Varnertown Tribe of Wassamasaw Indians Interviews

Interviewer: Dr. Stephen Criswell; Interviewee: Gloria Varner, Ruby Oliver; Transcriber:…

Varnertown\_Gloria-Varner\_Ruby-Oliver\_64kbs.mp3

SC: [00:00:01:000] Today is the reunion for the former students of the school here. Did y’all go to the school?

RO: [00:00:12:000] I did.

GV: [00:00:12:000] I did.

GV: [00:00:12:000] I don’t remember much but—[*laughs*]

SC: [00:00:12:000] You seem a little young—

RO: [00:00:12:000] I think the school started in ’34.

SC: [00:00:12:000] When did it close?

RO: [00:00:23:000] I think sometime in the late fifties or early sixties.

SC: [00:00:23:000] If I may ask, what time did you go there?

RO: [00:00:23:000] I went—the most I can figure, it was probably ’52,’54 in that area.

GV: [00:00:38:000] I guess I did too; I don’t remember the year.

SC: [00:00:38:000] You think in the fifties?

RO: [00:00:38:000] Most definitely the fifties.

SC: [00:00:38:000] So what grades—

RO: [00:00:38:000] I was probably in the third grade.

GV: [00:00:38:000] About the same.

SC: [00:00:50:000] So, just the one grade?

RO: [00:00:50:000] Well with me, my life was sort of here, there and everywhere. My grandfather was a large part of the community; one of the founders, so to speak. So, when we stayed with him, we went to the Indian School.

SC: [00:01:09:000] Did you live in North Charleston at that point?

RO: [00:01:09:000] No, no, no. We lived in Alabama. Our parents. With my dad and up in Jedburg, with my mother, and then back to my grandfather, and around we went.

SC: [00:01:21:000] When you were here you went to the Indian School?

RO: [00:01:21:000] When I was here, I went to the Indian School.

SC: [00:01:21:000] Were there Indian schools in any of the other communities you lived?

RO: [00:01:21:000] No.

SC: [00:01:31:000] Could you tell me your grandfather’s name?

RO: [00:01:31:000] Benjamin Varner.

SC: [00:01:31:000] And you were here around the same time?

GV: [00:01:31:000] Yeah, I grew up in this community.

SC: [00:01:45:000] You attended school here for a little while. Did you go on from here to other schools?

GV: [00:01:45:000] Yeah, I went to Berkeley (Berkeley High School, Moncks Corner, SC).

SC: [00:01:55:000] Why did you make that change?

GV: [00:01:55:000] I guess because they closed down.

SC: [00:01:55:000] And what about the earlier grades?

GV: [00:01:55:000] I can’t remember that far back [*all laugh*].

GV: [00:02:07:000] I can remember we had to walk. We lived not too far from it, and who was out there cooking the lunch: my Aunt Martha and Ida and Ruby and all those out there. I know we had an outside bathroom.

SC: [00:02:24:000] An outhouse?

GV: [00:02:24:000] Yes

RO: [00:02:24:000] Yes.

GV: [00:02:24:000] I know the teacher’s name was Miss Dehay.

GV: [00:02:40:000] We had a wood stove.

RO: [00:02:40:000] And if someone didn’t get there to start the fire, it was cold [*laughs*].

SC: [00:02:40:000] Where was the school?

RO: [00:02:52:000] Frontage 17, just a little ways down from where that community church is now.

SC: [00:02:52:000] Gateway?

RO: [00:02:52:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:02:52:000] The building’s not there?

RO: [00:03:02:000] No, they tore it down unfortunately.

SC: [00:03:02:000] Was this was one of those one room schoolhouses?

GV: [00:03:02:000] Mm-hmm

RO: [00:03:02:000] Yes, it was.

SC: [00:03:02:000] Were all the grades mixed together?

RO: [00:03:12:000] Yes. Younger ones in the front and it went on back, graduated.

SC: [00:03:12:000] Same teacher for everyone?

RO: [00:03:12:000] Same teacher for everybody.

SC: [00:03:12:000] How did they divide up the lessons?

