

00:00:00:08 - 00:00:15:11

Tonia Merideth

Thank you for joining us for an oral history interview for the museum exhibit, "A Better Life for Their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools that Changed America." Please state your name and the school that you attended.

00:00:15:13 - 00:00:26:26

Mary Anne Fletcher

Mary Anne Fletcher. I attended the school in Hayes, Virginia, and Bena, Virginia.

00:00:26:29 - 00:00:37:16

Tonia Merideth

Thank you. So we like to get a little bit of background about our narrators. Could you please tell us about your family? Your mom and dad, any siblings that you have?

00:00:37:19 - 00:01:18:15

Mary Anne Fletcher

My mother's name is Laura Ellen Carter Jackson, and she was born in Middlesex County, and my father was Abraham Lincoln Jackson the First, maybe Second. And I have three brothers, Abraham L. Jackson, Randolph L. Jackson, Leon Jackson, and Rudolph. And between that probably my mom had a twin. Randolph had a twin. So when Rudolph was born, when the next boy was born, she named him Rudolph.

00:01:18:17 - 00:01:37:10

Mary Anne Fletcher

And there are four of us. Laura Ellen Jackson, Mary Anne Jackson, Shirley Jackson, and Marion Jackson. So it's four girls, three boys.

00:01:37:12 - 00:01:42:04

Tonia Merideth

Can you tell us any special memories that you have about your childhood?

00:01:42:06 - 00:02:09:12

Mary Anne Fletcher

Well, I was coming up from about maybe four, I recall that as the others were born, like my sister Shirley was born, I remember I had to take care of her and hold her and all. We had a wood stove. And I do recall on the wood stove, and I had that responsibility of trying to take care of her and do something else.

00:02:09:15 - 00:02:28:09

Mary Anne Fletcher

She stepped out of my lap and fell by the stove and my mom didn't like that. And she'd punish me. But I did take care of her. And then Rudolph. And Mary. So we had the responsibility of taking care of our siblings as they were born.

00:02:28:21 - 00:02:33:25

Tonia Merideth

So among your siblings, were you the oldest or in the middle or the last?

00:02:33:27 - 00:02:49:14

Mary Anne Fletcher

The oldest was Abraham L. Jackson and I think now he'll be 92 years old. It was Abraham, Randolph, Laura, then me, so I was fourth. The fourth in line.

00:02:49:16 - 00:02:51:04

Tonia Merideth

Okay. thank you.

00:02:51:06 - 00:02:52:23

Mary Anne Fletcher

Gracias.

00:02:52:26 - 00:02:58:06

Tonia Merideth

So first could you tell me what was a typical day like attending the Rosenwald school?

00:02:58:08 - 00:03:24:01

Mary Anne Fletcher

Well, we caught the bus. We'd walk from our house to the end of the street, to a place called, his store was Jack Jones. And that's where we caught the bus. We arrive at school. I don't know what time it was, but probably 8 o'clock or nine. And once we get to school, we had the choice with various people.

00:03:24:01 - 00:03:45:17

Mary Anne Fletcher

We had various choices, had to go out in the coalhouse, get some coal, bring it in the school and make fire. But while I was out in the coalhouse, I thought I'd play around a little bit. I was just - I didn't think coal was that black. They would get all over you in smut. So I played around with it.

00:03:45:20 - 00:04:04:05

Mary Anne Fletcher

Then it was too much. The bucket was too heavy. I thought I would sit down on the bucket and rest a while. So when we'd get up, we'd always pull our dress up and really, so you won't get your clothes messed up. But the underpiece got really black. So I come in the school. I was smutty black. Soot all over.

00:04:04:07 - 00:04:39:27

Mary Anne Fletcher

They didn't even wipe your face and all. So during the day it was smutty too, you know? And we had to make the fire and our choices was that day every day. So we just had the various things to do. And then of course, we had lunch. We had to have - we carried biscuit whenever my mum put in our lunch, whether it was two guys at school in Harry Stokes and Jimmy Stokes, they would make fun of us because their parents, they were brighter children too, brighter skinned children and their parents was much little better than my parents.

00:04:40:00 - 00:05:03:24

Mary Anne Fletcher

And they would tease me about our food. So I decided, "Don't be a bully" at that young age. I took - the next day, they brought their nice sandwiches to school and I bought that biscuit, which was better. I took the sandwich and gave them half of the biscuit and they stopped teasing me about that one. So that's it for that.

