

TAPE LOG and TRANSCRIPT – Septima P. Clark

Interviewee: SEPTIMA P. CLARK
Interviewer: Ruth Miller and Linda Felkel
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Transcribed by: Jessica M. Strangstalien

TAPE LOG – Septima P. Clark

Timestamp	Topic
0:25	Recalls what Johns Island was like when she became a teacher at the Promise Land School in 1916. Talks about transportation, the houses and living conditions on the island.
5:17	Taught the fourth through seventh grade at Promise Land School. Took the children on fieldtrips to the Angel Oak tree where on many occasions they played and ate lunches.
8:28	Remembers her house on Johns Island.
10:12	Although her mother was a native of Charleston, she received her education in Haiti. Talks about the difference between the way her mother lived and the way she lived while living on Johns Island.
12:20	Compares the Promise Land School with the school for white children across the street.
14:22	Recalls a story about the Angel Oak tree. How ox carts pulled two branches over across the fence.
16:30	Types of cottages that were on the island.
18:18	Tells how the tree may have got the name Angel Oak.
23:30	Taught people how to read through familiar songs under the Angel Oak with Guy and Candy Carawan.
27:28	Tells about the importance of the Angel Oak tree to the African Americans of Johns Island.
30:08	Discusses the changes in the Angel Oak from 1916 to 1980.

TRANSCRIPT – Septima P. Clark

Felkel: This is November 20, 1980. This is Linda Felkel with Ruth Miller interviewing Septima Clark at 364 President Street.

RM: You might remember, because this is more, um, the statistics, like how old is it, and that's statistics, but we like the stories, something you might remember, maybe a ghost story about the tree or something funny that happened?

SC: There were so many ghost stories over there on Johns Island. I think Michael Freeman tells you in his article of this book here, *Angel Oak*, how his daughter could see the ghosts and how they decided that, uh, some sheriff was killed by the tree, and another man was killed by the tree. Now really they don't know those things to be true, but those were the stories that were on the island. I went over there in 1916. I finished Avery (unintelligible) when I turned eighteen and I went over to Johns Island to teach. I don't whether you know if you know it, but black girls could not teach in the city of Charleston because segregation was at its height, and um, we had to go over to the islands to teach. And over on Johns Island, back in Charleston County, we were able to teach six months. And most of the other counties just had from two to three months on the count of cotton and the older children having to go into the fields.

So, I went over to Johns Island and at that time, transportation was really a problem. There were no bridges. We had to go by boat. It took me nine hours to go from Charleston down to Promise Land School, where I was working, and landed at that place called Mullet Hall—the place that Limehouse owns today. I would leave here at three o'clock in the afternoon, had a little gasoline lunch, and um, arrive there about twelve o'clock at night. And if the tide was not high, then I could not land. I would have to wait in that little boat until the tide came up the next morning. And then I get out there at that Mullet Hall and go to that school. So, that was the way we did it in 1916 all the way till around 1945, when we got our first bridge. Transportation was a great problem. Now, I could come home sometimes Thanksgiving period because the boats didn't come but on Tuesdays and Thursdays and I would be teaching and the, um, the boats then, I couldn't get a boat, so um, I could have somebody ride me about eighteen miles down the island to what we call Limehouse Bridge. There, I could get a train and come on in to Charleston and then, go back the same way and ride back about eighteen miles. That was a type of thing. Living there was an extremely—um, hazardous kind of a thing. Most of the people living in Johns Island, at that time, had very uncomfortable houses, just sort of little shacks. Well even the white planters, um, papered their walls with the funny papers. You could sit in there and read about (unintelligible) when you went to have your claims signed. You know, you had to have your claims signed.

