

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Albert Charles Odell, Sr.      **COLLECTION:** 4700.1020

**IDENTIFICATION:** Baton Rouge native; McKinley High School and Grambling State University graduate; U.S. Army veteran; Retired speech and drama teacher

**INTERVIEWER:** Emily Smith

**SERIES:** McKinley High School Oral History Project - Baton Rouge Bus Boycott

**INTERVIEW DATE:** June 28, 1998

**FOCUS DATES:** 1940s-1990s

**ABSTRACT:**

**Tape 1505, Side A**

Introduction; born in 1922 between Baton Rouge and Bel, Louisiana; lived and taught in East Baton Rouge Parish, 1951 to 1968; was first black teacher in the city of Torrance, California in 1968; while in California, directed TV movie called *Robert Smalls Story*; in 1969, returned to Baton Rouge, married Mary Orleane Green, and worked for Bill Dodd in the Louisiana State Board of Education; was first black federal supervisor over Title I programs in the state of Louisiana; lost board of education job after Louis Michot beat Dodd in superintendent election; Michot initially told Odell he could keep his job, but then sent a letter terminating him; Odell had a family to support, his field is speech and drama, so he worked with politicians to prepare them for TV and radio; was first black to run for the school board in East Baton Rouge Parish and narrowly lost to white candidate, George Richard; supported Ossie Brown in district attorney race against Sargent Pitcher, "a stone racist"; Odell accepted job as Brown's administrative assistant, the first time that this position existed; worked as chief deputy for Independent Order of Foresters from 1975 to 1993; made home visits to candidates for membership in the Foresters; Foresters came to Louisiana in 1975 once the state accepted the integrated chapter; wife Mary from Bayou Goula, Louisiana, graduated from Southern University in home economics, interned in dietetics in Boston; integrating the city of Torrance, where the city's founders "had stipulated in the constitution that there would be no land sold to blacks"; while back in Louisiana visiting, accepted Bill Dodd's job offer as supervisor of Title I programs; very popular with his students at West High School in Torrance where he started as a substitute; was hard to accept job in Louisiana and leave his students, many of whom had transferred to study with him; wife's education and career trajectory, culminating in position as foods inspector for hospitals and nursing homes; Mary is his second wife, they have two children; his first wife, Edith Lorene Jackson, was a classmate at Grambling State University; names and careers of his eight children; decision to not move his daughter, Yivette, to the integrated school; origin of his two youngest children's names; his eight children are daughters Yivette, Carla, and Sylvia, and sons Albert Jr.,

Reginald, Kevin, Cascio, and Creon; Odell's mother, Olivia Sweeny, was a housewife; his father, Henry, was a Baptist minister who founded St. Mary Baptist Church in Baton Rouge; Henry Odell passed away in 1945; description of family home in New Bird Station neighborhood of Baton Rouge circa 1953; current home he had built in 1984 furnished by his wife's purchases;

### **Tape 1505, Side B**

Odell did not allow his children to ride the bus in Baton Rouge because he found it difficult to explain why seating was segregated; his niece took Yvette, on a bus once, she didn't understand why she couldn't sit with her white friend; riding the bus when he came back from World War II, "six battle stars to my name. I felt I should not be dictated to where I should sit"; returning from the service with a white friend, a downtown Baton Rouge restaurant wouldn't serve him; incident where he refused to sit in back of bus and got in a physical fight with bus driver who called him "boy" and was armed with a blackjack; on hiring of law enforcement in Baton Rouge "at one time, if you hadn't killed a black man, you didn't get a job"; incident in high school when he and Alex Haysbert refused to sit in the back of the bus and demanded their money back; his mother worried about his refusal to comply with segregation laws, discouraged him from acting out; disgust at seeing helpless children spat on by racists when schools were integrated in New Orleans; sent Yvette to California so she wouldn't be a guinea pig for integration in Baton Rouge; Mayor Woody Dumas and black leaders collaborated to integrate Picadilly restaurant and Baton Rouge High School without incident; black bus drivers set up their own bus line; striking white bus drivers found a way to prevent blacks from driving; hard for blacks to get to their jobs; disappointed with the compromise Dr. Theodore Jemison made to end the boycott, "he sold out too soon"; general disappointment in the black community over Jemison's compromise; many blacks feared retaliation or being fired if they spoke out at that time; ministers and the self-employed could afford to be active in the movement with no fear of being fired; he knows about bus boycott meeting from news, TV, speaking with friends; deep-seated prejudice of whites who enjoyed the comfort of black help since slavery times; story of his grandfather leaving plantation near Vicksburg, Mississippi, around time of Emancipation Proclamation; the overseer shot himself rather than facing free blacks; "the average white, it has not occurred to them what it means to be free. They've had freedom all their lives"; his father was poor but made sure his children got education; lots of money was collected at bus boycott mass meetings; his friendship with Alex Haysbert, who was one of Jemison's bodyguards; Haysbert's current health problems; doesn't want speculate on rumors about what happened to funds collected during bus boycott, "as far as I was concerned, it had to be spent for a beneficial purpose"; general unhappiness with outcome of bus boycott, blacks should have been able to sit anywhere on the bus for the same fare; he doesn't think it was an effective job, he wanted complete equality; his educated peers were all also dissatisfied with outcome; his friends Haysbert, Freddie Greene, and Gilbert Curry were some of Jemison's bodyguards; conjecture on how they came to work with Jemison;

