

*Civil Rights History Project*  
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Interviewee: Cecilia Suyat Marshall  
Interview Date: June 29, 2013  
Location: Falls Church, Virginia  
Interviewer: Emilye Crosby  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 30:49 minutes

[Sounds of conversation, laughter, children's voices, and other activity going on in the church where the interview takes place. The sounds continue in the background throughout the interview.]

Emilye Crosby: Ready, John?

John Bishop: We're back on.

Emilye Crosby: Okay. What was your awareness or impression of race growing up in Hawaii at that time?

Cecilia Suyat Marshall: I really didn't have any idea at all, because I went to school with different nationalities, Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, and I think there was only one Negro family in the whole section where I was. They didn't have any children.

EC: Um-hmm.

CM: And it wasn't really until I went to New York that I found out about the racial problem.

EC: I was going to ask: What was it like to go to New York after—?

CM: It was great. I loved it.

EC: Yeah?

CM: See, my father was still trying to break up my—[laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

CM: But it's funny the way things are, because I went to New York and got into Columbia University for a stenographic session. And then, by that time, I got a job. And my father said, "Well, if you love New York, you've got to support yourself. We've got younger brothers." I said, "Fine." I went to the employment office, and they sent me to the NAACP office, the national office in New York. And I think that was a blessing, really, because I *learned* about the racial problems. Only then did I learn about the racial problems.

And I worked for the—as secretary for the director of branches of the national office. And with that job, I got to meet a lot of the local people. I went to the conferences in the different cities, annual conventions. I was always there to take the minutes.

EC: So, it was just the pure luck of having the employment office send you to the NAACP that you got that job?

CM: Yeah! I think so. I don't know, maybe my guardian angels were watching over me.

EC: Yeah?

CM: And that's how I got to meet the secretary of the NAACP, the executive secretary, Walter White. And Roy Wilkins, I used to call him Pops, and he eventually gave me away in marriage, really, to Thurgood Marshall. He was the legal counsel there.

EC: And so, when you said you were working as secretary for director of branches, was that Gloster Current?

CM: Gloster Current, yes.

EC: So, can you talk about what some of your day-to-day work was like when you were doing that job?

CM: Well, it was mostly correspondence, but we got to meet a lot of people coming into the city for help and going to the annual conventions. And that's how they got to know me. You know, when Walter White divorced his black wife and married a white woman, that practically broke up the whole organization. And so, when Thurgood proposed, I said, "No way."

EC: [Laughs]

CM: Because a lot of people still considered me as a foreigner. Hawaii wasn't too familiar to people then. So, I said, "No way. No." But he insisted. He said, "I'm marrying you. I'm not marrying the country, and they're not marrying me." So, and that's how we got married.

EC: That's interesting. What was it like to work for the organization when that was happening around Walter White's marriage?

CM: I feel blessed, really, to have been at the organization at that time, and learned a lot for myself, really. And I got to know a lot of the local people in different—in the South, especially. They took us in when we couldn't stay in hotels. We stayed in their private homes, and they fed us and treated us like kings.

But they themselves, you know, as Thurgood said, "We were cowards." Lawyers were cowards, because they'd go into one city, fight their case, argue their case, and take the fastest train and the fastest airplane out.

EC: [Laughs]

CM: But he says, “The local people put their names on the briefs. They stayed there and met daily opposition, hostile people. They’re the real heroes in this civil rights fight.”

EC: Do you remember some of the people that you stayed with, or, you know, some of the people that you interacted with in the local communities?

CM: A lot of people that I can’t remember their names in Atlanta, Georgia, and Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Oklahoma City. I got to meet a lot of them. And it got so that they treated me as their daughter. [Laughs]

EC: Yeah, yeah. I know that there was a lot of hospitality, you know. I’ve read—I was actually over at the Library of Congress looking at some of the NAACP papers this past week and reading about some of the annual conventions. What were some of the main issues that you remember typing comments on or working on?

