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Black Women Oral History Project

Interview with

CLEMENTINE HUNTER

November 29, 1979

88-M84

The interviews in the Black Women Oral History Project
are dedicated to the memory of

Letitia Woods Brown

whose enthusiastic encouragement and wise counsel
made the project possible

This project was funded by
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INTRODUCTION

Since July 1976 the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College, with support from The Rockefeller Foundation recently supplemented by a grant from the Blanchard Foundation of Boston, has been conducting a project to record and transcribe the autobiographical memoirs of a group of black American women 70 years of age and older. The purpose of the project is to develop a body of resources on the lives of black women in the twentieth century, especially in the years prior to the Civil Rights Movement, and to make this material available to researchers and students interested in the struggles of women and racial minorities in the United States. Many interviewees have had professional careers in such fields as education, government, the arts, business, medicine, law, and social work. Others have combined care for their families with voluntary service to their communities. All have made significant contributions toward the improvement of the lives of black people and to the development of American society.

In the past the black woman often has not created a written record of her experiences, and when such a record has been created, it is not usually found in libraries or archives, the traditional repositories for historical documents. One means of attempting to capture and preserve such lives is the oral interview, which explores the influences and events that have shaped each woman's experience and gives her an opportunity to reflect on the past and to present her point of view on historical events. The interviews of the Black Women Oral History Project offer fresh source material that can add an important dimension to the study of the history of the United States. They supplement and comment on other sources as they examine the active participation of a group whose members were previously overlooked as being only shaped by and not shapers of historical events.

A primitive painter from the Cane River area of Louisiana, Clementine Hunter brings to her art a fresh and direct vision of black plantation life in the South. Her paintings constitute a unique record of the past, including portrayals of washdays, cotton-picking, and Saturday nights in a local honky-tonk. Though unable to read or write, Mrs. Hunter stands as witness to a rural culture which is vanishing from the American landscape.

Clementine Hunter was probably born in December 1885, on Hidden Hill Plantation near Cloutierville, Louisiana, the eldest of seven children of John and Mary Antoinette Adams Ruben. Her paternal grandfather was an Irish horse trader married to a black Indian woman named "MeMe." Her maternal grandmother, Idole Adams, was a slave brought to Louisiana from Virginia. She was married to Billy Zack Adams, and lived to be 110 years old. As part of a Creole family, Clementine was originally named Clemence, but called TeBa. Today she is still called Mama TeBa by her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Her mother tongue was French; it wasn't until her second marriage that she became fluent in English.

Sent to a Catholic school at Cloutierville, Clementine soon left to pick cotton and work in the fields. As a young girl, she moved to Melrose Plantation, about fifteen miles south of Natchitoches, and only a few miles from where she presently resides. She was married first to Charlie Dupree and had two children, a son and a daughter. Her second marriage, after Mr. Dupree's death, was to Emanuel Hunter, with whom she had three children. Mr. Hunter died in 1944. Of her five offspring, her youngest, Mary, survives and lives next door. She has about sixteen grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren.

After many years of work in the fields, Clementine Hunter was brought into the Big House to serve as maid and cook for Mrs. Cammie Henry, the owner of Melrose Plantation. In the early 1940s, Mrs. Hunter began experimenting with

some paints and brushes left at the house by Alberta Kinsey, an artist from New Orleans. Painting on anything she could find--cardboard and paper bags, as well as proper canvasses--Mrs. Hunter was soon producing pictures of startling originality. These canvasses, depicting work at the pecan harvest as well as weddings, funerals, and baptisms, age-old ceremonies marking the passage of time, soon caught the attention of visiting artists and writers at the Melrose Plantation. Her first public showing in Louisiana was at the New Orleans Arts and Crafts Gallery in 1949. Her paintings have been exhibited at numerous galleries, including the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Anderson-Hopkins Gallery and the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Clementine Hunter has been featured in articles in Look, Holiday, Ebony, and Reader's Digest, among others, and her work was selected for the 1976 UNICEF calendar. Her life has been the subject of three documentary films, and in 1979 the Division of the Arts of the State of Louisiana commissioned a painting depicting life on a plantation at harvest time. "Louisiana Harvest," a 24" x 36" oil painting, now hangs in the state capitol building in Baton Rouge.