### **Tape 1506, Side A**

Football careers of Greene, Haysbert, and Curry; Haysbert's post-football career; Jemison selected them as bodyguards through some relationship; mixed legacy of boycott, he had hoped for complete equality; understanding that "coming together in some cases meant retaliation, in other cases it didn't"; Mayor Dumas eased integration of schools in Baton Rouge, prohibited anyone from congregating around schools; his admiration for Dumas, who was straight and

diplomatic; integration problems came from within schools, from faculty, principals, and other students; attorney Johnnie Jones standing up for his son at his school; on Southern University students who marched to the State Capitol: "I know of kids who were gassed, and the dogs were sicked on"; trying to keep his son away from the demonstration, because "that white man with those billy clubs . . . he doesn't look at the age of a child"; situation with police is better now than it was in 1950s and 1960s; councils his son to have proper identification and insurance, abide by the law; politicians like Newt Gingrich who want to send black people back into slavery, "but it can't be done"; average black that goes for a job has to be much better qualified than his white counterpart; black youth are more likely to be charged criminally over minor offenses that whites would get away with, later may face incarceration and lessened educational opportunities; discrimination in criminal justice system places blacks at a disadvantage; "one little offense . . . will develop into something else;" problem is nationwide; awful murder of James Byrd, Jr., in Texas and popularity of David Duke in Louisiana show that racism is still a very big problem; Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas voted against affirmative action though he owes his job to it; welfare dependency destroys black and white people; black children need to have the same opportunities as white children, and need stable home environments that allow them to "see straight rather than being afraid to look over your shoulder"; wars have helped some black men get more opportunities; "after I went and fought and came back, I felt the government owed me some things they refused to give me"; revisits memory of being denied service in a restaurant with a white friend, it made him furious; joined service in 1942; buzz bomb raid in London left him blind for five weeks; was attached to the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry upon his release because his engineering unit had moved on; recounts experience in D-Day Invasion, being fired upon by German forces; 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry was overwhelmingly white and he was one of only eighteen black soldiers attached; remembers General Patton's announcement at Rhine River Bridge; "I'm going to cross this bridge if I have to send a truckload of dog tags back home"; many GIs lost their lives there; attached to 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry but segregated in tents;

### **Tape 1506, Side B**

Massacre of all-black tank unit in Germany in World War II; recent PBS documentary on World War II did not include black soldiers; no recognition of contribution of Tuskegee Airmen; many blacks died whose contributions were never recognized; Odell describes part of the plot of a play called *River to Bayou* that he published in 1964, based on his experience coming home from World War II, and feeling that "you don't solve a problem by running"; the play premiered at Grambling; his novel, *Convicted Before Trial*, is based on his experiences working in public education in post-war Louisiana; was leery of accepting an offer from someone in Hollywood to buy the story; worried they would change it too much; his niece was in movie based on Ernest Gaines' book *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*; declined other big money offers for his story because he's got a lot of pride; description of family novel he is writing based on his grandfather's and father's lives; taking a trip to Bel, Louisiana, to try to research his father's life; luckily met several people in Bel who shared their memories of his father, whom they called the "Indian chief preacher"; was interested to learn that black, whites, and Indians coexisted in Bel in the early 1900s; his father's job as a mail catcher in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi; his wife was instrumental in helping him trace his father's past to Bel; father's relationship with Odell's second oldest brother; his friend has been the constable in Bel since 1983; Odell outlines restrictions: no financial profit from his story but may be used for research purposes; conclusion.

**TAPES:** 2 (T1505, T1506)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 2 hours, 53 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 81 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Correspondence; Biographical sketch; Index (3 pgs); Obituary

**RESTRICTIONS:** None – prior restrictions outlined by Odell at the time of this interview have expired due to his passing in 2012.