Interview with **Vanessa Venable**
May 6, 1986
Production Team: A
Camera Rolls: 214-216
Sound Rolls: 1156

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965).*** Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Vanessa Venable, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on May 6, 1986, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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00:00:02:00

[camera roll 214]

[sound roll 1156]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING. SEVEN. MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. MRS. VENABLE, THE FIRST QUESTION I WANT TO ASK IS, WHAT WAS FARMVILLE LIKE IN THE 1950s? WHAT WERE RELATIONS BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITES LIKE IN FARMVILLE, AT THAT TIME?

Vanessa Venable: During the period of 1950s, Farmville was a very pleasant place, a very congenial place with apparently no discord anywhere. Everything was moving very smoothly.

INTERVIEWER 1: IT WAS A SEGREGATED TOWN?

Venable: It was a completely segregated town. There were three—there were two school systems at that time, the white system and the black system. And then there was another school system on the campus that was called the Campus School. Of course that's where the—most of the children of the college staff attended. But there were one or two blacks there also.

00:01:00:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION WHEN THE COUNTY ANNOUNCED THAT THEY WEREN'T GOING TO APPROPRIATE MONEY FOR THE SCHOOLS—THAT THEY WERE GOING TO LET, LET THE SCHOOLS CLOSE OR SHUT THEM DOWN WERE YOU, YOU SURPRISED?

Venable: When the county decided to go out of the school business we were all very shocked. We didn't have the slightest idea what was happening to us. We went to work one day and that next morning we were told that we were out of the school business. It was that, that was the day after the raid on the county treasury. [laughs] The night before there had been a very private visit to the treasurer's office, only by whites of course, to receive a refund of their county school taxes. So that the county could very well say, we're out of the school business because we have no school money.

INTERVIEWER 1: SO EVEN AS A TEACHER, YOU HAD NO IDEA THIS WAS GOING TO HAPPEN?

Venable: Not whatsoever. We had no idea that this was gonna happen this way.

INTERVIEWER 1: AT ONE POINT—CAN WE STOP FOR A SECOND?

[cut]

00:02:12:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: EIGHT.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: NOW, AT THE TIME, THE SCHOOLS WERE CLOSED IN FARMVILLE, YOU HAD TWO CHILDREN IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM?

Venable: I had two children in the school system when the schools closed.

INTERVIEWER 1: AND YOU WERE A TEACHER AND YOU ENDED UP LOSING YOUR JOB AS WELL. CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT WHAT THAT WAS LIKE DURING THE PERIOD THAT YOU, YOU WERE OUT OF A JOB AND TRYING TO GET YOUR CHILDREN INTO SCHOOL?

Venable: My children were both in high school when the schools were closed. It was—one was in the twelfth grade and the other in the tenth grade. The one that was in the twelfth grade managed to graduate that year and was off to college the next year. But with him going

off to college and with one coming into the tenth grade, Mama needed her check. And I had an invalid mother at the same time. So it was very, very difficult finding a way to support the son that was away in college and finding a place for the daughter who was entering the tenth grade at the time. So I managed to find a job in Charlottesville. So I came to Charlottesville and, at first, I left my invalid mother home with my husband to take care of her. But then that didn't work out too well, so I eventually had to move my mother to Charlottesville to a nursing home where I could oversee her care here. And in the meantime go back and forth home to see what's going on there.

00:03:40:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WAS THIS A COMMON THING THAT BLACK FAMILIES WERE HAVING THEIR FAMILIES WERE BROKEN UP BY THAT SITUATION?

Venable: Yes, most of our families were definitely broken up because of the situation. Our, our children had to go elsewhere to seek an education. The Friends Society out of New York came down and accepted a number of our girls and boys and carried them back to New York and put them into school. Others went to live with families. Some moved across the county line into Cumberland and their children went to school there. Some went into Buckingham County and so forth. But quite a few of them found a place to attend school, however, there were hundreds of them who had no schooling whatsoever for four years.

