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Iron Hill School Oral History Interview

Interview with Sandra Lewis Johnson

- Roberta: This is Roberta Perkins, June 8th, 2006 and I am about to interview Mrs. Sandra Lewis Johnson, Mrs. Lewis' daughter. Mrs. Johnson I am going to start by asking you if you would give, for the tape, your full name including your maiden name.
- Sandra: My name is Sandra Olivia Johnson and my maiden name is Sandra Olivia Lewis.
- Roberta: When were you born?
- Sandra: I was born in 1951 in Elkton, Maryland.
- Roberta: Can you give me, just for the tape, a little bit about who your parents were and I know you wrote down who your siblings were but if you could just name them on the tape.
- Sandra: My father's name was Ernest Albert Lewis, Senior and my mother's name was Edith Beatrice Miller Lewis. My oldest sister was Freda, we called her Bootsie, my oldest brother is Ernest, we called him Junior, his next brother is Clifford, we call him Ray, then Don, then Rosetta, then Wilma, then Richie, then myself, then Marva is the baby. She is the youngest of all.
- Roberta: What years did you attend Iron Hill?
- Sandra: I went to Iron Hill from 1957 to 1961.
- Roberta: When did the school year begin and end?
- Sandra: I think the school year began in September through June.
- Roberta: What was the school day like? How do you remember the day starting, during the school and that kind of thing?
- Sandra: We always started the school out with the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag and said the prayer and then we went into our class. Well each class had its own little row. The first grade was in a row. The second grade was in a row. The third grade and the fourth grade in a row. It only went to the four grades. We always started out with the Pledge of Allegiance to the

flag and the prayer. I remember on Wednesdays we always had Bible school. We had to go to the Congo's house for Bible classes. That pretty much was the day outside of recess. I really loved the recess going outside to play.

Roberta: For you what was it like on Iron Hill? I mean how did you like your experience there?

Sandra: I really liked going there. I thought it was nice. It wasn't that many children that went there so we didn't have large classes or anything. I can't really remember the exact number but many eight, nine or ten kids at the most in my class. In the whole school I bet there wasn't no more than maybe thirty kids in the whole school itself from the first through the fourth grade at the time I went.

Roberta: You said each row was a class.

Sandra: Yes.

Roberta: At any time were there more students than could accommodate a row? Were there more students than there was space?

Sandra: I don't remember there being more students than there was space.

Roberta: We haven't heard this before, tell me a little bit about the Bible classes. This was something that happened during school?

Sandra: Yes.

Roberta: And this was held at the Congos?

Sandra: Yes.

Roberta: Do you know what the origins of that, when did that start?

Sandra: I really don't know when it started. I can't remember if we went by the bus to the house or how we got from the school to the house or whether we were taken by a car. All I know is we were transported from the school, went over to the Congo house, had the Bible classes and then we came back to school.

Roberta: Was this once a week? Every day?

Sandra: Once a week.

Roberta: It was always on the same day, the same time?

Sandra: Always on the same day, the same time.

Roberta: Which day was that?

Sandra: I think it was a Wednesday.

Roberta: And how long?

Sandra: It would last maybe about an hour and we came on back to the school.

Roberta: Who was your teacher?

Sandra: My teacher for those four years was Miss Minnie Ryder.

Roberta: And the school day was how long? What was the time?

Sandra: I think it had to be about eight to four I believe. Because when I went to Middletown the time was much earlier so I think we started at seven during that time so I remember getting up earlier going to Middletown than what we did to go to Iron Hill so I am thinking eight to four,

Roberta: The books that you used, just the materials that you used for your class lessons, what kind of condition were they in and also did the school have a library that you remember?

Sandra: We had library books. We didn't have anything set aside just for a library but we did have books on the side on a shelf and I guess we had like the basic readers and math books and things like that.

Roberta: Outside of school, well I know you had homework, how much reading did you do on your own outside of school, outside of your homework?

Sandra: I don't think I did any. I didn't care for reading too much. When we got home from school we went outside and worked around the yard.

Roberta: So you had chores?

Sandra: Yes we had chores, most of the time it was just playing because there was a lot of woods around here so we just played out in the woods and up and down and then my grandmother and them lived right next door so we were always up there helping them on the farm or working.

Roberta: Let me go back to inside the school again, you know, the school day. For lunch, what did you do for lunches?

Sandra: I believe we always packed a lunch. I think we took something every day.

