in their home out there and did all the cooking and everything for them. And that was so interesting and I've heard someone say when an older person dies a book of knowledge went with them, because you know we've lived to see a lot of changes. And uh I can remember the ice wagons that used to come around when we did have refrigeration and these ice wagons would come by and we'd buy ice off of that and put it in this big ol metal ice box to keep our milk and stuff like that from spoiling and if we'd run out of ice we'd take the milk down to the creek right down below us and set it in the cool water so it would stay cold.

MF: That is so cool! Did you have dairy cows?

MS: Just one. To have enough milk for our family. And they killed hogs and whatever else for us to eat.

MF: What did your parents do? Were they farmers?

MS: My mom worked at signal knitting mill I don't know how many years and my dad at one time in my earlier years he worked at the saw mill. And then after that he worked for the Hamilton County Highway department. He was a guard over the prisoners when they would take them out on the road to clean out ditches and things like that. He was a guard over those people. And he would bring guys by the house and they would stop by there to get a drink or whatever you know and we was never afraid of them. I hadn't thought of these things in a long time! (chuckles)

MF: (chuckles) Well I think they are very cool to hear about! I like hearing your memories! So did you finish High School or just eighth grade?

MS: Just eighth grade and I went through Christmas in the ninth grade. And my husband graduated from high school.

MF: So he went to school after you got married or he was older than you?

MS: He was five years older than me so he had just finished and he was working at Cavalier up where they made furniture.

MF: And you just jumped in and got married.

MS: We just got married! (smiling)

MF: How was your wedding?

MS: We got married on a Sunday, January 13th, and he had already gone into the armed forces and he came in on furlough on a Sunday and we went to Rossville to the Justice of the Peace and got married! (smiling from ear to ear and chuckling slightly) He had to leave that night to go back to the Army. He fought in the Korean War.

MF: Was it hard for you while he was gone?

MS: It was.

MF: And you had a baby right after too right?

MS: Well...the Lord knows this and you know I don't feel happy about it but we had to get married. (slight laugh).

MF: Ohhhh, (smiling) so you had a shotgun wedding!

MS: (laughing) Yes! And I had my oldest son and my husband wasn't here.

MF: Was that hard? Having a baby while your husband was halfway around the world?

MS: Yeah and I stayed, you know back then that was a shame to be pregnant at that young a age and all but I had an Aunt that lived down in East Chattanooga on Brag Street and I stayed with her through the week and on the weekends I would come home and stay with my mom and then after my first child was born I stayed at mom's and took care of the house and baby while she worked and she helped me with raising my son while my husband was off fighting and he's always been the number one grandson (smiling).

MF: Oh I'm sure! (chuckling) So how long did your husband fight over there?

MS: He was just there two years, they just had to stay two years back then.

MF: Did he share any stories with you or did he not really talk about it? I know some veterans don't like to talk about it always.

MS: He never talked about it. The only thing he talked about was when he was in France, which is where he was pretty much the whole time, how it rained over there every day. He said that was the muddiest place! They would have to go out and stay out maybe two or three days at a time and it raining all the time and sleep in the rain and all that.

MF: So he was stationed in France?

MS: Yeah, they sent him to France, it was all the Korean War but they sent him to France for most of it. Right at the end of his life he was so proud of his country. I mean he was just, he hadn't expressed that all through his life but he was so proud to be an American and proud of the armed forces and all that and I wondered why but he gave his time to serve his country and he was proud of it.

MF: That's definitely something to be proud of. I haven't served in the military but I left the states for a year to go teach and during that time I realized how great America is and before that I didn't dislike America but it was just the place I lived, all I really knew of first hand but when I saw how other people lived and how their government was not good and it was dangerous, it really makes you appreciate America.

MS: Exactly.

MF: Do you know what his ranking was or what he did in the army?

MS: I don't know. (chuckles) PFC First Class and I don't know if he got higher than that or not there's been a lot of years go by! (laughs) I don't remember what I did yesterday!

MF: (laughs) Well and if he never talked about it it would be harder to remember also.

MS: Yeah he didn't talk about it much. He was just happy that he got to go to Paris and see the Eiffel Tower and go up in that. He always wanted me to bring our son and come and live on the base in France but being as young as I was I was afraid to go so I wouldn't go and I think he always felt a little hard at me for that. (chuckles)

MF: Did you ever regret not going?

MS: No not really. (laughs)

MF: I don't think I would have gone either, being that young. (laughs)

MS: Nope, I just didn't feel like I was ready to do that!

MF: Well especially back then. I mean if it would have been now you could Skype your family everyday if you wanted but back then that would not have been the case at all.

MS: Right!

MF: Did he write you often?

MS: Every day. (said very matter of fact like) I got a letter pretty much every single day. And I don't know what ever happened to all of those letters. (chuckles)

MF: Did he ever send you any pictures?

MS: Yep! He sent pictures of his buddies and he took pictures in Paris and in the barracks where they slept and things like that. So, we had a good sixty something years together.

MF: That's a long time! How fantastic. Ok well do you have anything else you remember or want to say?

MS: No I don't think so (chuckles) you know it all!

MF: Well thank you so much Ms. Melba!

MS: You are very welcome Honey!