

Carroll County Through the Eyes of the Black Experience: Sidney Sheppard

Sidney Sheppard

Interviewer: Patricia Mack-Preston

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What were some of your favorite memories growing up?

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One of the things we used to – of course the church was the social center of the community so we looked forward to things that happened at the church. I was a youngster in the late 20's, early 30's before you had barbeque grills. But they used to have what we called a lawn fate in the evening. Someone would have a lawn fate at their house. They would sell chicken sandwiches, hot dog sandwiches, homemade ice cream and sodas and the yards would be decorated with Japanese lanterns. We didn't have electricity but the yards would be decorated with Japanese lanterns which made a very attractive yard. It was something that as youngsters you would look forward to. Sometimes they called it a strawberry festival. It was almost the same thing. This was before radio, televisions, computers, internet, cell phones. You had to make your entertainment with each other; you had to play games with each other. As youngsters a lot of games were games that we made up. Tags, we used to play a game called wood tag; home base was anything made out of wood. Of course we used to play dodge ball and other games, baseball, we didn't play baseball on Sundays but you could play baseball through the week.

Did all the children in the neighborhood, black and white, get together and play? Or was it still segregated?

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I grew up in a little community where it was segregated. The black kids played with each other. There were sometimes we would get together with some of the white boys. There was a swimming hole about a mile from my house where **Ponty** Run Lake is now, it was Ponty Run Creek then, and we would go there and sometimes we would swim together. And you didn't have bathing suits so we had sometimes – sometimes we would adjoining swimming holes so we'd go swimming holes and swim together.

Okay. What about under segregation, what are some of your memories of what it was like for black people then?

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I think in my family especially in my family my parents had sort of schooled us, told us about the things and there were certain things that we knew – we weren't black then, we were colored – there were certain things as colored people we could not do, there were some places we could not go.

Like where?

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As we got older the movie theater in the town of **Sackville** was segregated. It wasn't segregated; black folks could not go to the movie theater in Sackville. The one in Westminster which was 18 or so miles away was segregated so we would drive 18 miles to Baltimore and go to the theater in the black districts in Baltimore City rather than having to go and being segregated in Carroll County. That was one of the fortunate things; we were close enough to Baltimore City to make that our Saturday night outing.

So your parents chose that instead of letting you be exposed to that kind of segregation they chose to be with other African Americans in the city?

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See now we were strictly country. All of Carroll County at that time was farmland, farming country and the largest city/town in Carroll County I think was Westminster and that time it had about 4,000 people. Carroll County was strictly farming country. And so you didn't get together because there was little pockets of black folks, you know two or three houses, it might be two or three miles before there was another house, a little road with two or three families on it. So you had to walk a mile or two miles sometimes to get together. So that was one of the reasons that the church was the social center; everybody would get to the church, walk to the church and things would happen at the church. Or somebody, a member of the church would have one of those lawn fates that we talked about before or there would be a picnic at the church, the churchyard.

Okay. And did you ever have any kind of run with anybody under segregation as a young adult or as a teenager?

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Not really. There were three boys, white boys, I used to walk with when I went to high school. One of them used to like to use the N word. His other two brothers didn't. We would have some – but he was – I mean he was such a little guy that you couldn't get mad with him. I never had any controversy growing up in Carroll County. Later on I ran into segregation as I left Carroll County and as I went into the Army in 1943 I ran in to some instances that were not pleasant.

Is that the way the Army was set up?

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The United States Army at that time was strictly segregated. Black troops were housed separately in Army camps, in certain sections of the camp. Army facilities were segregated. I took my basic training at **Keesler** Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi in 1943. There was one chapel on post. Black troops were able to go to chapel at 3:00 Sunday afternoon. You stayed in your – you were in your section of the camp which was the black section and most of the camps were like that. In 1945 I went to OCS at Camp Virginia. The OCS school was strictly integrated; I didn't know I was black until I looked into the mirror to shave but there was a barber shop, the barbers were black and

the first year we went there we went to that barbershop. Next time they told us that we would have to go in town and get our haircut that they didn't have the right instruments for us. Now these were black barbers segregating us. And so somebody told them that they didn't want us in here.

I got my commission in February 1945. I was made an officer and a gentleman by an act of congress. I was stationed we called it the Lower Camp at Camp Lee, Virginia. But the black officers were segregated. There was an officer's club for white officers. There was an officer's club for black officers. **The bachelor's office was quarters** was segregated. Black office in one building and white in another. The mess hall was segregated. In the mess hall there were two tables for black officers and the white officers sat at the other tables.

