

Dessa Edyth Parkey-Blair

Rogersville, Tennessee

2013

My name is Dessa Edyth Blair. I was only at Swift for one year, and that was 1947-48. My sister was already here, and she had done three years of high school and was a freshman in college. I was working at Oak Ridge at the time, two years at Oak Ridge, and she caught up with me. So, then, I came up here to be with her as a freshman in college, and I only came here one year as a freshman, did not stay on campus. I stayed with a family out in the city, one year. Then, I went to Morristown and finished junior college.

Not that much other than a little football, I think. I think they played against each other, and see, I hate football. If it was left up to me, I'd outlaw it, because look like somebody's gonna get killed every minute. Don't talk to me about football.

I was born in Hancock County. My family and my grandfather's family were the only two families in the white community. My dad was a blacksmith and any other kind of smith you wanna know, and he was a bigger asset, as one person, to the whole community than anybody else because he was so skilled and can do so many different things. He taught me grades one through three at home. There was no school for Black children. The bus passed right by the foot lot?, but we had to walk to school. So, as far as Swift is concerned, I was only here one year, but every one of my elementary teachers, over there in the hills, were trained here at Swift. Now, that's why I'm in love with it, and they had excellent teachers, gave you the good background information. And when you came out of elementary school from having one of those teachers – I had four, and I still remember all four of them. I have forgotten a lot of the names of teachers I work with, but I have not forgotten the names of those teachers who taught me. Jacquetta Sensenbaugh and there was Gram Carr, Molly Ruth Payne. All four of them came from here, and see, I've had a chance to be with teachers at Knoxville College when I was there. Had a chance to be with teachers because I got my Master's at UT. These teachers from Swift can't be beat, couldn't be beat nowhere. I know what I'm talking about. For fundamentals.

I knew from my dad. my dad was an old-fashioned-like, and he went to the eighth grade. And that man's spelling book – he called it the Blue Back Speller – some of the words in that Blue Back Speller, grades 1-through 8, I cannot pronounce – or announce, whatever you want to say, enunciate. Now, that's the kind of education I got: foundation, if that's what you want to know.

Well, they was down to earth, and they were so serious about children learning. Of course, you had respect, and if you could learn, you would learn. And there wasn't a lot of wasted time and whatnot. They used their time wisely, and had respect for students. They also taught you manners and how to act and a lot of other things about life. Because I wrote a poem about it before I left here. I can't remember it, but I have it at home. It's been a long time. I was 90 years old February 7, can't remember back that far now.

She's not quite as academic as I am, and I say that because she didn't study as hard as I did. I've always been very serious. I was the oldest child, and I've always been serious about school, and I loved my teachers from Rogersville so much. I wanted to be a teacher ever since I can remember. I wanted to be an elementary teacher, but I wouldn't want to be one now because I'd be down there behind bars. I

don't know about Swift, and see, I was teaching when – I don't know that much about desegregation of Swift, per se. When desegregation took place, I was teaching in Knoxville, and I was sent to the most prejudiced principal that they had in Knoxville. And I didn't know that till two years ago. The guy that was Dr. Fred Bedelle who I thought had passed, called me, and he's writing a book on the desegregation of schools in Knoxville. And he told me, he hand-picked me and sent me to Smithwood. He told me, and I was about to hurt him. No, I didn't. I brought the man into the twentieth century because I didn't know any better.

I remember something about it when it was being torn down, yes. Well, times change, and it was changing everywhere out there in the world, and in the other world, also. So, you can't get hung up with all these changes. Well, all you got to do is sit tight, listen, learn all you can, do all you can, say all you can, but be right and cope with it. That's the way I do life.

That it should be revered, like we're trying to do right now. needs reverence because it was a good foundation. And I say all the time, we haven't done half-enough for the Presbyterian Church, who set up these schools for Black children and Black folks. And I say the same thing about Rogersville; I say the same thing about Knoxville College. We haven't paid enough homage to the Presbyterian Church for what they've done for our race, our people.

Work, didn't have time play much.