Well in this school, my school was made of logs and in between the cracks they had mud and, um, had a big chimney with openings on both sides. It was a two teacher school. The chimney would heat the people right around the front and all the children to the back, like the teacher, were almost frozen. My feet really got so frozen that, um, I had chilled veins. And there were no doctors on the islands at that time. We had to pass this Angel Oak tree to go to Wadmalaw. There was a doctor on Wadmalaw, Doctor Barnwell. He was the only doctor for the five islands nearby, and uh, of course the people practiced their

medicine, all of their voodoo and witch doctor things. They told me to heat a potato and put my heel in it. Which I did and I almost lost my heel too! (both laugh) I had to come to Charleston to get something done for my feet. The children brought little buckets, little tin buckets, that had grits and oysters in there. That was their lunch, you know, for them. Also, on that island there were two dumb boys and the people expected me to teach them. So, they sent them to school everyday and all they did was sat up there and made fun. I really couldn't teach the dumb to speak, but coming over from Charleston, I found somebody who could tell me about a school in Greenville. And I finally got their parents to consent to let these two boys go to Greenville so that they could be taught.

My school, there were one hundred and thirty two black children of school age down there and I had to—well there were two of us, I had from fourth through the seventh and the other teacher had from the first up to the fourth grade. And of course, there were not too many of the larger children coming until the harvest was over in November. And from the last of November to the last part of February we had the big children. And the little ones came and we would let the little children bring the babies because their parents signed, you know, contracts to go into the fields and we had little pallets made of quilts that they had on the floor where these babies slept, while I was there.

Segregation was at its height, but the *tree* was not segregated, and so in the springtime to have some kind of, um, recreation program for the children. We could take a lunch and go to the Angel Oak tree.

RM: It was just open for everyone to use?

SC: It was open for everybody to use. Uh-huh.

RM: What year was that?

SC: Nineteen sixteen. I was there from 1916 to 1919 and then I went back from 1926 to 1929 and it was still open at that time for everybody to use.

RM: Who was the owner at that time?

SC: I really don't know. I thought the people who owned that church, right there.

RM: Saint John's?

SC: Yeah, but uh, I really don't know who owned the tree, but they never were, uh, they never segregated it so that we couldn't go in. We could go in and have our picnic lunch, spend the day, the children would play under the tree and then we would come back. We had buggies, carts pulled by ox. (laughs)

RM: It was really a fieldtrip for the day?

SC: That's right, it was. The different men in the community would let you use these ox carts. I rode on one to school every morning because I lived about a mile and a half or more from the Promise Land School. That was the best house—and I had a room up in

the attic with a lantern in the ceiling and at night, on Saturday nights, which was a great bathing night, when all the people went to bed I could bathe in the living room where the chimney was. This is the kind of life we had over there.

The people were real funny about religion. When the teacher went to church and she didn't have something to say, then they considered you were not a Christian—and in the summertime, well we started school in September which is usually pretty hot, and if you sat on the porch with your stockings off, they considered you not a Christian either. They declared the devil is going to get that teacher because she got bare legs sitting out on that porch. (both laugh). Those were the kind of things we had over there on the island.

Even the people who were supposed to be a little better off—the man I was living with had a farm and he had a store and his wife took care of the people, fed them at dinner time. Never the less, they didn't see that they should buy pots. They cook the tomato sauce and things right in the can and that was the kind of things we had. They had big wash pots that they used for fish, to fry the fish and cook the fish in, but um, I never worried about the life, the kind of living that we had. Although I'd been bred in Charleston, with a mother who was a free issue, and a mother who had been raised in Haiti and had a lot of cultural ideas from the English. Never the less, when I went over there, I felt different. I know it was different from my mother, she came over one Sunday and boy it was hard for her. To see her riding in an ox cart and to, um, live in an attic room with a lantern in the ceiling and to have to bathe in a big chimney when the other people were gone and to see the people cooking in tin cans. Those things were really something (unintelligible). (both laugh)

Then we had little water, very little, they um, although we were surrounded by Bohicket Creek, um, very few of them had wells and there were open surface wells where I was and when it rained everything went into that and you know, there were no outdoor privies either. People just used the bushes, and so, your water was not at all safe and on Saturdays, when you had to bathe, they would get, um, usually they would catch the rain water, they would make or get a tub full of water and you would bathe yourself, you wash your hair, you wash you wash your clothes all in that same water. Last year, I happened to be at a health workshop over on Johns Island and a man came from the Midwest and he told me they had the same kind of life. They had very little water, and I do know that on the mountains of Tennessee they also had no privies. They didn't even have the outdoor privies for the children at the school. They didn't have them at my school either. That was the kind of life that we had.