The post commander called all the black officers together one day and said I understand that some of you gentlemen have some grievances; if you have any grievances come to me and we'll talk about it. He said you've got to go through channels. Now if you've ever been in the army, if you know anything about the military that means if you want to go and see the general everybody gonna know that you're going there, you're company commander, battalion commander, _____ commander, there were about 55 or 60 officers at Camp Lee at the time, I think there were five of us who went to see the general. His excuse was that it wasn't him but there was some white officers who might resent the fact that black officers were sitting next to their wives in the mess hall, in the officers' mess. I said that they didn't have that problem in OCS. We did it at OCS it was no problem.

To make a long story short the next week both of the black officers on post were being shipped overseas. If they were part of a company those companies were shipped overseas. I didn't have a company; I was attached to a company so they didn't know what to do with me. The army said if you go overseas you go home for a furlough. They send me home for ten days then bring me back and put me in a holding company. They didn't know what to do so in a few weeks they send me home again for ten days. I was having a good time. I finally ended up going overseas and reaching a company – being assigned to a company that was already overseas. I went to India, I got to **Toledo**, India, the company I joined was celebrating their second year overseas. And this was a **quarter master truck** company that hauled a lot of tonnage over – we call it a hump. The army built a road over the Himalayan Mountains, joined the Burma Road so that they could carry supplies into China. Most of those truck drivers were black truck drivers because one of the good senators of the United States said at the beginning of World War II said that the black soldiers wouldn't make good fighting men. So black troops were assigned to, in World War I they called it Labor Battalions, in World War II they were Quarter Master Service Companies or Quarter Master Truck Companies or some of them had the fancy name of engineers. But they were engineers' labor battalions. If you read your history the **Elcon Highway** was built by black engineers. This was the beginning of World War II. The army was segregated.

A lot of experiences with that. Okay. How did you get your job at **Robert Moten**?

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Well I was teaching in Easton. I graduated from Bullhead; my degree was in elementary education. When I came back out of the army, I was drafted my senior year, so I had a semester to finish so I came back and finished that semester. But I decided that I would rather not teach elementary students; I would rather teach high school students and I thought I would rather teach physical education rather than anything else. I went to graduate school at New York University. The reason why I went to New York University because I could not go to University of Maryland. There were no black colleges in the state of Maryland that offered an advanced degree in physical education. So the state of Maryland paid me to study out of state. So I went to New York University and got my degree. I was teaching junior high school in Talbert County, Maryland and my good friend, the first principle of Robert Moten High School, Joey Crawford, was state supervisor of colored schools at that time. And he told me that there was going to be a vacancy in Carroll County that Arthur Neal was being drafted. He didn't call Arthur Neal's name but that's who it was. Arthur Neal was being drafted in the Army at that time. So I went to Carroll County as teacher of core, 8th grade core, 8th grade science and boys' physical education.

Now what is core?

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Core was a program that they started in the junior high school, the state of Maryland. They combined many subjects – the theory was you couldn't teach English without teaching a little arithmetic, without teaching a little science, without teaching a little – everything that you taught. So rather than having your compartmentalized high schools you'd take an area of interest and teach and discussing that area of interest you would learn all of the other skills that you needed like mathematics, like history, like science, like English. So that was the theory behind core.

Tell us about the kind of teachers they had there at Robert Moten?

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You mean when I was a student or when I came back to teach?

When you – well actually we can talk a little bit about when you were a student first and then move into when you were a teacher.

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And the same thing was true cause it hadn't changed too much when I became a teacher. Number one we had good, strong, dedicated teachers. If you think back because of segregation there were things that black youngsters could aspire to were limited. For example when I grew up I never thought that as a black youngster I could be a clerk in a grocery store because that wasn't available to me. I didn't think – I thought one of the nicest jobs anybody had was the mailman who he had a car who drove through country roads delivering mail but I didn't think I could be a mailman. I knew I couldn't be a

clerk in the bank. Those were the things that weren't available to me. So one of the nicest jobs I could get was to be a teacher. And that was true throughout this country most of the times. As I tell everybody, they say why did you become a teacher, I said well I couldn't afford to be a doctor; I wanted to be a doctor. I wasn't inclined to be a preacher. My mother said you don't need to go to school to learn how to lie so I wasn't a lawyer so there wasn't nothing else for me to do but teach. But that was one of the best jobs. If you think about it some of the best black minds in the country went into teaching during that time. And that's why we had good teachers. And we had excellent teachers as a student and we had excellent teachers when I came back as a teacher because I was one of them.