The interview took place in Mrs. Hunter's home on November 29, 1979. Mrs. Dorothy Robinson conducted the interview with the help of Mr. Thomas Whitehead. This interview would not have been possible without the assistance of Dr. Mildred Bailey and Mr. Thomas Whitehead of Northwestern State University of Louisiana, who have generously devoted a great deal of time and made available supplementary material on Clementine Hunter's life and work.

Clementine Hunter

(photo courtesy of Mark Cottrell)

INTERVIEW WITH CLEMENTINE HUNTER

Dorothy R. Robinson: This is November 29, 1979. I'm at Natchitoches, Louisiana, in the company of Mr. Tom Whitehead of Northwestern University in Louisiana, and I'm realizing a great dream of my life--I'm sitting next to Mrs. Clementine Hunter, known as the "Black Grandma Moses." It is a delight to visit with Mrs. Hunter, and I'm hoping that, as a result of this visit, we shall have a permanent record of some of the fascinating experiences that this great artist has produced and is now sharing with the public.

Mrs. Hunter, I'd like to know something about your early childhood. Will you share some of your early experiences, tell us about your parents, your grandparents--if you remember that--how old they were, how long they lived, and that kind of thing. Just whatever you want to say about it. I assure you, it will be of interest to everybody who reads it.

Clementine Hunter: Well, my grandmother, she was 110 when she passed, and my grandfather, well, I don't know exactly how old he was, because he got killed. He fell off a roof of a store, and he got killed. But she was 110.

Dorothy R. Robinson: Did you have other sisters and brothers?

Clementine Hunter: Yes, I had other sisters, four sisters, and they're all dead but one.

Dorothy R. Robinson: So you have a sister living now? Where does she live?

Clementine Hunter: In Alexandria. She lives in Alexandria.

Dorothy R. Robinson: Did you have brothers?

Clementine Hunter: Oh yes, I had about seven brothers, and every one of 'em dead.

Dorothy R. Robinson: Do you have children of your own?

CH: One.

DRR: Girl or boy? And do you have grandchildren? Just tell me all you can think about that you think would interest us about...

CH: Yes, I got grandchildren--that's one of them right there. And I got a lot more, but I don't know all of them, but I got 'em, got a lot of them.

DRR: I suppose you have great-grandchildren.

CH: That's a great, right there.

DRR: Tell me about your schooling. Did you go to school when you were a girl, and where did you go?

CH: Cloutierville. I went to school two years. I didn't learn abc's. Every time I'd get there, I'd run away. I didn't want to learn.

TW*: Why'd you run away?

CH: Just 'cause I didn't want to be there.

DRR: What was it about the school that you didn't like?

CH: I liked the school, but the teacher was too mean.

DR: What did she do that was mean?

CH: Oh, she just whip you too much, and I, I wouldn't take that.

DRR: Were you living away from home in a dormitory, or were you going to school each day from home?

CH: From home, right from home.

DRR: Did you go to Catholic school at one time?

CH: That's where I went all the time.

DRR: Tell me some more about the Catholic school.

CH: Catholic school, the nun teach me.

DRR: Tell me some more about the Catholic school, and how did you get along with the sisters?

CH: I got along pretty good with the sisters. Just, I didn't like to go to school. All the others was all right.

DRR: When you were in Catholic school, were there certain things you had to regard, like eating meat--could you eat meat any day?

* Tom Whitehead

CH: No meat on Good Friday.

DRR: What did you do about it?

CH: Well, I went to school with it [meat] in the bucket, and she found it.

DRR: Who found it?

CH: The teacher.

DRR: What did she do?

CH: Took it and threw it away.

DRR: And what did you do?

CH: I told her it wasn't mine. [laughter]

DRR: Did you go to school the next day?

CH: I went to school the next day. I'd go to school every day, but I'd run away.

DRR: Where would you go when you'd...

CH: In the road, and sit down until the school out.

DRR: What did your mother say when you'd get home?

CH: Well, she thought I went to school, until she found out.

DRR: When she found out, what did she do?

CH: She found out when the other children told her.

