



## BEYOND ROSA PARKS

# Interview with Mary McLeod Bethune

*This document is a transcript of an interview apparently conducted in about 1939 or 1940 by Dr. Charles Spurgeon Johnson, an authority on race relations who chaired the Sociology Department and was later the first black president at traditionally-black Fisk University.*

I think that possibly the first and real **wound** that I could feel in my soul and my mind was the realization of the dense darkness and ignorance that I found in myself—when I did find myself—with the seeming absence of a remedy. What I mean by that was the recognition of the lack of opportunity. I could see little white boys and girls going to school every day, learning to read and write; living in comfortable homes with all types of opportunities for growth and service and to be surrounded as I was with no opportunity for school life, no chance to grow—I found myself very often yearning all along for the things that were being provided for the white children with whom I had to chop cotton every day, or pick corn, or whatever my task happened to be.

I think that actually, the first hurt that came to me in my childhood was the contrast of what was being done for the white children and the lack of what we got.

**Johnson:** At what age did this occur?

**Bethune:** Around nine or ten years.

**Johnson:** Sometimes we may be feeling that thing under the surface for a long time and a little instance touches it off. Do you remember any such?

**Bethune:** My mother kept in rather close contact with the people she served as a slave. She continued to cook for her master until she owned five acres of land. He deeded her five acres. The cabin, my father and brothers built. It was the cabin in

which I was born. She kept up these relations. Very often I was taken along after I was old enough, and on one of these occasions I remember my mother went over to do some special work for this family of Wilsons, and I was with her. I went out into what they called their play house in the yard where they did their studying. They had pencils, **slates**, magazines and books.

I picked up one of the books ... and one of the girls said to me—“You can’t read that—put that down. I will show you some pictures over here,” and when she said to me “You can’t read that—put that down” it just did something to my pride and to my heart that made me feel that some day I would read just as she was reading.

I did put it down, and followed her lead and looked at the picture book that she had. But I went away from there determined to learn how to read and that some day I would master for myself just what they were getting and it was that aim that I followed. ...

That first morning on my way to school I kept the thought uppermost “Put that down—you can’t read,” and I felt that I was on my way to read and it

was one of the **incentives** that fired me in my determination to read. And I think that because of that I grasped my lessons and my words better than the average child and it was not long before I was able to read and write. ...

(11) **Johnson:** Were there any other colored children around your age? What was their outlook?

**Bethune:** There was nothing for them to **aspire** to—it was an incentive to me, and of course, many followers after that. Many boys and girls of the community. A new life came into the district.

Sunday afternoon I would take the farm children for miles around—I would give them whatever I had learned during the week ... Poetry, reading, songs, etc. ... I would give to them as often as I got. As I got I gave. They gave me a broader capacity for taking in and I feel that up to today, I feel it in all things, and I feel that as I give I get.

(12) I think the very first thrill I got from being able to transfer a desire for learning and the buckling down to getting something was from my own brother who was older than I was.

(13) When he saw what it was doing for me and that I was able to help him master his letters, and words so that he could open his eyes, and he could see and he began to realize what it meant to get some learning and to, himself, be awakened to such extent as to go ten miles at night to the Maysville village and attend night school until all could read, write and apply himself.

Things got and remembered was what he [her brother] got, what my immediate family got and the awakening came to mother and father when able to sit down and read the newspapers and magazines and the Bible to them—that they had in their own home somebody who could do that—that was the greatest thrill.

Of course, that was just the beginning of the thousands and thousands of lives that have been touched and awakened all along the way.

**Johnson:** I am very much interested in seeing just how a kind of family setting—however impoverished it may be, may have something that would set a person off ... How did this radiate in the community?

**Bethune:** In this way—that a new standard for living was set up in many of the homes and different little school centers were set up and workers who did not have much money, but more than they had before; and the little Sunday School, and the little chorus, and things of that kind. It brought about a growth—a desire for learning. It gave to the masses there an understanding that they just did not have to continue in darkness—that there was a chance. ...

(26) As I studied the situation I saw the importance of someone going down there doing something—So I selected Daytona Beach, a town where very conservative people lived and where James N. Gamble (of the Proctor & Gamble Company of Cincinnati); Thomas White, (of the White Sewing Machine Company of Cleveland); and other fine people. A fine club of white women in that section formed a philanthropic group of ... Palmetto Club through whom I thought approaches could be made. The colored people had little to offer. A splendid man of the Baptist church, Rev. A.L. James; another fine man of the little Methodist Episcopal church ... had conferences with these people and a little woman named Mrs. Warn, had some daughters who felt the importance of some one doing something in that section and gave their cooperation with my idea of starting a school. I made up my mind that I would do it and started out.

**SOURCE:** The original transcript is available at the Department of State or the State Library and Archives of Florida: [www.floridamemory.com/onlineclassroom/marybethune/documents/interview/?transcript=33](http://www.floridamemory.com/onlineclassroom/marybethune/documents/interview/?transcript=33).