00:04:32:00

INTERVIEWER 1: AT ONE POINT, THE, THE WHITE CITIZENS OF FARMVILLE OFFERED TO OPEN A PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR THE BLACK CITI—FOR THE BLACK STUDENTS THERE. WHY WAS THIS IDEA REFUSED? DID YOU, DID YOU—WHY DID—WAS, WAS THE IDEA REFUSED?

Venable: The white community did at one time offer some type of private schools for the blacks, but we felt that that was what we'd just come out of and there was no point in going back into a segregated school system. So we did not accept that. However, Dr. Sullivan from New York came down and they opened a free school in the county to which [sic] most of the children who were out of school attended. And they were, well, since then we have always referred to it as a "play school," because the, the children were non-graded and they—there wasn't very much accomplished through it. But a, a number of teachers came down from New York to work in these [sic] free school.

00:05:41:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WAS IT A MISTAKE? DO, DO YOU THINK IT WAS A MISTAKE NOT TO HAVE ACCEPTED THAT OFFER?

Venable: We think so. No, we don't think that it was a mistake. We thought that we were doing right then, because we did not want another segregated school system. So we thought we were doing what was right.

INTERVIEWER 1: SO YOU THINK THAT, MAYBE IN SOME WAY, BECAUSE OF ALL THE HARDSHIPS YOU HAD TO SUFFER, THE NAACP MISLED YOU TO ENCOURAGE YOU NOT TO TAKE THAT OFFER?

Venable: No. We have stuck with the NACP [sic] through all of that and we feel that their advice was sound. And we feel that we did the right thing to hold to our desires for a public school system that was purely public.

00:06:28:00

INTERVIEWER 1: YOU TOLD ME A STORY ON THE PHONE ABOUT A WOMAN, ABOUT A TEA—A STUDENT WHO WAS—WHEN THE SCHOOLS WERE REOPENED, WHO COULDN'T REALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS GOING ON IN MATH CLASS. THIS PERSON WAS A PERSON WHO SUFFERED DURING THE TIME THE SCHOOLS WERE, WERE CLOSED. CAN YOU TELL ME THAT STORY?

Venable: Well, I was a teacher of mathematics and when I came back to Farmville, something—well I didn't come back for something like seven or eight years. And I had a class of eighth grade math students. And going through the usual routine of checking up on them, I had this young lady to join some other students at the blackboard to work out some exercises. And I noticed that the others were writing and going ahead with their work, but this particular girl was simply scribbling, making marks. And I turned to her, because they always said I had a very rough voice, but with it I had no trouble with the discipline in class. So I turned to her and I asked, why don't you write your numbers, honey? And she continued to scribble. And I turned to her a second time and I said, you aren't doing anything. Why don't you write your numbers? At that point, she'd become quite exasperated herself, and she turned on me and she said, Mrs. Venable, I don't know anything about writing any numbers. I've never been in school. Nobody's taught me how to write any numbers. And she started crying and I started crying. So we both just sat there and cried. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER 1: WHY DIDN'T SHE KNOW HOW TO WRITE HER NUMBERS?

Venable: Because she hadn't been in school at all. She had been out of school. She had been—she was in the first grade when schools closed and over those four years she hadn't attended any schools whatsoever. So she had absolutely no idea of what I was talking about.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHO DO YOU THINK PAID THE HIGHEST PAYMENT—CAN WE STOP FOR A SECOND?

INTERVIEWER 2: SURE.

[cut]

00:08:33:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

[sync tone]

Venable: When the schools—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: NINE. WAIT JUST A SECOND. AND LOOK AT LOU AND GO AHEAD.

Venable: When the schools closed in Prince Edward County, we were all very, very upset. We didn't think that we were living among people who would be that mean. We expected something but not that drastic a move. We thought that the white people in Farmville were all friendly neighbors. But when this happened we began to wonder whether we were living among neighbors or whether we were living among enemies.

00:09:14:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHY DIDN'T BLACK PEOPLE JUST MOVE OUT OF THE AREA?