DRR: What did she do?

CH: She whipped me and send me back to school, but that didn't do no good.

DRR: When you quit school, then what kind of work did you do? After you stopped going to school.

CH: Pick cotton.

DRR: Did you like to pick cotton?

CH: I liked to pick cotton.

DRR: How much could you pick?

CH: Three hundred [pounds].

DRR: In one day?

CH: Yes.

DRR: That was quite a lot, wasn't it?

CH: That's right.

DRR: How old were you then, about?

CH: I don't know about how old I was. I wasn't no baby.

DRR: How old were you when you got married, Mrs. Clementine?

CH: Twenty.

DRR: How did you meet your husband?

CH: Down in Melrose at a dance.

DRR: Tell me about the dance.

CH: Oh, we had a good dance. I met him at the dance.

DRR: Was that a Saturday night dance?

CH: It was a Saturday night dance.

DRR: Did you fall in love with him when you first met him?

CH: No, not when I first met him.

DRR: I guess he had to court you pretty ardently to get you to say yes.

CH: Yeah, that's right.

DRR: Do you remember where you were when he asked you to marry him?

CH: To the dance, to the dance.

DRR: Did he ask you that first night?

CH: No.

DRR: You went to some other dance?

CH: Yeah.

DRR: How long were you married to your husband?

CH: Oh, about sixteen or seventeen years.

DRR: He passed away?

CH: Yeah.

DRR: I see. What about your church? Did you join the church early? I gather you were Catholic.

CH: Yeah, not too early.

DRR: Do you still...

CH: But he was belong to the church.

DRR: Your husband belonged to the church?

CH: Yeah.

DRR: I see. Do you still attend church occasionally?

CH: I don't go often, but the priest comes here and give me communion on first Sunday.

DRR: I see. Mrs. Clementine, you've lived in Louisiana all of your life.

CH: All of my life.

DRR: How do you feel about relations between white people and black people? It seems you and Mr. Whitehead and Dr. Bailey* have a very good friendship. Do you think that's generally the case in Louisiana? Do you have many white friends?

CH: I got a lot of them.

DRR: Do many of the black people have white friends?

CH: Well, I don't know about that, but I know I have.

DRR: Well, that is great. Well, tell me this one thing. You've heard a lot about the civil rights movement and women's lib and all of the marching and whatnot, and the integration of schools. Do you have any thought about that kind of thing?

CH: No, not too much.

DRR: What do you think about the women's lib? Do you think women have enough liberty, as we live now? Would you change anything?

CH: Well, I don't know how might we change. I don't know.

DRR: But, as it stands, you're pretty happy now.

* Dr. Mildred Bailey

CH: Yeah, I'm pretty happy.

DRR: Good. Were you happy as a child?

CH: I'm happy.

DRR: And you would say your childhood was a happy childhood?

CH: That's right.

DRR: What do you think about the condition that the country is in now, with the hostages over in Iran--do you listen to that on your radio sometimes?

CH: Sometime.

DRR: What do you think about that? Do you think Mr. Carter's done a pretty good job?

CH: Well, I think so. I don't know. I got to look over that.

DRR: I know what you mean. I think he hardly knows either. He's in a tough spot. [laughter]

CH: 'Cause I sure had to look over that.

DRR: Do you belong to any other organization...any organizations like lodges, or anything besides the church? You belong to Eastern Star or some of those organizations?

CH: No.

DRR: When you were younger, did you...

CH: No.

DRR: You have earned so many honors with your paintings--how did you first start painting? How did people learn about your skill and...

CH: Well, I just start with a little piece of cardboard, just any kind of old paper. That's the way I start.

DRR: How old were you then?

CH: Oh, I had three children.

DRR: When you first started to paint?

CH: Yeah.

DRR: What did you paint with? Did you have oils then?

CH: Oil.

DRR: How did you get your first oils?

CH: Well, they give it to me.

DRR: Who gave it to you?

CH: One lady--they call her Miss Alberta.* She paint, and she'd come to the Big House 'n' paint magnolias, and when she would go home, she'd leave me some paint. I never did buy no paint.

DRR: Now you say she came to the Big House. What was the Big House?

