

Black Archives of Mid-America / Kansas City Public Library Oral History Collection (AC12)

Interview #11: Cameron, Dr. Jeremiah

Interviewer: Milton Smith

Date: 04/11/1976

Length: 73:03

Summary:

00:00 – 02:25: Discussion of Dr. Cameron’s family background. Dr. Cameron was born in 1919 in Kansas City, Missouri. The family moved frequently and often lived in poverty.

02:25 – 04:35: Discussion of schools attended by Dr. Cameron. Dr. Cameron attended Attucks School, Yates School, and Penn School. Penn School was one of the oldest schools in Kansas City, Missouri. Dr. Cameron knew Charlie Parker; both attended Penn School. Dr. Cameron later attended Lincoln High School and the University of Indiana.

04:56 – 06:28: Discussion of Westport. African Americans lived west of Broadway Boulevard in the Mill Creek area of Westport. Younger African Americans were not interested in staying in Westport.

06:29 – 08:28: Discussion of teachers at Lincoln High School. The teachers were well trained and dedicated; most had Masters degrees. Dr. Cameron learned African American history at Lincoln High School. He names a number of teachers, including Dr. Girard T. Bryant, J. K. Russell, William Griffin, and Burt Mayberry.

08:29 – 10:54: Discussion of the quality of education at Lincoln High School. The teachers emphasized black culture and achievements. Dr. Cameron also discusses principal H. O. Cook.

10:55 – 11:36: Discussion of Dr. Cameron’s experience at the University of Indiana. He was one of two students who graduated Suma Cum Laude at a time when racism in Indiana was very prevalent. Dr. Cameron’s degree is in English.

11:37 – 13:39: Dr. Cameron describes changes during his lifetime. He says Lincoln High School is a shadow of the school it once was, but black students can now go to the schools they want and take the courses they want to take.

13:40 – 16:24: Dr. Cameron discusses what it was like to be poor during the Great Depression. When he attended Lincoln High School, he could not afford to have lunch. Streets in the city, made of wooden blocks, were pulled up and burned so

people could keep warm. Dr. Cameron also discusses the role of Tom Pendergast in running Kansas City, Missouri. Kansas City remained a safe place through the 1940s; things started to change in the 1950s.

16:25 – 18:37: Discussion of fellow students who went on to success. Dr. Cameron briefly talks about Arthur Saunders, Nathan Washington, and Mary Lou Williams.

18:38 – 19:52: Discussion of clubs and other places musicians played in the 18th and Vine district. Dr. Cameron specifically mentions Fox's Tavern and Charlie Parker standing outside to hear music played.

19:53 – 25:06: Dr. Cameron describes his advanced education after World War II. He attended school during the summer at the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin, and Michigan State University. Dr. Cameron also discusses his dissertation; his dissertation was held to a different standard than those of white students. He received his Ph.D. in English and Linguistics from Michigan State University.

25:07 – 30:14: Discussion of life at the universities Dr. Cameron attended. Dr. Cameron also discusses his subject area, English and linguistics, and the poetry of Leroi Jones.

30:15 – 30:28: Discussion about black life in Chicago.

30:29: End of side one.

30:30 – 33:09: Continued discussion of black life in Chicago and Indiana. Dr. Cameron also discusses Dr. Will T. Hale; Dr. Hale had a reputation for discriminating against African American students, but Dr. Cameron did not have that experience.

33:10 – 36:02: Discussion of Dr. Cameron's military service during World War II. Dr. Cameron served in the Air Force and was stationed at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, Missouri. He did not have to go overseas. The Air Force was terrible for African Americans. Dr. Cameron describes the segregated bathrooms and other discriminatory practices at Jefferson Barracks.

36:03 – 38:29: Discussion of Dr. Cameron's teaching career. Dr. Cameron taught for eleven years at Lincoln High School and four years at Central High School. After Central High School, Dr. Cameron became the first African American teacher at Kansas City Junior College. Dr. Cameron stayed in Kansas City to care for his mother and siblings. He also discusses his siblings.