Not really, because I lived very close. Didn't take long to walk over here, about two or three blocks over. I was staying with a lady, when I was here. Now, my sister was staying on campus. I just used what I had, and it worked. and I used what my daddy gave me, what I was born with and what I taught. I was Miss KC (Knoxville College) when I was here. Well, I had to get up and didn't have to walk far to come over here, and we'd have assignments. And there wasn't no such thing as not coming back with your assignments. Whatever they were, you did them. You didn't ask questions about them. You did your assignments and brought them back the best you could. But that I was born like that: doing the best that I can do. I'm still like that. I'm a perfectionist to an extent. Not that I am perfected, but I work toward it. I still do. As an old lady, I still do it. That's part of me. Now, you can ask somebody else that didn't have it, and maybe they acquired it, but I've always had it.

Well no, I didn't give that an awful lot of thought, because in those kind of days, you had no other choice. You had no other choice. If you had assignments, you had work to do, then you did it. If you didn't, you get consequences or get sent home, whatever it took. It's not like it is now. I'm an old lady, and I still do the best I can do in anything I do. I don't care what it is, how simple it is. Do the best job you can do. If I write you a letter, I want to be written correctly, written pretty, with no mistake. Now, that's just part of me. So, you gonna have to ask somebody else them questions.

I'm just so thankful that Swift was available, that the Presbyterian Church provided schools that poor people could afford. My dad – at the time I got here, they were charging, then, a little bit of tuition because I'm out of the county. This is Hawkins, and I'm from Hancock, the poorest county in the 96. And everybody else that went before me, they had to pay tuition, but when they came to my daddy home... "If I have to pay tuition, then my county is gonna pay it," and they did. That's the first time the county started paying tuition. My dad met the county courts, and while we were talking about that, we were living in an all-white neighborhood, and kids had nowhere to go to school. And the Black kids in Claiborne County lived just across just across the line from the Hancock boundary, and they went to Claiborne County school. And we had nowhere to go, and my dad met the courts. He was a veteran of

World War I. He told them what he had done for the country and what he deserved, and they built him a school next to the county line, almost on the Claiborne line. Because at that time, we had about six families in Hancock County that were going across the line to Claiborne. And that's how we got a school, got a brand-new school, only because of my dad. Only my dad is the only one who got that done, or tried to get it done, because they were an interesting – because we were isolated up here in the white community.

Hoop Creek Church, it was a church and schoolhouse together. And somebody donated that church building to the school, at that time, and then they got unhappy about it because they began to sell and whatnot. And you had some of those religious deacons and things that don't believe in selling in the church house. So, then, the school was moved up in the center of the Black neighborhood at Hoop Creek, but that was before I went to school. I went to school as a third grader at Hoop Creek, and I stayed with my Aunt Pearl, whose momma's sister walked a mile and a half to Claiborne County, Hoop Creek School in Claiborne County, for the first three years, I guess. two or three – no, about a couple of years. By then, my dad had a school. They built a brand-new school right at the end of Hancock County there. and white – we were Parkeys, and the Parkeys had a real large, large area of land and whatnot, and they donated the land as long as we had school. For us to have a school almost on the Claiborne line because we had those five or six families, who were on the border, who also could come to their school. But we're up here with the white folk, walking, bus passed right by the door, and we had to walk a mile – over a mile, I guess. I don't know, but we were young then.

I know where Blackwater is because I had an aunt that lived up there in Blackwater – Mayor John Livingston.

I had no pressure because I was, if I want to be frank about it, I was the better student. So, no pressure. Now, you might ask her if she felt some pressure.

I had a nephew whose wife died when the baby was nine years old. They had four children. That was in Knoxville, with cancer, breast cancer. Lord have mercy. And I went over there every week and worked with his children. Taught them little fellas to read and write, and they was all over my neck, my lap, and everywhere. Little bitty things. And started out with them, I went every week, once a week. And the first three was fine and got them started well, and the baby was about three years behind the other ones. He said, "Mother, when is Aunt Dessa coming over here to read to me?" Well, I taught those little bigger ones – I taught them how to read, they can teach him how to read. So, I had to go over and work with him. So, what I'm saying – I love school, I love learning, and I got three engineers and a nurse out of those four kids. Three graduated from UT. Engineers and the other one is a nurse, out of his four children. Best kids you've ever seen. Foundation that I had, that I could give them. Plus morals, good ethics, work ethics, any other kind of ethics you want to talk about. We got them at home, taught them at home, examples at home. So, that's the way it is.