CH: Yonder where I was cooking at.

DRR: Did that house have a name?

CH: We called it the Big House--Melrose Plantation, that's what it is.

DRR: Melrose Plantation. I think I heard you say something about the African House, and I believe you painted something about the African House.

CH: Yes, the African House is there, is on the place.

DRR: Was that where the servants lived?

CH: That's what they told me. I don't know. I wasn't there in them times.

DRR: Where did you live? In the big house?

CH: Unh unh. On the place.

DRR: Do you still go to Melrose sometimes?

CH: Yeah, I go every October.

DRR: Well, that was how you started to painting--the lady gave you the paints. Now, when did the public begin to recognize you?

CH: Oh, I don't know. I just painted and give 'em away, I just give the pictures away. I never tried to sell none.

DRR: You just gave the beautiful pictures away?

CH: Just give 'em... I gave 'em away.

DRR? How did you finally decide to sell some, or how did you learn that you could sell some?

CH; Oh well, somebody would come down and ask me if I wanted to sell one, or I'd sell them for twenty-five cents, and the highest one was fifty.

DRR: Oh, Mrs. Clementine.

* Alberta Kinsey

CH: Yeah, that's all.

DRR: Now, this is a very personal question that I'm going to ask now. If you don't want to answer it, you could just tell me, "Dorothy, it's none of your business." [laughter] But would you mind telling us the highest amount you've ever received for a picture? Now, I'm thinking about you started with twenty-five cents, and now certainly you get much more than that. Would you...

CH: A hundred and fifty.

DRR: That is beautiful.

CH: That's all I get.

DRR: You've seen quite a change, then, haven't you?

CH: Yeah.

DRR: Did you enjoy it at first when people'd come in to see you? Like I just breezed in here today wanting to see you, Mrs. Clementine Hunter. Did that worry you when people first started to come to see you?

CH: When they first started, yeah, I was kinda worried. I didn't much want to mess with them, but now I don't.

DRR: No, you're a very gracious hostess, and a wonderful interviewee. I want you to know that, and I'm so glad you're letting me talk to you.

CH: 'Cause it don't worry me, no.

DRR: You've mentioned that you have grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I hear so many people say young people are worse now than they used to be, that they are bad, and that they do bad things. Do you agree with that, or do you disagree?

CH: No, I don't.

DRR: You think they're as nice as we were when we were kids, huh? Or better?

CH: Not now.

DRR: Not now?

CH: No. [laughs]

DRR: You think they're worse than they used to be?

CH: Yeah, they're worse than they used to be, I'll just tell you straight.

DRR: Well, why do you think they're...

CH: Well, 'cause they don't... I don't want to go out, that's why I don't go nowhere, 'cause I don't fool around young people, and I don't like the way they do. They cuss, they drink, they do everything, and...

DRR: I know what you mean.

CH: And that's something that I don't like and I don't fool around them.

DRR: Why do you think young people are worse than they used to be? Do you think parents have stopped raising them...

CH: No, they ain't raising them like they used to do, they ain't raising nohow. They ain't raised like they used to, not when I come up.

DRR: How did you come up?

CH: I come up just hard, and they made me do what now they don't make the children do. They let 'em just grow up, that's all they're doing. They're just growing up their self. And they don't want to whip 'em, they don't want to do nothing to 'em, just let 'em grow. If it wasn't for the Lord, none of 'em, they couldn't raise none, none of 'em.

DRR: Well, thank you for that. Now let's get back to your pictures. I notice you do a great deal of painting of cotton-picking scenes. And you've told us that you picked cotton, and that you liked to pick cotton. Do people still pick cotton around here? Have you noticed a change in that?

CH: Just some times.

DRR: How do they gather the cotton here now?

CH: With the cotton pickers.

DRR: With the cotton pickers.

CH: Yeah.

DRR: Are there many young people around who would like to work and cannot find work?

CH: Some of 'em work a little while and quit and walk the road.

DRR: Do you think they could find work if they wanted...

CH: They could find work if they want, but they don't want none. Some of 'em don't want no work.

DRR: How do they make a living? How do they get along?

CH: Just walking the road, I guess. 'Cause I know I got to work, old as I is.