38:30 – 40:17: Discussion of Kansas City Junior College. Dr. Cameron compares the culture of Kansas City Junior College to that of the University of Chicago. He sees the role of junior colleges as places for students to catch up and move on to other schools.

- 40:18 – 45:08: Discussion of the University of Missouri – Kansas City. Dr. Cameron believes the course offerings at the university are lacking, and it does not have first rate professors. Dr. Cameron is on staff at the University of Missouri – Kansas City. He also discusses Dr. Robert M. Farnsworth, who asked him to teach black literature at the university.
- 45:09 – 51:41: Dr. Cameron discusses his commitment to teaching African American literature. Dr. Cameron also discusses a number of black authors, including Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin.
- 51:42 – 53:28: Discussion about Dr. Cameron’s writing. Dr. Cameron writes articles for *The Call* newspaper, but his position with the NAACP takes up a lot of his time. Dr. Cameron believes using his pen for the NAACP is more important than producing scholarship. Dr. Cameron also discusses Jean Toomer.
- 53:29 – 57:32: Discussion of Dr. Cameron’s work with the local NAACP branch. Dr. Cameron serves as public relations director for the local branch. Dr. Cameron discusses the fight against Dr. Edward E. Fields and the Kansas City, Missouri, School District.
- 57:33 – 59:59: Discussion of activism. Dr. Cameron believes writers in universities need to make their writing come alive by active participation in the world.
- 60:00 – Dr. Cameron discusses teaching remedial reading.
- 60:59: End of tape one.
- 61:00 – 64:14: Continued discussion of teaching remedial reading. Dr. Cameron uses magazines to help teach reading. Students should read what they want to read; it keeps students engaged.
- 64:15 – 67:16: Discussion of Dr. Cameron’s involvement with the NAACP. Dr. Cameron became involved in the organization when Dr. Julia H. Hill became president of the branch. Dr. Cameron discusses Dr. Hill and his “running battle” with Clarence Kelley.
- 67:18 – 68:31: Dr. Cameron discusses the Kansas City Parks and Recreation Board of Commissioners and hiring. Dr. Cameron serves on the Board of Commissioners. He believes it is one of the most racially discriminatory groups.
- 68:32 – 70:10: Dr. Cameron discusses his philosophy. He believes when you know what is right, you should pursue the right.
- 70:11: Discussion of youth. Dr. Cameron believes they ought to learn basic skills, to read and write, and to be mannerly. Learn to express righteous indignation.
- 73:02: End of tape two.

Index Terms:

18th and Vine District
 Attucks School [Kansas City, Missouri]
 Baldwin, James
 Baraka, Amiri
 Cameron, Jeremiah
 Central High School [Kansas City, Missouri]
 Cook, Hugh O.
 Education
 Farnsworth, Robert M.
 Fields, Edward E.
 Fox's Tavern [Kansas City, Missouri]
 Great Depression
 Hill, Julia H.
 Hughes, Langston
 Jefferson Barracks
 Kansas City, Missouri
 Kansas City, Missouri, NAACP Branch
 Kansas City, Missouri, School District
 Kansas City Junior College [Kansas City, Missouri]
 Lincoln High School [Kansas City, Missouri]
 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
 Parker, Charlie
 Parks and Recreation Department [Kansas City, Missouri]
 Penn School [Kansas City, Missouri]
 Racism
 Saunders, Arthur G.
 Schools
 Segregation
 Teachers
 Toomer, Jean
 University of Missouri – Kansas City
 University of Wisconsin [Madison, Wisconsin]
 Westport Neighborhood [Kansas City, Missouri]
 Williams, Mary Lou
 Wright, Richard
 Yates School [Kansas City, Missouri]

**Summary compiled by Susan Bubalo, June 2014. Edited by Michael Sweeney,
 Collection Librarian, July 2014.**