Well at the school, we had one hundred and thirty two children, all total. And across the street, my school was painted black. It had creosote put all over it, and um, there weren't but three white children down in our section. Now, the Andell's had three children and they had a white teacher for that school and that school was whitewashed. It was a little house. It was a little three room house. They had a bucket with a dipper and the reason why I know is because we went with the white teachers at the same time to get our claims signed down at the trustee's house. The trustee's wife—I always say there are warm spots in the hearts of some people—she would always give us a jar of pickles or something. She knew we were living in a different kind of culture then what we came from. Sometimes she would give us a jar of preserves and sometimes a jar of pickles, but if the man was eating his supper, when we went down there to get our claims signed, that's before you could get your money, you would have to stay out on the porch regardless of

the weather and wait until he got through eating before you could go in to get your claims signed. It's just that kind of a thing.

RM: A claim is like your paycheck for teaching?

SC: Uh-huh, like a paycheck. You had a little, kind of a book that you kept your attendance record in, you tore that out and filled in the number of days you had taught and then you would have to get these trustees on the island to sign them, even before you could come to Charleston. You would get your money in Charleston at that time.

RM: Did you hear any stories about, um, the limbs of the tree being pulled over by the oxen when the carts were tied there? I don't know if that has any credibility because a live oak naturally grows down like that and the roots won't go in to the ground and the limbs just naturally go over but, one of the Angel girls told me she had heard that story.

SC: Yeah, but you see that part that is way over? You know, here is the big tree, and um, here is another section that has gone over. Well, away from this tree you know because these limbs hits the ground, you cross that gate we used to go in, and on the other side you see two, um, limbs over there?

RM: Uh-huh.

SC: Well, that's what the island people said, that when they tied the oxen, it dragged a part of that tree to the other side of that fence. Now that's a big part of the tree too. There are two great big limbs over there. That is a part of the Angel Oak that was dragged from the main tree by oxen being tied when the people were working. You know, that was a field that was across the road from there.

RM: That was the only form of transportation you used when you went to school and took those children to the tree?

SC: That's right.

RM: Most everyone used oxen on that island?

SC: Uh-huh, that's right, even the judge. Judge Jenkins had an ox cart and if I could get down to his, um, road every morning, I could ride in his ox cart all the way to the school. Yeah, that was the form of transportation.

RM: There weren't mules? I thought there would have been mules?

SC: Well, they had mules, but um, they did have some mules, but they mostly rode in the ox cart and we used the ox cart. Most of the black people used the ox cart all the time, going to church and all. They got in that ox cart.

RM: Do you remember home being near the tree? What did it look like?

SC: Yes, um, one of those three room things, opened right from the front, with the rooms back one behind the other. The cottage, yes, it was just a little cottage. It was built one room behind the other. You opened the door and that was the front part. You can't say it was a front room because had beds in all the rooms, even in the kitchen. There weren't but three rooms and you had beds in each room because most of those people had large families, and so, they had to have beds in all of the rooms.

RM: Now, was that the owner's house?

SC: Of the tree?

RM: Of the tree.

SC: Not that I know of. It was somebody who worked, one of the caretakers of the farm right across from the Angel Oak tree. There is still an old house there. Did you notice? Not too far. Still one of the old shacks right there.

RM: There is still a lady living in there.

SC: Those were the kind of homes that most of them lived in. You know?

RM: But this house that you remember, next to the tree, was it right beside the tree?