CM: Well, I was there for the cases of the Groveland Boys, [05:00] the four boys that were indicted because they so-called “raped” a white woman, all four boys. And I remember Emmett Till case in Chicago. And I don’t know, so many other cases that we were involved with, because the branches were responsible for taking care of the cases, but they got advice from our office, you know, from the lawyers and from my boss, who was head of all the branches in the country. So, I got to interact with a lot of people.

EC: You must have, while you were in there taking notes, heard a lot of discussions of strategy.

CM: Yes, yes.

EC: What did you—?

CM: And as I said, it was a blessing for me to learn about our country, the way it is, and what's being done. And as I look back today, we've come a long way. But we still have a ways to go.

EC: What do you think are some of the most important changes?

CM: Well, for instance, going into restaurants, going into hotels, you know, without being looked at or without being turned away. And some places we couldn't even eat in the restaurants, and people fed us. We went to conventions, and they fed us. And believe you me, I don't know how they did it.

EC: Yeah.

CM: And I remember riding in one car with Thurgood, and one of the branch members says, "Judge, open up that glove compartment." And he opened it up. He says, "You see? There's a Bible there, and there's a gun there." He says, "We use the Bible first. If that doesn't work, we use the gun." That's how they lived! You know?

EC: Yeah.

CM: And it's remarkable how they did that.

EC: Yeah.

CM: I praise them to high—

EC: It must have been really exciting to watch those cases come in and see the victories through that period of the fifties and sixties.

CM: It was. Well, I worked in the branch department, so I didn't have anything to do with the legal aspects, but when they ran short of help—

EC: Yeah.

CM: For instance, the *Brown versus Board*, they needed stenographic help, and I was there with the—well, we were in the same office anyhow—and all the other cases.

EC: I remember reading about a meeting in Atlanta shortly after the *Brown* decision, and the excitement and the anticipation that things would move really quickly. And then, of course, that's not really what happened. Was that hard to see, too, the resistance?

CM: Well, we celebrated for a while, but after awhile, Thurgood said, "I don't know about you fools, but our work has just begun."

EC: Yeah.

CM: He was a realist then.

EC: Do you know when he had that moment where he said that or when he thought that, where in the process it was?

CM: When we were celebrating, you know, a victory—I think it was the *Brown*, or one of the big cases.

EC: Yeah.

CM: You know, as usual, we celebrated at the office. But after about an hour or so, that's when he said it, said, "I don't know about you fools, but I'm going back to work. Our work has just begun."

EC: Well, he certainly was right.

CM: Um-hmm.

EC: You said that you were concerned about getting married, because you didn't want to be perceived as, you know—

CM: Well, I didn't want to break, you know, break the organization up like the other incident took place. But he said, "No, no."

EC: What was the response when you got married?

CM: They all loved me!

EC: Yeah.

CM: They all thought of me as their daughter, really, because they had seen me around the branches, conventions. I was always there taking the minutes, recording the minutes.

EC: So, you think it helped that people knew you as a person?

CM: I think it did. I really think so.

EC: Yeah.

CM: And not only that, working in the branch department, anything that they needed help in, the local people would contact the branch department, and the first person they would get to is me. And if I could help them without bothering a director, that's what happened. And that's how they got to know me.

EC: So, you were already somebody they could count on?

CM: [Laughs] I don't know. I was just a nice secretary, I hope.

EC: [Laughs]

CM: But it really has been a lesson for me, myself, and a *blessing* in a way, having been born and raised in Hawaii. You know? You go to school, you learn all the bad words in all the different languages, [laughs] which is what you do, don't you?

EC: It must have been very different, you know, being in Hawaii, where you're with such a mix of people, and then coming here, [10:00] where there are so many *divisions* based on race.

CM: Right, it was. It was a lesson to me, really.

EC: Were there particular moments where you first experienced that and began to understand the differences?

CM: Well, I remember about a week after the *Brown*, the *Henderson* case—that was a dining room case where the dining room was segregated. You know, one section—there’s a section of dining room there, with a wall and a curtain there for the black people.