Venable: The black people couldn't exactly move because quite a few of us had our roots established there. Most of us owned our properties, owned our homes, and so for that reason we couldn't move. Most, most of us did go elsewhere seeking jobs. All of the teachers, for instance, had to go looking for other jobs and they went elsewhere, but it was just—it made suitcase teachers out of us. We went someplace to work during the week and Friday evenings we wanted to come home again because that's where our roots were. I was born in Prince Edward County, I owned property there, and I wasn't gonna give my property and leave if I didn't have to. So I went so that I could work and come home on Friday evenings and stay there until Sunday evening and jump in the car and run again [laughs].

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN WE STOP?

INTERVIEWER 2: I THINK WE SHOULD CHANGE ROLLS.

[cut]

00:10:22:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 215]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING. MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: TEN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: JUST A SECOND. GO.

Venable: I think that—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'M SORRY. ONCE MORE.

Venable: I think that back in 1950s and '60s the white people were very much opposed to having the schools integrated. They had no reason other than the fact that they thought that they just didn't want the children to mix. They were afraid of social repercussions. They were afraid that if these children were integrated that [laughs] some little white girl would bring a little black baby home and they didn't want that to happen. They want to keep the race as lily white as possible. And so, they thought the best thing to do was to keep them separate in schools. Even after the schools were integrated there were many occasions of various discords because some social act. Some little white boy had found favor in some little white girl—black girl or vice versa and that was one of their big reasons for wanting this thing to stay as it was. They seem to have been able to work together all right. In other words, there were jobs around town where blacks and whites worked together and there was nothing wrong with it, but it was just something against going to school together that they couldn't exactly settle on.

00:12:00:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHO DO YOU THINK REALLY PAID THE PRICE FOR, FOR DESEGREGATION IN FARMVILLE AND, AND WHAT DO YOU THINK THE PRICE WAS? HOW HIGH WAS THE PRICE?

Venable: The price of desegregation in Farmville was very, very high on both sides. It was high for the blacks in that so many blacks were denied formal education for a long time and some of them were lost entirely to formal education because some of them never returned to school. There were those who grew up and got married and went away and never returned. And so, those persons were denied an education completely. It was a costly thing for the whites because they had to pay tuition for their children. Tuitions that ran from nine hundred to a thousand or twelve hundred dollars a year for one child. And that, of course, was a very hard problem for many of the whites. During that time, there were white families that were—really lost their homes and lost their cars because they couldn't pay that type of tuition. They had to borrow money to send their children to school. Of course, the banks and all were very willing to do that. Quite often they, they—their, their checks were gun sheared [sic]. They had, it had to be taken out of their checks. Their, their bosses would deduct from their checks before they got it, the tuition price and take it out in installments too. So that the family would have something to live on. So I think all around both sides had to suffer.

00:13:53:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU THINK THE PRICE THAT THE WHITES PAID WAS HIGHER THAN JUST THE ECONOMIC PRICE?

Venable: Yes, I think it was because, after all, since we have to live together now, and perhaps the rest of our lives, I think that we lost a lot of contact that was necessary in the growing up process. I think that had we integrated at once and gone on and gotten over the pains of integration earlier, I think, that everything would have moved on much smoother.

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN WE STOP?

INTERVIEWER 2: YEAH.

[cut]

00:14:30:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JUST A MOMENT. GO AHEAD.

Venable: The price that was paid for integration will last for a long time in the lives of both the whites and the blacks in Prince Edward County. It is something that you would like to forget—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: NO. START OVER.

INTERVIEWER 2: NO, NO.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: PRICE OF SEGREGATION.

INTERVIEWER 2: NO. SHE, SHE SAID THAT. IT'S FINE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OH I'M SORRY. EXCUSE ME.