00:05:03:26 - 00:05:06:08

Tonia Merideth

Would you get in trouble by the teacher for behavior?

00:05:06:10 - 00:05:17:27

Mary Anne Fletcher

No, because it, - no, because the teacher never knew. If they told, if they would tell her, I'd take their whole lunch. So there was never told. I never heard anything about it.

00:05:17:29 - 00:05:25:24

Tonia Merideth

What about being dirty from the coal. Did the teacher ever say anything to you about coming in the classroom dirty?

00:05:25:28 - 00:05:53:27

Mary Anne Fletcher

She'd say, "Don't sit down on the coal, 'cause you'll be smutty." So I think they gave us something to wipe our hands off, because in school, once you get into school, you had to put your hands on the desk. You must have a napkin or a handkerchief. A handkerchief. And make sure that you're clean and look good. And that was very important that your - that your personality.

00:05:53:27 - 00:06:17:24

Mary Anne Fletcher

And your hygiene - personal hygiene - look so very nice - smell good. And if you didn't, I think they must had a way of doing things because there was no running water. We had a pump outside the house, the school, we pump water. Yeah it was a pump. You had to get water like that. But somehow in some way we made it.

00:06:17:26 - 00:06:18:28

Mary Anne Fletcher

Yes.

00:06:19:00 - 00:06:22:17

Tonia Merideth

Do you remember what year did you begin attending in.

00:06:22:19 - 00:06:24:25

Mary Anne Fletcher

1947.

00:06:24:28 - 00:06:27:12

Tonia Merideth

And did you have - where were your bathroom facilities?

00:06:27:14 - 00:06:58:00

Mary Anne Fletcher

Outside. It was an outside pivot. It was called a toilet and it had two seats and a flap down to keep the flies and all that kind of stuff buzzing around you while you're sitting on the pivot and the commode and you can hear the fly - funny. You hear the flies buzzing around you and I don't know sometimes if they ran out of tissue paper, you had to use whatever there was like newspaper.

00:06:58:03 - 00:07:05:04

Mary Anne Fletcher

You rub it together, make it soft, you wipe your behunkus with that. It's not behunkus, it's wipe your butt with that.

00:07:05:07 - 00:07:10:29

Tonia Merideth

Do you have any memories, special memories of a specific teacher that you had?

00:07:11:01 - 00:07:32:17

Mary Anne Fletcher

Mrs. ... Wall and maybe Miss Louise Stokes, Miss Louise. Dabney. Her name wasn't Stokes. I think her name was Louise Stokes. and Ms. Jacqueline Forster. Yes.

00:07:32:20 - 00:07:38:06

Tonia Merideth

And do you remember in school? How was discipline handled?

00:07:38:09 - 00:08:12:19

Mary Anne Fletcher

Very nice. You - anything you wanted, you must raise hand for that. You don't speak out of turn. You must be very disciplined, disci - that word. Some words we cannot pronounce so very well. Now I'm in speech therapy for some words. So some of the words we can't pronounce. But you had to be very obedient in school. And listen, no clowning around.

00:08:12:22 - 00:08:14:16

Mary Anne Fletcher

It's time to learn.

00:08:14:18 - 00:08:18:18

Tonia Merideth

And if you didn't - if you did misbehave in school, did they spank?

00:08:18:23 - 00:08:29:10

Mary Anne Fletcher

I think they made us stand up at the border in the corner. Or I think that's what they think they did.

00:08:29:12 - 00:08:34:13

Tonia Merideth

Do you remember starting out the school day saying an oath? A pledge of allegiance?

00:08:34:15 - 00:09:29:01

Mary Anne Fletcher

Yes, I, every morning I would say "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands. One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." And we'd say, "Holy, holy, holy," sing, "holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty early in the morning the sun should rise to thee. Holy, holy, holy Lord, God, Almighty. God in three persons, Blessed Trinity."

00:09:29:03 - 00:09:41:08

Tonia Merideth

But were there any responsibilities that you had to perform while you were going for school? Different responsibilities, maybe for the girls, then the boys? Were the boys given chores to bring the coal in? Or.

00:09:41:10 - 00:09:50:25

Mary Anne Fletcher

They had the - maybe had - I had a choice maybe one day, me and a group and then next day another group like that. That's how we kept the fire going all day. Yes.

00:09:50:27 - 00:09:55:03

Tonia Merideth

And then you touched on lunch. You'd said that the children, you each brought your own.

