

Excerpt from an oral history interview with Albert Delaney Salisbury, part of the Lawrence/Douglas County [KS] African American Oral History Interviews collection; accessible at http://oralhistory.lplks.org//4albert_salisbury.html.

The original interview was collected by Curtis Nether on June 15, 1977.

Introduction to the online interview transcript:

Albert Delaney Salisbury

Albert Delaney Salisbury's family moved to Lawrence from Topeka in 1905. Mr. Salisbury discusses the role of blacks in World War I, jobs open to blacks, racial barriers, all-black social clubs and activities, and black businesses.

... MR. NETHER: Early in the 1900's, okay, it was one of the most atrocious times for blacks. They were being lynched. Ku Klux Klan was running rampant. It was hard times in the history of black people. In 1914 we got involved in World War I. It was said to be the war that they stood in line to fight. Everybody was so patriotic and everything, wanting to fight. Despite the feelings for the conditions that blacks were suffering, do you think blacks were still anxious and willing to go fight in the war? Do you think that blacks during World War I were anxious to enlist and go fight for their country?

MR. DELANEY: No, I don't think they were.

MR. NETHER: Do you know why not?

MR. DELANEY: The way things were here in this county, treatment that they received here, they didn't know what they would be fighting for.

MR. NETHER: All right.

MR. DELANEY: I take it that would be that way. You think so?

MR. NETHER: They said fight for democracy and you didn't have democracy. Did many blacks despite what was happening go to the war?

MR. DELANEY: Quite a few, yes, that's right. Quite a few.

MR. NETHER: What kind of units did they have? Were the units segregated?

MR. DELANEY: Yeah, pretty much of a segregated army. Mostly work battalion is what I understand in World War I.

MR. NETHER: Do you know where most of the black soldiers went to take their basic training?

MR. DELANEY: I think most of them went to Ft. Riley.

MR. NETHER: The ones here from Lawrence?

MR. DELANEY: Yeah, Ft. Riley. Of course, the folks that went into officer's training, they went different places. They were assigned different places.

MR. NETHER: Could black people go to officer's training?

MR. DELANEY: Yes, but they would have to be recommended just like that letter I showed you, have to be recommended to go.

MR. NETHER: Did your father-in-law get his chance to fight in World War I, get a chance to serve?

MR. DELANEY: No, he didn't.

MR. NETHER: What was it like here on the home front during World War I? What was it like for blacks? Was segregation still—

MR. DELANEY: Yes, it still existed and of course now there was a scarcity of people to work around because a lot of these fellows were drafted and went to the army. Fact of the matter, I got a job from the fellow I used to have went to the army, and things began to open up a little bit more. Each war was getting better for the blacks in regards to economy, jobs.

MR. NETHER: What kind of jobs did blacks mostly have before the war?

MR. DELANEY: This is quite an agricultural area here too, and lot of them worked around what most of those industries, man had down on the river, paper plant.

MR. NETHER: Bowersock?

MR. DELANEY: Ice plant, a lot of blacks worked at the ice plant. By the way, my grandfather in the early days, before they had machinery to make ice, used to cut ice on the river, used to drive this team and break ice up on the river and pack it in sawdust and sell it in warm weather.

MR. NETHER: Did you have any black doctors or lawyers during World War I?

MR. DELANEY: During World War I, let's see. We did have. I think we had about two doctors here, Dr. Kenner and Dr. Frederick Harvey, and later on we had a couple more.

MR. NETHER: Did they treat just black people or did they treat white and blacks?

MR. DELANEY: White and black, that's right.

MR. NETHER: Were they able to make a comfortable living?

MR. DELANEY: They did quite well, that's right. They did pretty good.

MR. NETHER: Is there anything else about World War I that you would want to point out as far as how it related to black people here in Douglas County? How did women feel about their sons and brothers and loved ones going over to fight?

MR. DELANEY: Didn't like it too well, no.

MR. NETHER: Did you still during that time, during the war when the war had been fought, did you ever read or hear about lynchings or outright discrimination against blacks?

MR. DELANEY: I didn't hear too much about it, but there was some that was going on just the same, but you didn't hear it like you did before the war. Kind of keep it hushed up a little.

MR. NETHER: Had you heard that at any time?

MR. DELANEY: Yeah.

MR. NETHER: What were some of the things you heard about?

MR. DELANEY: You mean about the lynching and things like that?

MR. NETHER: Yeah.

MR. DELANEY: Some of the things, it contended but they tried to stop it in lots of places, it began—areas they begin to cut it out. Especially this Ku Klux Klan business.

MR. NETHER: Why would they lynch blacks, for what reasons?

MR. DELANEY: I guess they thought that was the alternative in the law, you know taking it in their own hands, instead of letting the courts and judges. Go right in the jails and take them out. I understand in the early days they had one or two lynchings on the bridge down here, horse thieves.

MR. NETHER: Do you know any reason besides horse stealing that blacks were lynched most times for the same things that whites were lynched for?

MR. DELANEY: I think so, practically the same thing.

MR. NETHER: Did you know what you could and could not do? Did you know what racial barriers that you could cross and which ones you could not cross during the time around World War I? Did you know that say if you whistled at a white lady that maybe you would be lynched?

MR. DELANEY: After World War I?

MR. NETHER: During or before now.

MR. DELANEY: Probably before, something like that, you would get in trouble, yeah.

MR. NETHER: Did you know that maybe if you went and tried to eat at a restaurant where you were not allowed that maybe you would be lynched?

MR. DELANEY: I didn't think it got that bad, but I tell you experience I had during World War I. Had one severe winter here and we was running out of coal and the city set up a wood yard, and a bunch of fellows that worked around different garages, I had worked in a garage, got these fellows that worked in the garage and went to Leavenworth to bring back some trucks, and they all went to a white restaurant and I couldn't go in there, so they told me they would give me mine in a sack.

MR. NETHER: Mr. Salisbury, I knew we would get a story out of you. I have been sitting here trying to think how could I get a story.

MR. DELANEY: Yeah. So I couldn't eat in there.

MR. NETHER: After the war many of the people came home and you had a period of time when they felt that it was a prosperous time for the United States, during the 1920s.

MR. DELANEY: Yeah....