And I remember getting in the train going to Chattanooga about a week after that with one of the lawyers. A lawyer always is there to confer with the branches. Well, he was traveling, and I was traveling along as a secretary. And his name was Franklin Williams, one of the lawyers who became the first Negro ambassador to Ghana, if I’m not mistaken. But he was a lawyer then, and he said—and, you know, he could pass for anything. And he said, “Hey, Cis, how about you?” You know, he asked my boss, who was pitch black—as a matter of fact, they called him [11:18] boy, you know. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

CM: [Laughs] He only took it from his close friends, especially from Thurgood. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs] I can imagine.

CM: And he said, “No, no, not me! It’s too soon!” And the membership secretary, who was a woman, said, “I’m too tired. I just want to rest.” So, Frank says, “How about you, Cis?” I said, “Sure, let’s go.”

EC: So, you didn’t mind traveling South?

CM: I was new then. I didn’t know, you know.

EC: Yeah.

CM: So, we went to the dining car. And the headwaiter looked at Frank. He couldn’t figure him out. He looked at me and he couldn’t figure me out, with my long hair and flower in my hair. So, he took us to the table, not, you know, in the partition section, but right next to it.

And Frank looked at him, and he said, “Pourquoi, monsieur?”



And he said, “Oh, come back this way,” and took us to the center of the dining room car. And while we were eating, every time Frank saw the headwaiter coming down the aisle, he said something in French. And my only French was, “Oui.”

EC: [Laughs]

And that went all during the dinner there, but it was quite an experience, because he would look at us. He was still trying to figure out what I was, what he was, you know. [Laughs]

EC: Did you ever feel nervous in those situations?

CM: Never, never.

EC: Yeah.

CM: Naive me, coming from Hawaii, you know. [Laughs]

EC: Yeah, yeah. Did you continue to work at the NAACP after you were married?

CM: No. I stopped working in '55.

EC: Um-hmm.

CM: But I kept in close contact, of course, with Thurgood still being a lawyer there.

EC: Yeah. What was it like to start seeing all these major events taking place within the Civil Rights Movement? Do you remember the sit-ins and how you felt when they started?

CM: I remember segregation very well. You couldn't go to different places. You couldn't sit in anyplace. I just wish Thurgood were here.

EC: Yeah.

CM: I just wish—to see *his* work and the work of his lawyers, really, because most of them are gone. Like you interviewed Bob Carter. Bob Carter was one of Thurgood's first assistants there. And Mildred Bond, she was a field secretary under my boss.

EC: Oh, really?

CM: My boss was the one that hired all the field secretaries for the branch department, and she was one of them.

EC: What was her territory? Where did she travel to?

CM: Well, they try to travel all over. But, you know, they usually go to where they were born and around that area.

EC: Yeah, yeah. You said a little bit ago, you were talking about how much has changed, but some things that are still, you know, that still need more work.

CM: Well, you still get nasty looks every once in a while, and you can feel the difference. You know, they'll serve you, but you can feel the difference.

EC: Yeah. I don't know if you've been watching the news, but did you follow the cases that were handed down earlier this week? The Voting Rights Act cases?

CM: Yes. In a way, we've made a lot of progress. But I see the court has gone back to some of the—few things and invalidated some of it. But we're getting there.

EC: What was it like to move from New York City to Washington, D.C.? I understand it was still somewhat of a Southern town then.

CM: Well, from one to the other, I guess I got used to the moving then. [Laughs] After New York, you know, [15:00] what else is new?

EC: Yeah. Did you get involved in the community when you were here in Washington?

CM: Not too much, because with Thurgood being with the legal work and with the NAACP, I had to keep distance. I had to cut out a lot of my friends, as a matter of fact, because of the cases involved, and so forth. And parties, you know, you had to be careful.

EC: Is that so that it's not perceived as a conflict of interest? Is that—?

CM: Yes, yes.

EC: Yeah. What was it like, then, for you to have to sort of—you know, because obviously this has a big impact on your life?