- Roberta: So by the time you were in school there was no cooking done at the school?
- Sandra: No.
- Roberta: Okay, that was earlier on then. Actually you were beginning to recite for me, tell me kind of what the school day was like so let me let you kind of go back to that. Any little thing that you remember. Did you go into the school as you came to school or was there a gathering time? Were you outside and the teacher said to wait and then everybody came in at the same time or you just came in when you got to school?
- Sandra: We all pretty much rode on the same bus so therefore we all went into the school at the same time. There was a time to start when we got into the school. You know we all had to get to our desks and get ready for it to begin and because there was the four classes and the one teacher a lot of times she would designate one of the other students to head this class while she did this class. So sometimes some of the other kids would head up the other classes, some of the smarter kids you know would head up the class or something like that while she was taking care of the other classes. I just remember the recesses we would go out on the ball field and play ball and ride the Giant Ride, called the Giant Ride, it would take you high in the air and the see-saw and different rides we had. All I can remember is the playing part of the school.
- Roberta: What was the Janis ride again?
- Sandra: It was a pole that had a lot of chains. Maybe eight chains going all the way around it and you would swing around. We would wrap each other and swing one person real high in the air.
- Roberta: Did anybody get hurt?
- Sandra: No. I can't recall anybody being hurt on that.
- Roberta: Was that something that you sat on or just held on.
- Sandra: Held on by two hands. If you were brave enough you could hold on with one hand. Some of them did they hold on with one hand and they would go flying high in the air.

- Roberta: What were special activities that might have happened either on a weekly basis or once a year you know, that kind of thing?
- Sandra: We would always have a May Day out there in the yard so that was the only special thing that I can recall and that was always in May. I can't remember who actually came, if a lot of the parents came or how it was conducted.
- Roberta: Who took care of the school?
- Sandra: I can't remember. Like cutting the grass and janitor work?
- Roberta: Yes. At that point did the state provide somebody to take care of the school inside? Cutting grass, maintenance, repairs or was that somebody from the community?
- Sandra: I was too young to even think about any of that so I don't really know.
- Roberta: Tests. I know you guys had tests.
- Sandra: I guess we had tests every quarter. Once the semester was over we would go through the testing. Maybe every week, I don't remember.
- Roberta: The school down the road from Iron Hill I think at one time it was an all white school, was it still? If you come this way towards Pleasant Valley there is a building on the left hand side so it probably wasn't a school by that time.
- Sandra: You speaking on the corner?
- Roberta: Yes, from Iron Hill.
- Sandra: No it wasn't a school.
- Roberta: I think it is a residence now.
- Sandra: I think when mother and them was younger it was a school.
- Roberta: You said Miss Minnie Ryder was your teacher. How would you describe her – what was she like as a teacher?
- Sandra: She was a nice teacher. I liked her. I know one thing she was afraid of snakes. At that school we always had a lot of snakes there/ I think there still is.
- Roberta: You know there might be because when Laura had to do an inventory of the school to get it ready for grants and all that kind of thing and she said

they went down in the crawl space and she described it and she said there were a lot of snakes.

Sandra: Yes. She was petrified of them snakes.

Roberta: Was the woods close to the school?

Sandra: Yes.

Roberta: Was it pretty much like it is now?

Sandra: Yes, pretty much like it is now.

Roberta: So how did you know that she was afraid of them, was there a time when a snake would make its appearance?

Sandra: Yes. I think there was one in the pump room of somewhere one time and oh she just threw a fit. They had to get somebody in the school to get it out of the room and everything. Actually I think some of the boys I guess got it out because boys did those kind of things. There wasn't a day go by we didn't see maybe two or three snakes inside. Even playing on the ball field. I remember I was playing ball one time and I dropped the bat and somebody said lookout for the snake, right by my feet, and I jumped up and the snake jumped up at the same time I mean it just missed me by that much. Those snakes were terrible.

Roberta: So were they poisonous snakes?

Sandra: No. Not that I know of anyway. I don't think Delaware had poisonous snakes at that time. Little black snakes and little brown snakes. They might have had the water moccasin but I don't think they came around the school.

Roberta: What about discipline at the school? Was there a problem with that? Did the teacher have problems with discipline or did they pretty much stay focused on their school work?

Sandra: I don't remember anybody ever getting a beating because you know at that time they could beat you so I don't remember anybody getting a beatin'. Everybody I guess was pretty much focused on getting their work done and playing and going home,

Roberta: Did anybody play pranks that you remember?