Now what was school like, a school day, when you were younger?

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Well elementary school I went to a one room elementary school that meant grades one through seven were in that same building. The school was about a mile from my house. But my family was the closest black family to the school. We was the only black family that had a lot of children. Our house was sort of magnet to the children on the way to school. In wintertime on their way to school they'd stop by our house and get warm before they took that last mile to school. And in the spring when it was warm they would stop by our house get a drink of water on the way home from school or the way to school in the morning. We got to the school and this is where you saw everybody. See because I was a mile from the school and I said we were the closest family to the school and some of the youngsters had to walk, this was before school buses. Everybody walked to school. some of these youngsters walked two and three miles and I'm talking about 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders walking two or three miles to get to elementary school. We had a one room school I said with a potbelly stove.

What was the name of the school?

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It was Whiterock Elementary School. It's a private family home now but it's located on the corner of Whiterock Road and Streaker Road. And right up the road from the school was Whiterock Church which was the church for the community. Now the building that had Whiterock School belonged to a social club, the Odd Fellows, who leased it to the Carroll County Board of Education for several years. and another thing that might be unique, all of my teachers in elementary school were men until I got to 6th or 7th grade which were the worst two years I spent in school because my sister was my teacher in the 6th and 7th grade. But all of my teachers were men up until the 6th and 7th grade.

Very different from now.

00:19:58

Very different from now.

Now when you first started the day did you have chores to do at school?

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At home I had chores. I told you – of course fortunately I had two brothers who were older than me. When they were home I didn't have much to do. See I was the little fellow and they did it. But I said we had chickens, we had pigs, we had a cow. So the first thing in the morning before you went to school you had to get up and milk that cow, you had to feed the livestock, make sure everything was comfortable. We didn't have running water. We had a well which was about 20 yards from the kitchen door and so we made sure that my mother had water in the house so she wouldn't have to go out. My father would be called a chauvinist now but there were certain things that women didn't do. One of the things that women didn't do was carry water. We had a wood stove so we had to make sure wood was cut according to how – one thing that women didn't do was cut wood; they didn't carry wood into that house. The boys did that. Of course now we didn't have to make up beds; the girls did that. but we were taught that there were certain things that women didn't do so we made sure that my mother would have everything she needed like water and wood and stuff in the house before we left for school in the morning. So we had to get to school at 9:00 so it would take 15-20 minutes, 8:30-8:40 we'd be on our way to school. Usually there was a group of us walking together. You didn't want yourself.

Since our house was the closest house to school very often the teacher that taught in that school boarded at our house. They didn't board at our house they took meals at our house which put an additional burden on me because the teacher saw my mother everyday. So I had to make sure that I hadn't done anything in school that I didn't want her to know about.

Now what about your studies at school? Did the student teach other since it was a one room school?

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One of the fortunate things about going to a one room school, for example the teacher couldn't teach everybody so she would divide the class into groups. For example she may teach the 1st and 2nd grade then she would go give the 2nd grade some seat work to do and then she would go to the 3rd grade or the 3rd and 4th grade. Well if you were in the 2nd grade when she was teaching the 3rd grade you'd hear what she was saying. Now if you got any sense at all the next year when you get to the 3rd grade you already know most of it. So that was helpful. That meant as you went along as you moved up to the 4th grade you knew about what you were supposed to do because you'd heard that from the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade. By the time you got there if you had any sense you knew what you were going to do – had to do. But that was one of the advantages.

Also I don't know if it is just – well disadvantages because school wasn't that crowded. I don't think we ever had more than 30 students at one time. I don't know if we ever had that many students at one time because there weren't that many of us living in that area. We had excellent teachers.

What was your favorite subject?

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I don't know. In elementary school I liked history. I used to like to read about wars and adventures, people going places, discovering things. I sailed the seas with Columbus and Balboa and all those people. I used to enjoy those kind of things. I think history might have been my favorite. Geography. I liked geography. I liked to study about foreign lands, foreign places.

And then you went to some of those places with the Army.