00:09:55:06 - 00:10:09:18

Mary Anne Fletcher

We had to bring our own lunch. Whatever your parents had, that's what you brought to school. And we were glad. Those biscuits was very nice. Peanut butter and jelly is one of them. That's for sure. And it's survived.

00:10:09:20 - 00:10:20:22

Tonia Merideth

Tell me about some of the extracurricular activities that you had. Did you have any type of carnival? School carnival, maybe May Day?

00:10:20:24 - 00:10:45:18

Mary Anne Fletcher

Not at - being at Hayes, but we went outside. There was a - I call it a monkey bar and - monkey bars. But the length of this width of this building and you could climb tha. I could really climb a monkey bar. I had a lot of strength, but one end to the other. I always made A's in things that I did.

00:10:45:21 - 00:10:55:21

Tonia Merideth

Okay, good. So do you remember anything about the materials, the books that you used in school? Could you describe those for us?

00:10:55:24 - 00:11:31:15

Mary Anne Fletcher

The only book that I see, know, and remember is that "Jack and Jill went up the hill fetch a pan of water. Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came running after." And there was a little folder but I loved that book. I would like to find one of those books and read it. And at the early age I could read very well at an early age like about three, maybe like two. I knew how to pronounce words and get them in syllables so you can pronounce like, like total, only two syllables total.

00:11:31:17 - 00:11:45:00

Mary Anne Fletcher

Yeah. You must learn. And, that helped us. I don't know what other book that we had. But I sure would like to find one of those books. So, Jack and Jill live in an old library we can find.

00:11:45:03 - 00:11:48:14

Tonia Merideth

So you have a special story about braiding your hair?

00:11:48:16 - 00:12:12:25

Mary Anne Fletcher

Yes. My sister Laura used to do our hair. 'Cause she was older and she put like lots of little teeny, I call them knots on your hair, like about 20 of them. And then put a comb in your hair. And we had clothespin. So my hair was long. So if it closes on each braid of the hair and I didn't like it so much.

00:12:12:25 - 00:12:31:15

Mary Anne Fletcher

So I took my hair a loose and made myself a fro(?) and I could plait hair too. So I would go back home. I would have less braids, but I could braid my hair before I left school, similar to what my sister did, but less and look better.

00:12:31:17 - 00:12:35:16

Tonia Merideth

So was that a common thing even your girlfriends would do? Is change your hair for school?

00:12:35:20 - 00:13:05:11

Mary Anne Fletcher

Yes. Yes, definitely. I like that. And clothes. We only had two skirts. Everything was two. Two skirts two pair panties, everything in two's. And you come home, you took those clothes off and you had a pair of jeans. We wore jeans. Put them on. You did not stay in your regular clothes. And the thing I did not like because I had another sister, surely we could wear clothes the same size. She -

00:13:05:11 - 00:13:29:21

Mary Anne Fletcher

I wore the skirt to school on Monday. Tuesdays, she would have to wear. I didn't like that. So I hid my clothes under my bed. My two skirts, I kept myself. I did not like. I was being bullied, at home. And then my mom say, my mom would say something and I told my mom I didn't like, but she said, so I don't think I said a nice word to my mom, but in a pleasant way.

00:13:29:23 - 00:13:31:21

Mary Anne Fletcher

Smiling.

00:13:31:23 - 00:13:38:20

Tonia Merideth

So the academic year you said, started in about August. What month did you guys get out of school in the summer.

00:13:38:20 - 00:13:39:00

Mary Anne Fletcher

June.

00:13:39:03 - 00:13:40:11

Tonia Merideth

June was the last month?

00:13:40:16 - 00:13:42:23

Mary Anne Fletcher

Yes.

00:13:42:25 - 00:13:45:27

Tonia Merideth

Okay. So you attended from August to June,

00:13:46:03 - 00:14:27:11

Mary Anne Fletcher

Right. And then because the school was only like three, maybe one grade, one second, first, second, third, we were transferred from that school to a school called TC Walker. And for TC Walker, that's when before us, maybe in the 50s, 1950, we were made to TC Walker and my teacher then was Ms. Willis, Ms. Jackson. Teachers through the years. Ms. Willis.