- Sandra: I don't remember any pranks either.
- Roberta: Was the weather for transportation – going back and forth to school - was that a problem? You said a lot of the folks, most everybody, came on the bus rather than walk. So that wasn't a problem for you? The weather?
- Sandra: No it wasn't never no problem. We went through deep snow and everything. We always went to school. The bus was always there.
- Roberta: Do you remember some of the games at recess that you played?
- Sandra: Dodge ball and baseball. I don't recall any other games. Outside of playing on the things that was out there, the rides and seesaw and sliding boards and stuff like that.
- Roberta: Did you have teams like baseball?
- Sandra: No.
- Roberta: So was it teams for girls and boys?
- Sandra: We all played together. You picked the people you wanted on your team and that was it.
- Roberta: Did you ever have teams from visiting schools, did you ever have competitions?
- Sandra: No
- Roberta: One of the things that I wanted to ask you was about holiday celebrations at the school. What do you remember if the school had any holiday celebrations, special events or that kind of thing.
- Sandra: I don't recall anything at the school for the holidays.
- Roberta: What about the community? Did the community use the school for any events?
- Sandra: I don't think so. I don't remember anything going on at the school at all. If there was we really didn't have too much transportation at that time so I really can't recall anything going on.
- Roberta: What about health care? Was there a visiting nurse? That came to the school that you can remember? I know I am really pushing it because you were a really young kid.

- Sandra: I remember going to Middletown to get our teeth done and I can't remember what grade – that may have been the third or fourth grades or something.
- Roberta: Was that every year for you or just those two years?
- Sandra: Yes. Just once a year, it may have been earlier too but I can't remember earlier. I remember later on we went to Middletown. I think some of the health services would take us to Middletown and we would get our teeth done and come on back.
- Roberta: And that was paid by the State?
- Sandra: Yes.
- Roberta: So what if somebody had an accident or they got cut or hurt was there ever any think like that you had to bring them to the hospital for?
- Sandra: I can't recall anything like that ever happening.
- Roberta: What did the school look like inside that you remember? If you are looking at the front of the school from your desk, do you remember what was on the wall or around the room?
- Sandra: All I remember is the windows on the side and then the stove when you go in there was the bathrooms and the pump room and I remember a little room to the back when you go in all the way to the back on the right there was a little room back in the corner and it had a door where you go out on that side door.
- Roberta: Was there a door there because it is open now?
- Sandra: I remember she had a piano there because Miss Ryder loved to play the piano and she always had her piano on that side once in a while she would let us go over there and we would fool around on the piano and play Mary Had A Little Lamb, little songs like that on it, that's all we knew. Other than that I don't remember too much else about the room.
- Roberta: Did she ever teach or help the students with music or piano if you showed an interest like that?

- Sandra: I think some of them she did but most of the day was spent teaching each grade you know you didn't have enough time to learn anything extra. There wasn't no music classes or nothing like that.
- Roberta: Do you think that helped the students when they were asked to help other students while she was working with another part of the class? I guess what I am saying the student that was doing the assistant teaching, do you think that helped them? Did you do any of that?
- Sandra: No. I wasn't an outspoken person, I sat back and let everybody else do everything. I am trying to think of the ones that did, well I guess they are no better or no further than what I am today. It may have helped them with the way they look at it so I don't know.
- Roberta: Like you said they are probably a little more outspoken than you are. What do you remember about the community in general you know, around Iron Hill, you know, when you were a student there? Again I am remembering that you were a young age and it might not have impressed you. You didn't really live in the general area, is that right?
- Sandra: I lived right here.
- Roberta: So that's further down.
- Sandra: But we would walk up on Iron Hill because we knew all the people. On this road here there wasn't many houses so in order to be around people and friends we had to walk to them so we walked up on Iron Hill and visit some of the people we went to school with, you know, that we knew. Everybody was fairly friendly you know we've never had no problems since I have been growing up here as far as race is concerned, nothing like that.
- Roberta: I get that a lot. People try to work together to try to get along. When you left Iron Hill and went to Middletown what was it like for you? Was school life drastically different?
- Sandra: No.
- Roberta: You would be like in the fifth grade, right?

- Sandra: Yes. Fifth grade, right and then there was more students in the class of course but it wasn't too much of a difference.
- Roberta: Did anybody give you a hard time?
- Sandra: No, like I said I was always quiet and set back and said nothing and not cause no problems.
- Roberta: Did you miss Iron Hill?
- Sandra: No I was actually glad to be going to school where my brothers and sisters did.
- Roberta: So there were probably more activities to do.
- Sandra: Right and because we were so far from Middletown we couldn't get involved with anything. You know what I mean? If they had games and stuff like that we couldn't go, cheerleading and things, we couldn't go so we didn't get involved with anything. We didn't have no transportation. It was quite a ways from here to Middletown. I started going to school every day and back. That was basically it.
- Roberta: So that was a happy time for you when you could go to school with your brothers and sisters were around.
- Sandra: Well they were in higher grades. When I was in the fifth grade I think Richie was in high school but the high school part, they were in a different section where they had to switch classes and everything.
- Sandra: I was looking at these (absent) while I was at Middletown I think I missed one day there and no days that year and no days that year so we pretty much went every day. We didn't miss a lot of days out of school.
- Roberta: Yes, that's what I've been hearing. Students, for the most part, went to school.
- Sandra: Yes.
- Roberta: There was no missing school.
- Sandra: Not unless you were really sick. You didn't miss just to be out.
- Roberta: When you went to Middletown were there white teachers? Did you start having that experience where there were white and black students?