DRR: I know what you mean.

CH: I got to work. They don't work. They walk. Then they work a day and take that and go drink it up and that's all.

DRR: I see what you mean. I believe you painted some pictures of Martin Luther King?

CH: No.

DRR: You didn't ever see him, but you admired him a great deal, I guess.

CH: I saw his pictures.

DRR: You saw his pictures. Did you think of him as a very fine person?

CH: Well, I think he's all right.

DRR: What about... I believe I saw a picture of John Kennedy? Did I? President Kennedy?

CH: I don't know. I don't believe I got it now. [pause] Oh yes, that's it.

DRR: I gather you admired him a great deal, you liked him a great deal?

CH: Yeah, I liked him all right.

DRR: If you were to pick out a person that you, that would be your hero, or somebody that you think is one of the very, very fine Americans, who would you name?

CH: Well, I don't know. I can't tell you that today. 'Cause I don't know I can...

DRR: Could you tell me some woman that you admire very much? Above most?

CH: Unh unh.

DRR: Well, I could tell you one I admire--Clementine Hunter.

CH: Yeah, maybe. [laughs]

DRR: You're one of the best. I understand that at one time in this state there was strict segregation or caste between dark-skinned Negroes and light-skinned Negroes. If you remember anything of that sort, do you want to comment on it? How was the difference made? What is it that the black...dark-skinned Negroes did not enjoy that the light-skinned Negroes enjoyed? Could you tell us something about that? If you had any experience.

CH: Well, the light one didn't like the black one. That's all I know. And right now, there's some of them don't like the black one, and some of them

CH: (cont.) don't like the light one. And now they're getting so they're liking the black and the light, all of them together.

DRR: And I suspect that's the way it ought to be, because God made...

CH: It's ought to be, yeah, 'cause God made us, and there ain't but one God. He made white and black, 'cause some of us white, and some of us black. But them light ones is making the different with the black. But you see, now, look like they done change it. They ain't making no different. They got 'em all the same.

DRR: Yes. Now, back when they made a difference, how did they show it? Would the light ones refuse to marry the black ones...

CH: They wouldn't marry the black one.

DRR: What would a mother do if her daughter was going with a black man?

CH: Well, I don't know, she might would kill her, all right.

DRR: You think it might have been just that bad, huh?

CH: Yeah. They didn't like it, but now they don't mind.

DRR: I see. What would you say has been a great influence in your life? Would you say your painting, your friends, or the church, or your parents, or just what? What influenced you, what made you Clementine Hunter that you are?

CH: Well, the church, and the people, my people. I got...had feeling for my people, and I prayed for them, and I'm praying for 'em till yet. I'm trying to make heaven my home, that's what I do.

DRR: A beautiful statement. If you wanted to give a bit of advice to your great-granddaughter over there, how would you tell her to live? What would you tell her?

CH: I'd tell her, the church. Go to church and go to school to learn something. And don't forget the church and her prayers at night. That's what I try to teach her.

DRR: What is your hope for her? I don't mean now that you want her to be a painter or a teacher or a nurse, but what would you hope for her?

CH: Well, I don't know. I hope she'd be something to help herself, a teacher or something. Something or other.

DRR: That's a beautiful expression.

CH: I wish she would.

DRR: When do you intend to stop painting? Let's go back to painting again.

CH: I'm thinking to stop now.

DRR: What do you mean, today? [laughter] You're not going to stop today, are you?

CH: No, not today, but I don't know. I'm getting kinda worried that way.

DRR: What do you mean? Your hands get tired, your mind gets tired...

CH: No, my hands don't get tired, but I got arthritis in my hands, and they hurt. I even can't sew. And some days I can paint, and some days I can't.

DRR: What time of day do you usually paint? When do you paint?

CH: Some time in the morning, when I get up I start painting, and then I quit till the next day.

DRR: What time do you go to bed?

CH: I go to bed about ten o'clock sometime.

DRR: I understand that your paintings are exhibited in various galleries and museums about the country. Have you ever gone to New Orleans or to some place to see your pictures on exhibit?

CH: Before you get through talking, I just tell you, I don't go.

DRR: You don't want to go.