00:14:27:17 - 00:15:21:15

Mary Anne Fletcher

Ms. Jackson, Ms. Grandison, Ms. Johnson, Ms. Ethel Gram. Ms. Helena Brown. Ms. Bernice Summers, Robert. Robert. I don't know if that was his name. He was a science teacher. Mr. Armstrong. Ms. A.R. Turner. I don't know her maiden name. Her maiden name before Turner. And a few more that I can't remember. But those are the years I went through school in 12th grade, and I don't remember really too much of graduation because at time I had asthma. I was asthmatic.

00:15:21:18 - 00:15:40:15

Mary Anne Fletcher

But I'd play a lot so I wouldn't have to do a lot of things. And the teachers took a lot of sympathy from me. So Ms. A. R. Turner had me to stay with her so she could help ease the load for my mom. And she said two things. "You come with nothing, you take nothing, you leave nothing."

00:15:40:22 - 00:16:06:01

Mary Anne Fletcher

"That's what you come with. Keep your hands to yourself and be obedient." And I did just that. I think I was a very obedient child coming up. I liked it. I liked being obedience. Now I'm listening to - I'm obedience looking at you directly. But I see a little bit of my girl over there.

00:16:06:03 - 00:16:12:03

Tonia Merideth

So in thinking of your life after you left school, what was your path when you finished school?

00:16:12:05 - 00:16:13:07

Mary Anne Fletcher

Pardon me?

00:16:13:10 - 00:16:21:22

Tonia Merideth

What was your path after you left school? Did you go to higher education or start a family?

00:16:21:24 - 00:16:53:22

Mary Anne Fletcher

No, left (?) graduating from school. I went out to work at a bakery in Gloucester County, and her name was Lucia Madison. And her bakery was on the left and righthand side of in Gloucester, not too far from me, where I could ride a bicycle from my house to her bakery in the - in 6 o'clock in the morning there - those years you didn't have to worry about, nobody bothering you.

00:16:53:22 - 00:17:13:06

Mary Anne Fletcher

And all like that. People mind their own business and look out for you. And I learned a lot from the bakery. That's to help my mom out and things. And it was really nice to make the money and labor the money and give it to my parents. I kept something like a couple of dollars would take you a long ways and help your parents out.

00:17:13:09 - 00:17:36:29

Mary Anne Fletcher

That was nice to help the remaining of the family to do things. I think that was real nice. And in the flour bakery, on one day I went in and I wasn't evident and I wasn't being disciplined. I'll listen and Ms. Madison, Lucia Madison say, "Reach down real low and get me another cup of flour." So I say to myself,

00:17:36:29 - 00:17:55:15

Mary Anne Fletcher

"I'm tired of just reaching down." So I reached down real low and I almost fell into the flour pot. Flour bucket. And come up with all that flour all over my face. And she said "That was not fun." And I say, "You're right." I took the smile off of my face, so I keep my job.

00:17:55:17 - 00:18:06:12

Tonia Merideth

Do you remember any experiences in your community, the racial tension around the school being built or anything that that happened during that time? Because of segregation.

00:18:06:16 - 00:18:25:28

Mary Anne Fletcher

We knew nothing about. We didn't talk about segregation. It was only a Black school to begin with. So there was only us blacks to begin with. There were different color of us, so of us was a light. Some was dark. And it didn't matter to me because I thought the darkest of the person looked better than the brightest of the people.

00:18:26:00 - 00:18:54:09

Mary Anne Fletcher

And - but I knew about different colors of people, but not talk to our parents about it, because I remember there was a so-called white march or whatever stores was there and there was a couple of guys in the meat counter especially. I had a way of communicating with people in a way that could get - passed you over to help my mama in the store.

00:18:54:15 - 00:19:13:14

Mary Anne Fletcher

This guy was white. He was behind the counter cutting meat and all and I knew mom couldn't afford it. So being kind, I would go in there and he say, "You like me" and I like him and I never told my mom. And I said, he used to give me cuts of meat like a whole lot for our family where the average person didn't get it.

00:19:13:14 - 00:19:31:25

Mary Anne Fletcher

Because you know why? You didn't speak up. And hearsay (?) maybe his race. But you say - he said, "Keep it to yourself for a while." And when one day I told my mom, she said, well, "Don't be going with this guy." I said "No way." But guess what? Yeah, he like me. So that was cute. I said he was.

00:19:31:27 - 00:19:33:24

Mary Anne Fletcher

He was cute.

00:19:33:26 - 00:19:49:18

Tonia Merideth

In thinking back to the education that you received at the time, what did you think about the education you received at the Bena Hayes school and what do you think about that education now when you look back on it.