RO: [00:03:12:000] She would go down the row and give everybody their assignments. Whatever you were doing—you’re reading, other people were doing whatever, answering her questions and it went on that way. There was a lot of commotion sometimes.

SC: [00:03:37:000] Is that how you remember it?

GV: [00:03:37:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:03:37:000] And you had lunch there?

GV: [00:03:37:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:03:37:000] Did family members make lunch?

RO: [00:03:37:000] Um-hm.

SC: [00:03:47:000] Out back?

RO: [00:03:47:000] No, in the kitchen. It had a kitchen.

SC: [00:03:47:000] The “facilities” were out back.

GV: [00:03:47:000] You left the little school room and went to the classroom [inaudible] door.

SC: [00:04:03:000] Do you remember what you studied?

RO: [00:04:03:000] I—reading is what I remember.

GV: [00:04:03:000] I don’t remember nothing.

RO: [00:04:03:000] I remember reading, multiplication tables, that sort of thing.

SC: [00:04:17:000] Did you like it?

RO: [00:04:17:000] Mm-hmm. I just felt it was strange [*laughs*] because I had been in other schools.

SC: [00:04:17:000] What was strange about it?

RO: [00:04:27:000] In other schools, we were segregated according to grades and here you’re all in one room. That sort of thing.

GV: [00:04:27:000] That was the first one I went to. After I left there I went to Berkeley. We moved.

SC: [00:04:40:000] So it wasn’t strange to you at all?

GV: [00:04:40:000] No.

SC: [00:04:40:000] Did going to Berkeley seem strange to you?

GV: [00:04:40:000] Yeah, because I quit.

RO: [00:04:40:000] [*laughs*] Oh, Georgie.

GV: [00:04:51:000] I did. I pretty much went up to about the sixth grade. I went to the seventh grade one year and I failed. So I quit the next year. So that little school must have went to [about] the sixth grade.

SC: [00:05:03:000] So, attending school here—the name of the school was “Varner Indian School?”

RO and GV in unison: [00:05:03:000] I don’t remember the name.

SC: [00:05:03:000] But you would refer to it as the “Indian School.”

RO: [00:05:03:000] Um-hmm.

GV: [00:05:03:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:05:24:000] At the other schools you attended at different times, did you think of yourselves as “Indians?”

RO: [00:05:24:000] No, I think I was too young for that. We just realized that we were very poor.

SC: [00:05:40:000] But when you came here, you went to the Indian School. Were you conscious of it being the Indian school or was it just this school for here?

RO: [00:05:40:000] No, it was just the neighborhood school.

GV: [00:05:40:000] It was the neighborhood school. It didn’t bother me.

RO: [00:05:40:000] Everybody was there.

SC: [00:05:51:000] What about when you went on to Berkeley? Was there a sense of being Indian there?

GV: [00:05:51:000] It didn’t bother me; it didn’t bother me one bit.

SC: [00:06:01:000] What do you think the importance of this school in the community has been?

RO: [00:06:11:000] well, I think it gave us an education. I mean, we weren’t—I don’t know what the situation was in the state, I don’t really know why we were regulated to go into this little one room school, but we were. And I do want to say, too, that when I left, I was never behind when I went to a public school. So, whatever they were teaching, whatever she was struggling to teach us—

GV: [00:06:11:000] We got it.

RO: [00:06:11:000] —was appropriate.

SC: [00:06:34:000] You used the phrase “struggling.” Why struggling?

RO: [00:06:34:000] I think she had a hard time because—

GV: [00:06:34:000] All the kids in there.

RO: [00:06:34:000] And the older boys were always acting up. So she had to struggle to get everyone to settle down and be quiet and to do what they were supposed to do. And several of them got thrown out. Just like—

SC: [00:06:51:000] Did she throw them out?

RO: [00:06:51:000] Well, she would write a note [*laughs*]. I guess the parents dealt with the rest of it.

SC: [00:07:08:000] So it was boys and girls all together?