CH: Don't want to go, and I ain't goin'.

DRR: Well, when somebody comes and says, "I read something about your paintings," do you want them to read it to you to see what was said about your pictures?

CH: They can read it if they want.

DRR: But I mean, do you want them to read it to you?

CH: Yeah, if they have a mind to.

DRR: How do you feel when they say something nice about Mrs. Clementine Hunter?

CH: I feel good, I feel fine, but that don't make me go. [laughter]

DRR: I've noticed that you've done flowers, cotton-picking scenes, Christmas scenes--what are some of the other things that you've painted?

CH: Well, not too many other things.

DR: How do you decide what to paint?

CH: I don't know, it just gets in my mind.

DRR: But does it stay in...does it come on all at once?

CH: Yes. At night, sometime be a time when I get to painting. Sometime it don't come on till I be wanting to paint something.

DRR: And you may start the picture and think of something new to add to it as you paint?

CH: Yeah. That's the way.

DRR: And when you end the picture, it may not be what you had in mind at first? Or maybe you've changed it...

CH: Well, just let it get in my mind, that's what I put in the picture.

DRR: That's what you put in. But you get it in your mind as you go along sometimes.

CH: Uh huh.

DRR: How long does it take you to paint, say, a picture the size of this machine [tape recorder]?

CH: Well, about three days.

DRR: About three days. What is the longest time you worked on one picture?

CH: A week.

DRR: Now I read something about a big mural that you had done. I believe it was...I think in a church. It was a great big picture. How long did it take you... Was that the three-week...

CH: That took about, near about a month.

DRR: Well, that "African House," how long did it take you to do that?

CH: Took me a long time.

DRR: Do you go back now and look at the house every now and then?

CH: No. Just every October I go when they got some kind of to-do that I go, but I don't go look at it.

DRR: But you don't go anywhere but to Melrose.

CH: No, I don't go nowhere.

DRR: Now, when you were young, and you worked at the Big House, do you know where any of those people are that you worked for?

CH: They all dead.

DRR: They all dead. None of the youngsters keep in touch with you?

CH: They ain't got but one.

DRR: Does that one keep in touch with you?

CH: Just now and then. He in Natchitoches.

DRR: He comes to see you?

CH: He kinda light, but they...

DRR: But does he come to see you at Christmastime sometimes?

CH: Yeah, he bring me present in the Christmas sometime.

DRR: Tell me something about Mr. François Mignon, you know him?

CH: Yeah.

DRR: A friend of yours, too, I believe. Has he helped you in some way with your painting? Well now, here's Mr. Tom Whitehead, how has he helped you? I know he helped me to get out here to see you.

CH: He helped me to get my boards and paint and everything.

DRR: That's wonderful. What about Dr. Bailey?

CH: Dr. Bailey do the same.

DRR: How did you find them, or how did they find you?

CH: Well, they find me!

DRR: How did Mr. Whitehead find you?

CH: Well, they find me, and I find them, and...Dr. Bailey. Both of them, they good people. I like 'em.

DRR: Yes, I think I like 'em, too, because it was through them I found you. I understand that you had an opportunity to go to Washington for a Mardi Gras ball, someone promised you that you could meet the president if you went there. Did you go?

CH: No, I didn't.

DRR: Well, how did you answer that question...

CH: Well, the way I answered that question,"If the president wants to see me, he would have to come here to my house, 'cause I don't go nowhere."

DRR: And you meant that, too.

CH: And I meant it, and I didn't go.

DRR: You sound like a very independent lady. How do you feel about the critics who look at your paintings? If they say they're not good, do you care?

CH: I don't care how it is. If they want 'em, just let 'em get 'em, and if they don't, they can leave 'em there.

DRR: If they like them, it's okay, and...

CH: And if they don't...

DRR: ...if they don't like them...

CH: ...it's okay.

DRR: It is still okay.

CH: That's right.

DRR: Do you paint for fun? If you didn't get any money for it, you'd paint anyway, I have a feeling.

CH: I'd paint right on.

DRR: That is your hobby.

CH: That's right.

DRR: What other hobbies? You say you piece quilts.

CH: I don't no more.

DRR: No, but you used to.