SC: It was across that road.

RM: Across the street?

SC: Yeah, right across that road.

RM: In that field?

SC: Uh-huh.

RM: There wasn't any house around the tree?

SC: No, wasn't really at that time.

RM: What year was that?

SC: Nineteen sixteen.

RM: So, there weren't any Angel's living there at that time?

SC: (laughing) No, let me tell you a funny story about that. My sister-in-law took her little boy and took some people to see that Angel oak and the little boy was about three

years of age and he fell asleep and when he got awake he said, "I see a big tree, but I don't see no angel." He couldn't see the angel, they call it Angel Oak and he couldn't understand that.

RM: Did you ever know that, um, Margaret Angel Bolt, the lady that was in the confederate home, until about a year ago, she died. She was the last, well, the next to the last owner because when she died she left it to her daughter, Dorothy and Dorothy sold it because of the vandalism in that area.

SC: Yeah, so much. I'm always carrying people over there. I have people from the eastern part of Tennessee, from Palm Springs, California and they just called me the other night. I took them all over to see that Angel Oak, I've taken so many groups over there to see the Angel Oak, and um, when we went over there the litter was terrible. You know, so many people come over here with all the cans and the bottles and the paper where they eat lunch under there.

RM: Was it always like that? Did people used to take care of the tree?

SC: Yeah, I thought that when I used to carry my children up there, down there from Promise Land, we never had all that litter, but just since we've had people coming in now from everywhere that you have that litter. The people on Johns Island didn't do that type of thing. They really didn't.

RM: When do you feel the change occurred? In the fifties? In the sixties?

SC: Yeah, just about the fifties. When I started working in eleven deep South states, beginning in '56 and talking about the Angel oak, numbers of people would come up here from Mississippi, Alabama and all around and knowing that I knew about this tree. I would take them over, they would come to me and I would carry them over to see the tree. That's when we had a lot of litter coming in, the fifties and sixties, but it really wasn't so in the thirties. The twenties and thirties, you didn't have that. You could go up there and eat your lunch and sometimes they would put their trash in their baskets, you know, how they brought their lunch. That's what we did too when we carried the children down.

RM: Dorothy told me, the daughter of the last Angel lady that owned the tree, that her mother had built a house over there at the tree and from what I understand it must have been in the late thirties or early forties the house was there. I'm not sure if it was a brick house or not, but it must've been located to the left of the tree, where that new health center is. About in that area, there is supposed to be a road you can see going up to it.

SC: Yeah, there is a road.

RM: Do you remember that house?

SC: Yeah, but I thought that was the rectory for the church. It didn't have to be, but I thought it belonged to the church and the minister lived in there.

RM: It might have become the rectory later because now they all belong to Saint John's. A lot of them are buried there.

SC: Uh-huh. I thought that was what that house was for because there is a fence going right through that road and right by that fence there was that house.

RM: Was the house to the left of the health care center, or, was it more midway between the church and the tree?

SC: Let me see, yeah. It was in-between the church and the tree. I can remember that house but I really thought it belonged to the minister.

RM: She might have built it and later given it, might have given it to them. Was that same road still used?

SC: Yes. We went down that road in an automobile then. (laughs) Around the fifties and sixties we went in automobiles. I didn't have the ox cart anymore. While the people were coming in from various places.

pause in recording

SC: . . .(unintelligible) something about a struggle, *Freedom is a Common Struggle*.

RM: Is it a book?

SC: Yeah, it is a book. And then they have a book of songs taken from Johns Island and they did a lot of that under the tree.

RM: What are there names now?

SC: Guy and Candy Carawan.

RM: How do you spell that last name?

SC: C-a-r-a-w-a-n. They lived on Johns Island in a house that was owned by Doctor Felder on that river road at that time around 1960.

RM: Sixty?