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Went to some of those places. I didn't get too many of them. My travel experience was kind of limited. I just went to – I went to India, China, I drove a jeep from India to China leading a convoy.

Now tell us about one of your most memorable teachers.

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I think perhaps – I can't claim my sister because that wouldn't be fair. Of course I remember my 1st grade teacher fondly because I was a little guy and I used to love the way he used to play with us, toss us up in the air and catch us and things like that. And my 5th grade teacher, **Ross Videy**, was a good teacher. Of course when I got to high school **George Corbet** was one of the my favorite teachers, Daisy Harris, mainly because you didn't fool around in Daisy Harris's class, and **Alonzo Mistro** who taught agriculture. In 1936 I guess it was that would have been my second year in high school the state of Maryland decided that boys in the state of Maryland needed to take vocational agriculture. We didn't take the same courses that the girls took. We took vocational agriculture and instead of taking industrial arts it was farm shop. Science was agricultural science. Everything was related to agriculture. This happened in 19, I think it was 1936. I understand that wasn't just Carroll County; I think that was statewide. When I speak of statewide remember I'm not including Baltimore City. Baltimore City Department of Education school system was strictly separate and distinct from the state of Maryland and it stayed that way for many years.

The principal – how many principals were there when you were teaching? Was there one or just two while you were teaching at Robert Moten?

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I taught at Robert Moten under three principals. When I went there Daisy Harris was the principal. And later on Francis Gates became the principal the second year – just two principals while I was there.

What can you tell me about those? What kind of character did they have? Character traits did those two principals have?

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They were typical. I kind of revered Miss Harris because she had been my teacher as a student and I came as a principal then. I was one of them just like she was; that was strange. Gates, a friend of mine, I knew Gates when he was a freshman in college. So I knew his family. At that time they were both concerned about making sure the youngsters could get the best education that they could get, that the youngsters would be the best that they could be and all of them educated us and their concern was the well being of the youngsters. At that time, teaching was a profession and one of the things that I complain about now is that teaching is a job. It wasn't a job it was a profession. It was something that you were proud of and it was something you wanted make sure you did to the best of your ability. You wanted to make sure that you were doing something to help the youngsters, you were not handicapping the youngsters you were helping them. And so that was the Daisy Harris as educators. They were dedicated educators. Those were the teachers that I ran across as a student at Robert Moten.

What was some memorable moment of anything that happened while you were teaching there?

00:30:02

One of the most memorable moments for me, I was a basketball coach and I carried a team up to **Fredericton** High School and we won the game and for a boy to beat Lincoln High School at that time would be just like Morgan beating the University of Maryland. So that was one of my most memorable moments because Robert Moten High School was one of the smallest black high schools in the state. So everybody we played were bigger than we were, had more students than we did but that was one of the most memorable moments.

Tell me about some of your players.

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I was lucky, I had some good players, I started off I guess the best player I had the first year I was there, **John McGruder** and **Louis Simms** and then I ended up with **Paul Mack**, **Calvin Joycey**, **Hayes North** and as I told some of those kids I said you guys made me look like I knew what I was doing. We had a good experience. one of the things that I enjoyed about working at Robert Moten they were all good youngsters, not every one of them was good a good youngster but most of them were good youngsters and never had any problems, I never had any problems with them because they were all – and one of the reasons I didn't have any problems because I knew them all, I knew their older brothers and I knew the parents which made a difference. They were good youngsters and it was a rewarding experience for me. I spent a lot of time. My school day started around 7:30 in the morning when I let here to head to Westminster and it might be 2:30 the next morning when I got home if it was basketball season because the nearest school that we played was 40 miles away, 30 miles away, Carver High School in **Carlson** or **Cubman** High School in Simpsonville or Lincoln High School in Frederic, or North Street High School in Hagerstown, Central Consolidated in Bellaire or **Haveitgrace** _____ grace. Those were the teams on our schedule. And all games were evening games.

Usually they were two games, girls and boys. If the first game started at 7:30 the last game probably ended at 10:00- 10:30. We had two games and then we had to get back home, the time to ride back on the bus was about an hour, close to an hour. And then when I first went to Robert Moten the attitude of most of the youngsters was if you didn't live in Westminster you couldn't play sports. I told the boys if you can get to the game I'll see it you get home. You get to practice because we had the practice in the evenings also, I'll see it you get home. Which meant after practice I would have a group of boys to take from Westminster to Newman's or Union Bridge and then I would pick up your father and _____ and head on into Baltimore. So by the time I got home from practice it might be 11:00 or 12:00 at night. And I told the youngsters I said if you're going to play basketball for me you can't stay home the day before a game, you can't stay home the day of a game and you can't stay home the day after a game. We played on Tuesday and Fridays. Now you tell me what day they could stay home.