CH: I used to.

DRR: Did you ever like to fish? Do anything...

CH: Yeah, I like to fish. I used to like to fish. I fish now sometime.

DRR: Is that right? What do you catch?

CH: Catch the catfishes, and breams.

DRR: Do you fish with a rod and reel?

CH: Fish with earthworms.

DRR: And do you get in a boat and go out...

CH: No, I don't get in no boat.

DRR: Just stay on the bank.

CH: Stay on the bank.

DRR: I see you have a picture with a chicken...with a hen in your arms...

CH: That right there?

DRR: Yes. A beautiful picture. Did you used to grow chickens?

CH: Yeah.

DRR: Did you ever grow hogs, cows...

CH: Hogs. I've got some now.

DRR: You have some hogs now? Do you butcher the hogs...

CH: Yeah.

DRR: ...or have them butchered? Is that right? Your health must be extremely good.

CH: Well, pretty good.

DRR: You still eat pork if you want to?

CH: No, not too much.

TW: Ask her if she drinks wine.

DRR: You drink wine?

CH: I drink wine, yeah, but the doctor don't want me to drink none. [laughter]

DRR: Does she know you drink it?

CH: She don't know, but I know. [laughter]

TW: Cold medicine, cold medicine. It's cold medicine, isn't it!

DRR: Oh, it's cold medicine.

CH: Yeah.

DRR: Do you drink anything else besides wine?

CH: No.

DRR: What about Coors and Schlitz beer?

CH: No, I never did drink beer.

DRR: You don't drink cocktails?

CH: Unh unh.

DRR: Well, let me ask you this, and then we're very nearing the end. Do you have any plans of what you would like to have done with your pictures when the good Lord calls you?

CH: Well, you see, I don't know. They got... All them got 'em, they're going to do what they want with them.

DRR: And the ones you leave here, you'll leave 'em for Quida and the other grandchildren?

CH: Yeah, they'll take 'em if they want 'em. And they might go ahead, time I die, and sell them. [laughter] I can't never tell what the children going to do.

DRR: That might happen. Well, I think everybody knows you, and certainly your relatives will be pleased with all the publicity and the historical materials that you're leaving. Mrs. Clementine, before we close this interview, could you tell us some more about Melrose and Mrs. Cammie Henry? She ran Melrose or owned Melrose at one time?

CH: She owned all of Melrose.

DRR: Did you work for her?

CH: Yeah, I cooked.

DRR: You cooked. I suppose you did a lot of good old southern cookery. Did you make...

CH: Well, she's, she didn't like no fancy stuff. She like all old-time cooking.

DRR: Such as?

CH: Yeah, she didn't care what I...

DRR: What kind of pies did you cook for her?

CH: She didn't even want meat pie. She just cook all kind of other hard things, you know. She didn't...

DRR: Did you make...

CH: ...peas and...

DRR: Shrimp gumbo?

CH: Oh yeah, gumbo. Mix it up with different things.

DRR: She enjoyed that?

CH: Yeah.

DRR: Do you make gumbo now sometimes?

CH: Yeah, sometimes.

DRR: Did you make pecan pies?

CH: Yes.

DRR: Did you ever cook crawfish or crayfish--I don't know how you call it.

CH: You boil 'em.

DRR: Just boil them? What do you eat them with?

CH: You eat 'em with anything. You eat 'em with rice, or you can stuff 'em and all like that.

DRR: Well, I understand you've had some recipes published in a cookbook. Do you know what recipes you gave or made?

CH: I must've known when they made the book.

DRR: But you don't remember now?

CH: I don't remember now.

DRR: What kind of bread did Mrs. Cammie usually like?

CH: Cornbread.

DRR: She liked cornbread. I do, too. I understand that. Did she keep livestock on the farm, like cows?

CH: Yeah, lot of 'em.

DRR: She had a lot of servants working out there.

CH: Lot of 'em.

DRR: Was she a churchgoing woman?

CH: I don't know. I never saw much of church service. [laughter] I can't tell you that.

DRR: Did she have a lot of parties, garden parties?

CH: No, she just liked a lot of singing at night. Baptist singing, she liked it all.