- Sandra: Middletown was all black. There was no whites there at all. Louis L. Redding. No, the other Middletown High School they had the white and we went to the black schools
- Roberta: You probably still have the same kinds of sense of community in school, for lack of a better word?
- Sandra: Yes. I didn't experience going to school with the white people until I went to Christiana High School. That was in my ninth grade.
- Roberta: So what was that experience like for you?
- Sandra: It was fairly good. I didn't have no problems or anything there either. I went there from the ninth through the twelfth grade. I never experienced anyone calling me names or anything like that.
- Roberta: I'm trying to think if I want to ask you this question. I've asked several other people about it – it's just segregation. If segregation had remained and you had the same quality of teachers you know and the same atmosphere you know that you had do you think that the quality of the education would have been the same all through your school years? Does that make sense? It's a hard one to answer.
- Sandra: Yes that is a hard one to answer. Sometimes I look back at like going to Christiana how sometimes like I wanted to take a Spanish class at Christiana and they told me I couldn't do it. They said the classes were too full so they put me into a Latin class which was very hard you know what I mean? It was like I was sure to fail it so that was just like a whole year wasted of taking a class of what they knew I would fail to begin with. You know it was like I couldn't do what I wanted to do but this advisor was here telling me I had to do this and I had to do that because I wasn't going to college anyway. This is the thought they were telling me you know where perhaps if I went to a different school I may have been encouraged to go to college, you know, to do something different.
- Roberta: Did you find that the counselors at Christiana were helpful at all or was the experience that you just related an extension of that?

Sandra: At that time I was thinking that they were helping but then when you look back at it I think a lot of it they could have helped me better considering that I came from a different nationality. Their basis was on white kids getting to college instead of what I could do myself so I think probably I would have ...

End of Tape 1 side 1.

Tape 1 side 2.

Roberta: We had some finishing remarks from Mrs. Johnson. The front side of the tape cut you off. Did you want to continue that one thought that you were sharing about being pointed in a direction that you thought was not helpful to you.

Sandra: No. Well when I think back of it now you know, at that time I didn't know no better, I just thought I was being pointed in the right direction. Maybe I could have advanced even more.

Roberta: Because Spanish was more of an interest for you than Latin, is that right?

Sandra: Yes. Then the next year I took French, which still they were telling me I couldn't take French.

Roberta: That's too bad. Spanish is something that just about everybody speaks now.

Sandra: Yes it is.

Roberta: Mrs. Johnson thanks very much. If you have any other thoughts you want to share with the project about your experience as a student at Iron Hill or even just the general community, the general Iron Hill community. I'll give you a couple of minutes here to think about it.

Sandra: No, I think that is basically it. I like living around here and being around here. Everything is so peaceful and quiet. Nobody really bothers me you know. The church we go to has been there I think 178 years this year so we are pretty much involved in the church and everything. I am the secretary of the church and we have different programs and everything so other than that.

- Roberta: Is there a church history written somewhere so that people know, the members and just anybody that might want to know? I mean when you start having a church that is over 100 years old there is a history and it gets pretty interesting, any organization or building.
- Sandra: We was having a church anniversary every year and we have the history read and everything about the church and some of the people in the church so it is written somewhere.
- Roberta: Just kind of a thought one of the churches in town have created a museum, they have artifacts of old mother church the Mother A.U.M.P. Church.
- Sandra: We used to be A.U.M.P.
- Roberta: Is that right?
- Sandra: Yes. We got out of the conference, so did they.
- Roberta: Conference, that's the word.
- Sandra: Yes, they got out and we got out
- Roberta: Pat Butler is the curator, I guess she is the one that started that. That whole museum they have there. That's my grandmother's church. My grandmother went to that church so I learned a little bit about the history of that church through her. If you ever get in town, if you ever get to go it is really neat.
- Sandra: It's right there at the church?
- Roberta: It's right there I forget which hall. I'm trying to think now if I remember correctly (this doesn't need to go on the tape, anyway) its right there when you go in the main doors before you go to the sanctuary you keep going back in a hall and you turn right. Its kind of in the hallway there on the far side when you go in the main doors. It's very interesting. It's worth it. Maybe that's a project you all might want to start for your church.
- Sandra: Yes because we keep in contact with the Mother Church, all the churches that was in the conference and got out of the conference, we keep in contact with all of them. Its hard doing it on your own. The hardest thing is trying to get a good pastor so once you get one in there you try and hold on to them.

Roberta: That's interesting. I think I have worn you folks out. I appreciate your time. I am going to end the interview at this point. This is the end of tape 1, side 2. Thanks a lot, I appreciate it.