Saturday.

But that was one of my rules because I'd been in situations where the athletes would stay home the day before a game or stay home after a game. Come to school the day of the game. To me if you're going to be a student you've got to be there everyday and being an athlete comes second. The most important is to be a student.

How was it in Carroll County with the segregated schools? Did any of them play you? Or did you try and get games with some of the white schools?

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The first year I came – well let me say this, the physical education teachers meeting was segregated. We all met together. I mean integrated. I was only black one there but we all met there. And they had a league in Carroll County and I was told that most of them had their schedules fixed when I got here. The first year I got here the only school that played me for a regular game was St. John's Catholic School. The coach at Newman's came down and we had a practice game. Over the years I was able to every now and then schedule one. The last year I was here I think I was able to play every school in the county except one. They had a tournament at **Westerboro** College, my last year here we were invited to that tournament. We lost in the first game of the tournament to a school that hadn't won a game all season. That was just the fates. The principal put two of my players off the team, my second and third best player, and your father got the schedule mixed up and he didn't get there till half time. We lost that game of the tournament. My students and their families would rather we play these other schools we been playing.

In order – the athletic program had to pay for itself. So I had to make enough money to buy uniforms. I had to make enough money to pay for officials to join the game. I had to make enough money to hire a bus to carry the team to the schools that we were playing for example. We went to Bellaire we had to hire a bus to go to Bellaire. If we went to Frederic we had to hire a bus. My only way of making that money or the major way was gate receipts so we had to charge somebody admission. So I had to have my games in the afternoon when folks got home from work so they'd be able to come to the game. That's

how we made enough money. And to supplement it we had to have a concession stand at the games. We sold hot dogs and sodas and stuff like that. So in addition to trying to coach the team I'm hustling hot dogs or sodas too to make sure the concession stand is going. Another thing we did to make money is we formed an athletic association. We sold memberships to the athletic association. I don't know how much it was but it wasn't a lot of money but if you had a card to the athletic association you got into the games at half price. It also if you were a member of the athletic association we had a recreation night every Thursday at the school and we sold hot dogs and sodas and put on records so you could dance and eat hot dogs and sodas which made some money so I would have enough money to hire officials for the game or to hire the bus or pay for the uniforms.

Now did other schools have to do that? The white schools or was theirs in the budget?

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I don't know. I suspect that they did because the superintendent told me and I don't think that was just for me. He said to me when I came to Carroll County he said I didn't hire a coach; I hired a physical education teacher. So for athletics everything you use you have to pay for yourself. He said it's all right to use that basketball for physical education so I'm sure some of the other counties paid – I think Baltimore County did. See Baltimore County had a rule that I think they couldn't start a game after 5:30 so they wanted their games early in the afternoon. I had a good friend who coached at **Bantitha** High School in **Capersville** so we worked out an arraignment because I said I can't – I got to make enough money when you come to my school to buy the bus to go to your school. so we made an arrangement he would come with two games, the girls' game would start at 5:25 so by the time the girls game was over the boys' game started it would be time for the folks who had gotten home from work they could come buy tickets to see.

What advice would you give to young black people today after all these experiences that you've had? What advice would you give to them to be successful in life?

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That's a hard question. I think what I would say is number one you do the best you can at what you do and if you don't do well the only person you can blame is yourself. Nobody else is going to stop you from doing well. You can do well whatever you want to do and if you don't do well the only person you can look to is yourself.

Thank you. Is there anything else that I missed that –

00:42:02

No. I don't think so. I think. . . we have these programs on the black experience but I think one of the things that should come out of all of this is that despite of all the segregation and everything we all went through but the bottom line is we're not too much different. And my father had the same wishes and the same desires for his family as that white farmer who had that big farm next door to us had for his family. And I think that's the bottom line. All in all we're not that much too different. And we've got to stop looking at black folks as a monolithic group. We're just as different as we are alike.

My advice to youngsters is look you do the best you can and if you don't do well it's nobody's fault but yours.

Thank you very much.

00:43:21

I hope I said something worthwhile.

It was great, wasn't it?

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