RO: [00:07:08:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:07:08:000] You said some of the boys were trouble. Who were the youngest? First grade, kindergarten?

RO: [00:07:16:000] First grade was where it started. I don’t think there was a kindergarten. It started at first.

SC: [00:07:16:000] And they sat up front?

RO: [00:07:16:000] Up front. The older ones were in the back of the room.

SC: [00:07:28:000] You mentioned your grandfather.

RO: [00:07:28:000] Right.

SC: [00:07:28:000] You said your grandfather was important to--

RO: [00:07:38:000] I think he sort of was probably the patriarch of the community. He built the church and that sort of thing.

SC: [00:07:38:000] What do you remember about him?

RO: [00:07:48:000] Oh, he was a dear, dear man. Very, very wise. I, to this day, can hear his voice in my head.

SC: [00:07:48:000] Do you remember anything that he told you?

RO: [00:07:58:000] Oh yeah, yeah. He tried to get us to learn from his experience. That was one of his big things: “Why do you have to go out and learn yourself?” And then when I went back east with my dad, when my father came home without me, he said “Why’d you take her off and let her marry a Yankee?” [*laughs*]. And he planted cotton. We all picked the cotton and that sort of thing.

SC: [00:08:21:000] Same thing? Did you pick cotton, too?

RO: [00:08:21:000] Everybody picked cotton.

GV: [00:08:21:000] I got stung by a worm, too—underneath the cotton.

SC: [00:08:21:000] What else did you farm?

RO: [00:08:33:000] With Grandpa, it was just cotton.

GV: [00:08:33:000] Cotton. Corn and stuff like that.

RO: [00:08:33:000] Food for us to eat but the major crop was cotton. That brought in income.

SC: [00:08:44:000] Where did they sell it?

RO: [00:08:44:000] He would load it up at Moncks Corner at that train station there. They would come in there and take it to the gin.

SC: [00:08:44:000] And he farmed enough to make a living?

RO: [00:08:55:000] Yeah, yeah.

SC: [00:08:55:000] The whole family was involved?

GV: [00:08:55:000] We used to pick it for them and they used to give us—

SC: [00:08:55:000] And that’s easy work, right?

RO: [00:08:55:000] No!

GV: [00:08:55:000] [*Laughs*] No, no.

RO: [00:09:08:000] We used to pick it and we got paid for that but we had to get out there and weed the plants. Weren’t no pay for that.

GV: [00:09:08:000] I used to do mine for Uncle Hamp.

SC: [00:09:08:000] How did you do that?

GV: [00:09:20:000] Get you a bag and tie on there. Get on your hands and knees and go down the row. And when they real brown, the little—what that you call that?

RO: [00:09:20:000] Stickers.

GV: [00:09:20:000] It got sticky on your finger. Make your fingers bleed and stuff. My grandpa—

RO: [00:09:34:000] I know we all had, I did anyway. I don’t know if you ever—I Katherine and everybody had some kind of sores all over our legs. Everybody thought it was Impetigo but it was actually the burrs of the cotton scratching you.

GV: [00:09:44:000] My grandpa used to plant the cotton, too.

SC: [00:09:44:000] Did you say you got paid to do it?

GV: [00:09:44:000] When I did it with my granddaddy. He’d give you a couple—little bit of money. Not much, but you know.

SC: [00:09:54:000] You got paid by the amount?

GV: [00:09:54:000] It’s how much you pick.

RO: [00:09:54:000] Grandpa paid like two cents a pound? He had a scale and he’d weigh it.

GV: [00:09:54:000] Yeah, It’s how much you pick. We used to put water on ours.

RO: [00:10:04:000] I put a brick in mine one time. When he found out that brick was in that bag, boy—

NOTE: [00:10:04:000] [*all laugh*]

SC: [00:10:22:000] Were you picking cotton at the same time you were in school?

GV: [00:10:22:000] No, they used to close the school down at harvest time.

SC: [00:10:22:000] What time of year was that?

GV: [00:10:34:000] I think we picked cotton in what—long about September, October, early fall.

SC: [00:10:34:000] So they would close the school down.