CM: Whooh! [Laughs] I don't know where to start. I just feel blessed to have gone through what I did. I learned a lot. I learned a lot.

EC: What were some of the cases that seemed most memorable to you, either that Justice Marshall was involved in as an attorney or as a justice?

CM: I think the *Brown* case was the most important.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

CM: And there are so many others, really. And at my age, really, [laughs] this was in the fifties!

EC: You don't want to pull out these cases and sort of, yeah, rehash them. Did your brothers and sisters come, follow you to the mainland, to New York?

CM: Well, not to work, no. [Speaking to her son] John, do you remember meeting any of my brothers and sisters? [Laughs] No, as a matter of fact, they're all deceased now except for my one sister. And she's still in Honolulu. She used to teach there.

EC: Yeah. Do you get back to Hawaii? Or did you go back very often?

CM: Not too often. It's too long a trip, you know, five hours to the West Coast, another five to Hawaii. And it's so much easier with the telephone now, a few cents. But I remember making my first telephone call way back in '48 or '49, my very first telephone call, because I couldn't afford it at thirty-five dollars a week.

EC: Wow.

CM: But I was promoted and got fifty dollars a week. So, I called home. And we cried and we cried! And I got the bill the following weekend. It was so high, I says, the second time I called them, “Talk!” [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

CM: [Laughs] “We’ll cry later!” Practically a month!.

EC: You don’t want to cry when you’re paying those kind of rates?

CM: No, I can cry afterwards.

EC: Can you describe what the national office of the NAACP was like? Like, how it was set up, and who you were working with.

CM: Well, there was a stenographic pool where I started off with. And then, there was a branch department that oversaw the fifteen hundred branches around the country. Then, on the other side was the legal department, and the lawyers helped branches in their legal work. And upstairs, there was Roy Wilkins and Walter White.

But it was like a family, really. After work, we’d sit around for awhile and go out to dinner, just a few of us. [Siren in background gradually gets louder] It really got so that, you know, we didn’t think of anything except brothers and sisters.

EC: Do you think there was more camaraderie because of the work that you were doing, because it felt like important work?

CM: Yes, yes.

EC: Are there some of the people, can you—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We’re back.

EC: I was wondering if you would be willing to describe some of the people that you worked with, you know, help us get a portrait of people that aren't with us anymore? What was Gloster Current like or Walter White?

CM: Well, Walter White was a wonderful administrator, but sometimes he was above all of us. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

CM: It was Roy Wilkins that did the work there. He was the one that met the people locally more often.

EC: Yeah.

CM: And, of course, Thurgood and my boss. It was like a family, really, just like a family, especially when you went to the conferences and conventions.

EC: Yeah. Do you remember some of the places you went for the conventions?

CM: Atlanta, Oklahoma City. Let me see. Atlanta, Oklahoma City—where else did I go? [Laughs] Well, we started off in Boston, actually. That was my first convention in 1950. Then to Atlanta, then Oklahoma City, then Chicago, you name it, and Dallas, Texas, you know.

EC: It must have been something else to have people coming from all over the country to the conventions.

CM: And that's how I got to know them [20:00] because, you know, they always have branch problems and they would come to my boss, and I would be there. But you have to give them credit, really, to do what they did in those times.

EC: Yeah.

CM: It's amazing, just amazing! And the way they treated us. They treated us like kings and queens. But, you know, they didn't have to. They really didn't.

EC: Yeah. Well, I'm sure they appreciated the help, you know.

CM: Oh, yeah.

EC: You know, somebody they could call on and somebody they could work with.

CM: Um-hmm.

EC: Even while they're struggling where they are.

CM: Especially through our department, actually, director of branches. They had to come through out department for any problems, and we tried to solve them as much as we can, before taking it to the board.

EC: Before taking it to the board?

CM: Board of directors for any problem that we couldn't solve.

EC: Conflicts? Yeah. What are some of the things that you think young people should know about those days?