DRR: Who would do the singing?

CH: Well, all the people around on the place. She'd get 'em all to her house one night, and get 'em to sing.

DRR: Were these black people?

CH: Black people, black people.

DR: Was there a preacher on her place?

CH: Yes.

DRR: Would he hold church every Sunday?

CH: Every Sunday.

DRR: And I guess the sisters would shout?

CH: Yeah, they'd shout and fall out, but not me, I didn't... [laughter]

DRR: Did you go to the church where the...

CH: Yeah, I go. I like to go.

DRR: But that wasn't the Catholic church, was it?

CH: No, that Baptist.

DRR: It sounds just like a Baptist. I'm a Baptist. I can say that. And the preacher would holler loud...

CH: Yeah, and preach loud.

DRR: And long?

CH: Long time, yeah.

DRR: And call collection.

CH: That's right. You bring the money up after that.

DRR: How did he get the money?

CH: Well, they go put it on the table.

DRR: Was Mrs. Cammie nice to the people who worked for her? They all loved her?

CH: Oh yeah. Yeah, she was nice to 'em.

DRR: Did you stay with her until her death, until she died?

CH: Right there with her.

DRR: How old was she?

CH: Well, I don't know. She was older than I was.

DRR: Well now, what happened to Melrose?

CH: Well, they sold Melrose after they died.

DRR: After she died. You don't know how long... You don't know what year she died?

CH: No, I don't know.

DRR: You were a widow quite a long time.

CH: I was a widow a long time.

DRR: A long time. Did you find it hard to be a widow after having been a married woman? Was it hard for you to make a living for yourself and your children?

CH: Well, not too hard. Just went on to work. I knew I had to work for a living by myself, then. And I just went on to work.

DRR: Well, how did you keep the other fellows from wanting to marry you and coming around...

CH: 'Cause I just tell them no.

DRR: Just tell 'em no, it's just that simple.

CH: That's right.

DRR: Mrs. Clementine, you talked about the noisy services or worship that the good Baptist folk used to have down at Melrose. It sort of seems sometimes that we black people are pretty emotional, and certainly we show our emotions a lot at funerals. Have you seen [people] exhibit a lot of emotionalism at funerals?

CH: Yes, a lot of 'em.

DRR: Do you go to funerals?

CH: I used to.

DRR: Why don't you go any more?

CH: I don't go no more 'cause it worry me, 'cause I don't like all, all that, 'cause I got a sister, it'll kill you--you know, it can make too much... They do too much--them, you know, but not me. 'Cause I can't even cry.

CH: (cont.) I ain't cried when my mama died, you know, when you don't cry when your mother died, well, you ain't gonna cry. But it hurt me, but I just can't cry. Can't do that. That's why I don't go.

DRR: Well, thank you for that. Mrs. Clementine, I understand there's going to be an exhibit at the University of Texas in Arlington next February, and that some of your works will be on display there, and I want you to know, I plan to be there, and I'll just point out, with so much pride, "I know this lady. I had the opportunity and the honor of interviewing her." And if you should change your mind about going to your own exhibits, you might come up and be my guest for a while.

CH: Well, I'll just tel-...

DRR: ...don't, I'll surely be there.

CH: Well, you can be there. I hope you be there. But Clementine ain't going to be there. [laughter]

DRR: Okay. This interview will be sent to the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College in Boston, Massachusetts, and as Mr. Whitehead pointed out before our interview, they selected you as one of the women to be interviewed because you had made such an unusual contribution to the field of art with your folk art painting. And they consider it an honor to have had this interview with you. Do you want to say any word to them, did you want to say thank you, or you're sorry they bothered you or anything?

CH: No, I'm not sorry, and I thank 'em. I'm glad.

DRR: Good. Thank you very much, Mrs. Clementine.

CLEMENTINE HUNTER

Index

A native of Lavaca County, Texas, Mrs. Dorothy Robinson has been active in the field of education for over forty years, serving in the Texas public schools as teacher, principal, and coordinator of special education. She graduated in home economics from Prairie View University, and holds a master's degree from San Francisco State Teachers College. She is the author of The Bell Rings at Four, A Black Teacher's Chronicle of Change.