GV and RO: [00:10:34:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:10:34:000] So was there summer vacation too, or was that it?

RO: [00:10:46:000] Oh, we had summer vacation. I don’t know if they closed the school (I don’t remember that). I just know that when grandpa needed me to pick cotton, I didn’t go to school.

SC: [00:10:46:000] So nobody was at the school.

RO: [00:10:56:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:10:56:000] Brent, you want to chime in?

BB: [00:10:56:000] I think you’ve covered everything I was going to say.

SC: [00:11:08:000] Your family is from here as well.

GV: [00:11:08:000] Yeah. Yeah, because my husband used to go to that school.

SC: [00:11:08:000] Same grade?

GV: [00:11:08:000] Same one. I have heard it talked about it a lot. He used to tell me. I think we had the same teacher, Miss Dehay.

RO: [00:11:08:000] Yeah.

RO: [00:11:23:000] She taught there until—it was the same teacher always.

SC: [00:11:23:000] The whole time?

RO: [00:11:23:000] Um-hm. As far as I remember. I mean, I don’t know when they closed it. I think they closed in ’54,’57. I don’t know if she lasted that whole time but I know she was always there.

GV: [00:11:36:000] My husband said that he used to go down and that’s his teacher inaudible] Miss Dehay, too.

SC: [00:11:36:000] Do you have any sense [of] how old she was when you were there?

RO: [00:11:36:000] To me, she appeared to be a young woman.

GV: [00:11:36:000] She was really nice and sweet.

RO: [00:11:48:000] She was a very nice person.

GV: [00:11:48:000] And sweet.

RO: [00:11:48:000] Very caring, yeah.

GV: [00:11:48:000] And she loved kids.

RO: [00:11:48:000] Yeah.

GV: [00:11:48:000] She didn’t care what kind they was; what race they was.

SC: [00:11:48:000] Was she from the community?

GV: [00:11:48:000] She was from [inaudible].

WG: [00:12:11:000] What other things did you all do within your community that were not school related?

RO: [00:12:11:000] Church.

GV: [00:12:11:000] Get in fights.

SC: [00:12:22:000] Two very different answers; let’s go to the nicer one first. Is that the Gateway church here?

RO: [00:12:22:000] Yeah, but at that time it was just a little country church with a stove too, and an outhouse.

GV: [00:12:33:000] We used to help people. They used to have quilting parties and stuff. People used to go over there and just cook. If somebody was sick, we used to go help them and take their food and stuff.

SC: [00:12:46:000] Tell me about the quilt parties.

GV: [00:12:46:000] My grandmamma used to do that. I didn’t like that.

SC: [00:12:46:000] Older women?

GV: [00:12:46:000] Yeah, uh-huh.

SC: [00:12:46:000] Is it like a quilting bee, where they would all be in a circle?

RO: [00:12:46:000] Yeah.

GV: [00:12:46:000] Uh-huh.

SC: [00:12:57:000] And what would happen with the quilts they would make?

GV: [00:12:57:000] They’d make them and sell them.

RO: [00:12:57:000] Keep them warm. I’m a quilter still today.

GV: [00:12:57:000] They used to get your dresses and stuff and cut them up and all kind of stuff.

RO: [00:12:57:000] You never threw anything away.

GV: [00:12:57:000] Uh-uh.

RO: [00:13:10:000] The dresses were made out of, all my clothes were anyway, I don’t know about you, feed sacks.

GV: [00:13:10:000] Feed sacks.

GV: [00:13:10:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:13:10:000] And then when they were worn out as dresses—

RO: [00:13:21:000] They went into quilts or whatever.

SC: [00:13:21:000] Did they patch?

RO: [00:13:21:000] Yeah, patchwork.

GV: [00:13:21:000] Uh-huh.

RO: [00:13:21:000] They made designs.

SC: [00:13:21:000] Do you remember any of the designs?

RO: [00:13:30:000] Oh, log cabin. The squares, the stars, lone star, broken star. That sort of thing.

SC: [00:13:41:000] Did they sell them?

