

THE CRENSHAW OF WOODS PLACE *(Interview with Ms. Bessie Reese Crenshaw)*

I was born and raised in Reading, Pennsylvania, located approximately one hour northwest of Philadelphia. My father, Mackey Laney Reese, a Bennettsville, South Carolina native died when I was three or four years old. My mother, Bessie Hunter Reese was from Arlington, Virginia but she chose to remain in Reading to raise me, my sister, Mary, and my brothers Wilbert and Herbert.

My mother's parents were Moses Hunter and Mary Woodley Hunter. I don't remember my father's parents except that his father was a minister.

It was not longer after I had moved to Method that I met and married George Crenshaw. We had two beautiful daughters, Celeste and Freda. Our home was at 2915 Woods Place. George's grandmother, Ms. Alice Crenshaw and her sister, Ms. Julia lived next door.

Berry O'Kelly School

I graduated from Kutztown State Teacher's College (now, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania). I would have stayed in Reading had I found a teaching job but it was the 50's and they were not about to hire a Negro to teach in their predominately white schools! During the summer following my graduation, I found work in Cape May, New Jersey. While working there I met Vice Principal W.D. Moore and his wife. I shared with them that I was looking for a teaching job and Mr. Moore recommended that I contact his Principal, Mr. E.A. Johnson. I did and Mr. Johnson hired me on the spot as the teacher for the combined classes of third and fourth graders at Berry O'Kelly School.

The combination grades were not a problem since there were no more than 35 children in the classroom. Discipline also was not a problem. Parents were very cooperative and serious about their children getting their education. If there were any problems, all any teacher had to do was contact the parent. Problem solved! We, teachers were expected to be well-rounded as we would often have to teach music, art, gym, etc. Each class was assigned a school assembly for which they were to produce a program. The parents also attended these assemblies. The annual May Day celebration was a beautiful sight to me. I remember how special it was to see my Black children dance around the May Pole.

I remember the school campus had a dormitory in which six of us teachers were housed on the first floor. Two of those teachers I remember were Ms. Daisy Morris and Ms. Willie Tyler. Vice Principal Moore and his wife, Victoria, who was also a teacher at the school, resided on the second floor. There was a cook that would prepare our meals. This was also exciting to me since I worked my way through college and was not able to experience dormitory life on campus.

Some of the other teachers I remember were Ms. Webb, Ms. Blonnie Williams, and Ms. Reed who married a man named, Darnell Crews.

Principal Johnson was very strict. I remember that we had to keep census cards on all of our students. Mr. Johnson would not give us our checks until our cards were accurate and in alphabetical order. This meant that each teacher would have to file their cards in with the other eight or nine grades! Teachers were expected to behave properly at school and in our private lives. Principal Johnson also required us to show him our lesson plans. But Mr. Johnson seldom had to come in to observe us in our classrooms.

The Community

The Method Community gladly received me! The community was something of a culture shock for me. In Reading, the people were different. It was a factory town and whole families came there looking for work in those days. If you were not part of a family then you were an outsider. The people in Method were the exact opposite. Everyone was warm and friendly toward me and received me as one of their own. I remember Ms. Dora Stroud had no personal family of her own but the whole community embraced her as their family member. Such was the spirit of Method when I arrived. People cared about you and they knew each other. If you were sitting on the porch and someone was passing by they would speak. Neighbors would bring you hot biscuits even when they did not really know you! I also remember that people in Method were genuinely concerned about each other. When my house caught fire, I did not have to call anybody, they just came. There was a sense that if something happened to you it was as if it happened to them.

In addition to this pleasant surprise, I had to acclimate myself to an all Black community. I found the dirt roads to be a novelty! But the dirt roads were not the only thing that I had to get use to. Reading was integrated and when I was in school, I was often the only Black person in the class. In Method, I saw faces that looked like mine! There was a sense pride within the people and they celebrated each others' achievements especially the children's. And it was also refreshing for see firsthand Black people in such professions as medicine and law. Also, I did not have to belong to one church or the other in the community. I could visit the Methodist Church on the first and third Sundays and the Baptist Church on the second and fourth Sundays. I liked that!

Method was a quiet, safe neighborhood. I felt safe walking back home even at night. It was the people that made Method a wonderful place to live. I grew to love that Method. And, I still do!