Venable: The price was very great for both the blacks and the whites. It is something that we won't get over in a long, long time because for generations we will always think about the midnight raid on the county treasurer. We'll think about other incidents, for instance, I can think very readily now of an occasion when the—a member of the School Board and I were in a discussion and he said—because I had said that I didn't think that there was anything fair about what was going on and so he decided that he was going to take me aside and kind of smooth it over. So he says to me, he says, now Vanessa, he says, I couldn't think about sending my little child out here among all these colored children. And I said, well, yes sir, I guess you've got a point there. I said, you remind me of myself. I said, suppose I go home this evening—you see he was on the School Board and he was making the rules and regulations and appropriations for the black schools. So I said, I'll go home this evening, I said, I'll fix a good dinner for my husband. I'll fix him all his favorite foods and put out a

beautiful tablecloth and serve it beautifully. And then when he gets ready to sit down to eat, I'll say to him, now you eat and enjoy yourself honey, but I can't that stuff, I'm going downtown into a hotel someplace and get myself a good meal. I said, you're preparing for the black children but you saying that it's not good enough for your child. It's fine for them, but it's not good enough for your child. So I laughed at him and we ended that conversation, but that's the thing that usually happened. They would—the School Board members would do what they thought—

00:16:52:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Venable: —they wanted done for the black children and felt that the black children and the parent [sic] too should accept it.

INTERVIEWER 1: WE'RE ABOUT TO ROLL OUT. CAN WE STOP?

INTERVIEWER 2: LOVELY ENDING. THAT WAS A BEAUTIFUL—

00:17:05:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 216]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING. MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TWELVE.

INTERVIEWER 2: WAIT, WAIT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JUST A MINUTE. GO AHEAD.

Venable: This whole experience was something that has left a mark on all of us and on all of us in our own family lives. The fact that we had to break up our home life and go other places to look for work or for school. You see my problem was I had this girl who was going in the tenth grade and she had had one year of Spanish. And it wasn't easy for me to find another school where she could pick up the second year of Spanish. And I found job openings in many places. So I had to be choosy and that was the reason I selected Charlottesville. I had to select a school where she could get this final year of Spanish,

because, at that time, in the high school curriculum any person had to have at least two units of foreign language to graduate. And she had had one unit and she had to find this other unit. And so, I brought her to Charlottesville with me where she could get this other year of Spanish. I had to leave my husband at home, alone, while my mother, my daughter and I came to Charlottesville. My son was away in college at the time. And that was a matter of destroying our home life almost completely. Weekends on Friday evenings and, and some Friday evenings, I had to work the football game here and that meant that it would be eleven or twelve o'clock before I could finally get back home and that made it very hard for us. So Saturdays and Sundays were the only two days that we would have at home as a family. So I would go back in on Friday evenings and start getting ready to leave Sunday evening again. And it was—it, it made it very miserable and, of course, we didn't have any idea how long it was going to last. We thought maybe the breaking up of the schools and what-not would just last for one year, but then when it happened the second year and the third year and the fourth year, we said, well, we don't know what's gonna happen. So, then, finally, as I said, they opened up these free schools in Prince Edward and they very, very kindly invited all of us back to work again when they finally opened up the public schools again. But I was working here in Charlottesville and the, the superintendent of school did not agree to our release because we didn't know the schools were going to open again until after we'd signed contracts here. So when we went down to him to talk about—when I say "we" there were three of us from Farmville teaching here in Charlottesville. So we went down to talk with the superintendent and ask for release from our contracts. And he said, well, as much as I am in sympathy with the Prince Edward case, he said, if I release three teachers now, what am I gonna do about opening my schools here in Charlottesville? So he said, we, we, we, we wouldn't like to do that and—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M SORRY.

Venable: —we were too dedicated a teacher [sic] among us to just break the contract. So we stayed that year out and just didn't sign the next year's contract.

00:20:36:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WAS IT WORTH ALL THAT PAIN?

Venable: Well, it was the only thing we could do at the time. It wasn't worth it, but it was all we could do. It was a bad situation and we just had to make the best of it.

INTERVIEWER 2: THAT'S A WRAP.

INTERVIEWER 1: THANK YOU SO MUCH.

INTERVIEWER 2: THAT'S LOVELY.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:20:59:00