RO: [00:13:41:000] I don’t know; my grandmother never did. Maybe your family did.

GV: [00:13:41:000] I mean, if anybody wanted to buy it within the community.

SC: [00:13:51:000] And you mentioned cooking and feeding.

RO: [00:13:51:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:13:51:000] Let’s go back to the school. What was the typical lunch at school?

RO and GV in unison: [00:13:51:000] Okra Soup and cornbread.

SC: [00:14:03:000] How do you make Okra Soup?

GV: [00:14:03:000] With beans and okra and meat.

SC: [00:14:03:000] What kind of beans?

GV and RO: [00:14:03:000] Butterbeans, and tomatoes.

GV: [00:14:03:000] And onions and whatever else you want to put in there.

RO: [00:14:13:000] And also, she used to, I have memories of her teaching us to can. I don’t know if that was stuff from the neighborhood or supplied. I don’t know where the food came from for the school. I remember canning tomatoes.

GV: [00:14:28:000] I do, too. We used to do it for us.

SC: [00:14:28:000] That’s kind of dangerous if you don’t do it right...

RO: [00:14:28:000] We did a lot of things that were dangerous that I wouldn’t let my grandkids do.

SC: [00:14:38:000] So, you think the kids were canning the food and then that was—

RO: [00:14:38:000] We would help her. I think that was the kind of thing that if the teacher was through with you for the day—

GV: [00:14:50:000] You could go into the kitchen and wash dishes and get the water up and the wood up for the next day.

RO: [00:14:50:000] Yeah.

SC: [00:14:50:000] Okra soup. So okay okra, butterbeans, [and] tomatoes. Did you have a bit of rice here?

RO: [00:15:05:000] No, cornbread.

SC: [00:15:05:000] What about when you cooked for neighbors and so forth?

GV: [00:15:05:000] Whatever we got, we just cook it and take it over.

RO: [00:15:16:000] A lot of coon, a lot of squirrel—

GV: [00:15:16:000] Possum.

RO: [00:15:16:000] Possum.

SC: [00:15:16:000] How do you cook a possum?

GV: [00:15:16:000] My grandfather would skin it—

RO: [00:15:26:000] And you see one today—the first time I realized what it was, I was like, “Oh my gosh!” My grandfather would skin it and clean it out and pack it with sweet potatoes. And bake it real slow in the oven so that all the grease was gone. Same way he cooked a coon.

SC: [00:15:41:000] They’re greasy sort of.

RO: [00:15:41:000] Greasy, greasy. But if you cook it real slow.

SC: [00:15:41:000] Pack the sweet potatoes inside the body?

RO: [00:15:41:000] Inside, yeah. I don’t remember what it looked like but it tasted good.

GV: [00:15:56:000] Back then, that’s all we had to eat.

SC: [00:15:56:000] Did they grow the sweet potatoes here?

GV: [00:15:56:000] Yeah.

RO: [00:15:56:000] Yeah, my grandfather always grew sweet potatoes.

GV: [00:15:56:000] Used to have a bank, you had to bank them.

SC: [00:15:56:000] Tell me about the bank. I’ve heard about “banking” potatoes; that’s fascinating.

GV: [00:16:07:000] You put straw and stuff up in there and you get a big ol’ hole like a cave thing. Put the straw in there, put the potato in there, you cover it back up and you pack it with dirt.

SC: [00:16:07:000] And they don’t rot?

GV and RO: [00:16:07:000] No.

SC: [00:16:20:000] And they don’t grow?

GV: [00:16:20:000] No they don’t grow.

RO: [00:16:20:000] It’s like a hill. You put all your potatoes in there.

SC: [00:16:20:000] So, you just dig it out—

RO: [00:16:20:000] And when you want potatoes, you go in there and—

SC: [00:16:30:000] Pine straw?

RO and GV: [00:16:30:000] Pine straw.

RO: [00:16:30:000] Layers of pine straw and layers of dirt.

SC: [00:16:30:000] How long do they keep?

RO: [00:16:40:000] They keep all winter.