00:19:49:20 - 00:20:13:27

Mary Anne Fletcher

Looking back over my life at the Bena Hayes school, that education that we learned, the words and spelling and reading and writing and arithmetic, very nice. And as I went to the TC Walker School, I accomplished more in school learning like, well, we learn like in the younger days how to add and subtract. Like right now 2022 minus 160.

00:20:13:27 - 00:20:42:02

Mary Anne Fletcher

Is 1862. I knew how to add and subtract and I could add and subtract without fingers. It came to me naturally. Big numbers. Only thing I didn't like, didn't understand a lot is algebra. I never could conquer algebra. And I told my teacher, Ms. Granderson was that teacher, and I told her I do not understand. So giving me homework every day, just getting me to - learn two at a

00:20:42:02 - 00:21:31:13

Mary Anne Fletcher

time. Oh, Ms. Anne Gregory, of the Wagon Wheel was that algebra teacher too. I remember Anne Gregory of Leon Gregory because recently we had a - memory - something to recognize the Black person in the county that have that was an inspiration to us in the county. And that was Leon Gregory and Anne Gregory, because Leon Gregory owned a tavern, a cleaners, a wagon wheel, which gave dances.

00:21:31:18 - 00:21:46:10

Mary Anne Fletcher

And I worked in the wagon wheel. I was a very exuberant, ambitious person, ambitious person. I'm always willing to strive to reach the goal, to reach my goal. I like my journey through life.

00:21:46:12 - 00:22:04:06

Tonia Merideth

When you were going to school, do you remember how important it was for you and your siblings to go to school? Like if you got one morning and said, "No, I don't feel like going to school, Mom or Dad." Did your parents really put a huge emphasis on you and your siblings getting an education?

00:22:04:13 - 00:22:27:22

Mary Anne Fletcher

Yes, very, very specific. We were all pretty healthy and there weren't - we did not want to miss a day in school. We want to keep learning and staying at home was not going to learn us anything. But when you go to school, make sure you accomplish what the teacher have taught you. Bring it back home and the first thing you do when you get back home.

00:22:27:29 - 00:22:50:28

Mary Anne Fletcher

Take your clothes off. Eat your lunch or a very nice dinner and go in your room and read. And we read, by - we had no electricity. We read by a lamp. You did your reading. And if I could read and the others couldn't read, we help each other. Education was very important.

00:22:51:01 - 00:23:08:10

Tonia Merideth

What do you think of the efforts to collect the memories and legacies of the students who attended the Rosenwald Washington schools? How do you feel about what they're doing to restore this building and to recognize the men that started the Rosenwald schools?

00:23:08:12 - 00:23:36:22

Mary Anne Fletcher

I think, it's very important. I am really impressed about that, what's going on here. And in Gloucester County, is it renovation or remodelin,g, or remembrance of this school that James and Edith Stokes had, and you choose to keep this school going? I think it's very important. My age - maybe we remember. This young generation. I don't think they're interested in nothing at all.

00:23:36:24 - 00:24:12:13

Mary Anne Fletcher

And when I tell them about looking back over your life, a real spent journey, I think this is who Mr. Wilson and the colleagues that has tried to keep this building going, I think it's very important and I want to play a part in it. It's not much money, but money, a little bit will help. I want to give at least \$10 a month, at least \$100 a year, and doing something if it's no more than buying some paint for the school or whatever needs to be done, some deoderant for the bathrooms and things like that.

00:24:12:15 - 00:24:23:27

Mary Anne Fletcher

I want a job here at the, school, yes. Anything you'd like for me to do here at this Rosenwald(?) school. I will do. I'm interested.

00:24:24:00 - 00:24:30:03

Tonia Merideth

Before we end, is there anything that you would like to add to this interview that we did not ask?

00:24:30:06 - 00:25:13:03

Mary Anne Fletcher

I thank God for the time that I've been here and the colleagues - you all - impressing me, getting me out of my zone and doing something to encourage not only me, the young generation and generation on to - you never know what it is until you've walked in my shoes. And may God bless you all and have a smile upon you. I have enjoyed myself this day, the 24th of January 2024.

00:25:13:05 - 00:25:16:07

Tonia Merideth

Thank you so much for joining us for an oral history interview here. Thank you for your time.

00:25:16:07 - 00:25:16:25

Mary Anne Fletcher

Gracias.