SC: Yeah, because we were teaching people how to read and write by music and he played the guitar and he played the songs, and um, while he played their songs. They knew the words and they could put the words on paper and then they could learn from

those words, learn how to read newspapers and how to read the bible. That's what they wanted to do.

RM: You know, I'm wondering if you heard it called by other names?

SC: Other than the Angel Oak? Never.

RM: Did you ever hear stories on how it got the name Angel Oak?

SC: No. The people on the island, they declared, that um, that angels would appear. Well, in the form of a ghost, but how the tree got its name I never did understand that, no, because they said that the tree was there during slavery times and the killings and things that happened around the tree, they could see them through the stars out there. People who were supposed to have had a caul, were born with a caul. In that way they could see things around that tree. I've never been able to see any of those.

RM: Well what, they thought the tree was used for hangings, or something?

SC: No. They just declared that, um, there were killings around the tree and that they could see them out of their eyes. I don't know how in the world they did it but you know we still have people today who declare that they can see the spirits moving in so many ways, bringing them to your house and doing this, that, and the other. Which I've never been able. To say when people are born with the call, sometimes black stuff over their eyes, that they are able to see these spirits. I haven't been able to see them.

RM: So the tradition was that these spirits were around that tree?

SC: Yeah, it was supposed to have been the spirits and because the spirits were around that tree, and it was a live oak tree, then they considered that the angels brought these spirits there. So, that's how they finally decided that Angel Oak was the name for this tree.

RM: There wasn't a plantation owner there with the name Angel, at that time?

SC: There could have been, but I haven't heard of it.

RM: It must not have been at that time because if it had have been, then they wouldn't have that story, probably.

SC: Uh-huh, that's right. No, I've never heard of a plantation owner by that name of Angel Oak because most of the plantation owners around Johns Island, when I was there in 1916, were the Legares and the Andells, and the Seabrooks and the um - those were big planters, you know, on the island. And, Limehouses had quite a bit.

LF: Let me ask you something about another aspect about the blacks on the island. We have never had any problems with the blacks, since we started charging admission.

We've never had any problems with the vandalism from the blacks. The only thing we have had, or noticed about the blacks was that they all seem to have a great love for the tree and respect for the tree, and um, and seem to take more of an interest than anyone else that comes to that tree. Why do you think that is?

SC: Because from the early days, I think, the stories people told their children about that tree. It was sacred, and it is sacred to them. So, they respected it. When I took my children over to have picnics and things, they never thought they could drop a piece of paper around the tree. The very word angel means that it is sacred to them, you know, and so they felt that anything that was like an angel had to be clean and had to be loved and had to be respected. This is the kind of thing that I think the people on the island still feel about the Angel Oak. They don't feel, in any way, that they should desecrate it, do anything that would tend to make it look (unintelligible). That's the incoming people, who want to see the Angel Oak that dropped paper.

LF: I agree. Do you know of any people who have been married out there, or, any events that had occurred out there?

SC: I don't know if any of them had any weddings. We had weddings and great things when I was out there, but I really don't remember going to one under the Angel Oak.

RM: Any other special celebrations, like you said your class, were there any other groups?

SC: There were ten black schools on the island and nearly all those teachers used the Angel Oak for their recreational programs.

LF: There weren't any special events though? They were regular field trips that they would take?

SC: That's it, field trips in the spring that we carried our children to the tree and they ate their lunch there, played their games under the tree and got ready to come back in.

LF: Can you visually see that much difference between 1916? Was that the first time you saw the tree?

SC: Yes.

RM: And today, as far as the carvings, the paintings, anything visually, how much change would you say has occurred in the tree, or even the growth of the tree?

SC: Well, when I took my children there in 1916, uh, the tree is really as it is today, without the carvings. People have come around in the fifties and sixties and everybody wants to write their name on the tree somewhere. That wasn't true in 1916. Another thing that I noticed is the little tree across that had been dragged by the ox carts, it has grown so much bigger now. It is soon going to be another big tree.

end of recording

SCHEP