CM: That they shouldn't take anything for granted, really. It was people in the earlier days that went through all the sacrifice, they went through all the indignities, you know, to be what they are today. So many people take so many things for granted, especially the younger generations. When you think of the older generations in the South, what they went through, oh, they were wonderful people! They really were.

EC: Did you travel much in the South after the Civil Rights Movement, enough to see some of the changes?

CM: Well, up until 1955.

EC: Yeah, yeah. So, you didn't travel after that?

CM: No.

EC: No?

CM: Got married. [Laughs] *He* kept me busy!

EC: [Laughs]

CM: And my older son, of course, I'm proud of them.

EC: Yeah. Can you talk about the church here where we're meeting today?

CM: I think having my deep faith in God was what kept us through, really. I mean, you have to have faith in God. You know, you talk to Him in private and just get everything out of your system, just between you and—at least, that's the way I feel.

EC: And that allows you to keep a good upbeat—and face things?

CM: Yeah.

EC: Yeah. Where did you live when you came to New York?

CM: Oh, where did we live, John? 123<sup>rd</sup> Street, 501 West 123<sup>rd</sup>. Well, we first lived at 409 Edgecombe, which was supposed to be the high society of the Negro world. But then, they built a co-op, the first co-op, middle-income co-op in New York. That was what they called Morningside Gardens, and it was wonderful! We didn't have to go out to parties. They all came to us, because we had the two young boys. And they didn't have any, so, it was easier for them to come.

EC: Can you describe what that—living in that community was like?

CM: We had so many friends. There was Ed Dudley, who became ambassador to Liberia, the first ever, before Frank Williams. He lived across the building. And there was a doctor there, I can't think, which was my husband's doctor. [Laughs] It was so convenient! And Bob Carter, one of the lawyers, lived in another building. There were five buildings there, but we were all within one community. We lived in one building, and we had Guichard Parris, who was the

director of the Urban League, they were above us. And we had George Dockery, who was a dentist.

And between George Dockery's wife and Guichard Parris's wife, they tried to buy the boys' attention. So, one would sneak up and leave food at our front door for the boys. Then, we'd come home again another time, and there was food from the other! [Laughs] They would try to outdo one another! They were wonderful!

EC: [Laughs] A little bit of spoiling going on?

CM: Uh-huh! They were wonderful, wonderful! And Lou Jefferson, who was a great artist, lived there.

EC: So, it sounds like it was quite a community.

CM: It was!

EC: It wasn't just a place to live.

CM: It was. It was wonderful, just wonderful. I couldn't think of a better place, really. [25:00] And as I said, we didn't have to go out. They came, because of the boys, they knew it was easier for them to come.

EC: Yeah. I read in something that after you moved to D.C., at a certain point, you moved out and became the first people to integrate a white community.

CM: Well, we lived at 64 G Street, which was walking distance of our church. I still come to this church here. And then, it got so that Thurgood couldn't stand the steps. But we did move to another co-op on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, which was three stories, but more steps. And after one year, he said, "No, that's enough," and we found this house in Virginia, which is wonderful.

EC: Yeah. And I'm trying to—let me see if—

[Recording stops and then resumes]



JB: We're back.

EC: Okay. I'll ask you about this. This says that you moved to the Lake Barcroft.

CM: Lake Barcroft.

EC: Barcroft?

CM: That's where we are now.

EC: Okay. And was that an all-white community before you moved in?

CM: It still is, practically. Ramsey Clark, who was then attorney general, lived in Lake Barcroft. And he says, "Boss, you have to come and integrate the place." So, we moved from Washington to Lake Barcroft. But, as far as I know, we're still the only family there.

EC: Did you have any trouble when you moved over there?

CM: No, not really. When we first moved there, we saw a bunch of kids, came by, and they welcomed our boys.

EC: Yeah. And so, you were the first and still one of the only African American families, and yet they—?

CM: I think there's one Asian family.

EC: One Asian family?

CM: Out of fifteen hundred.

EC: So, it's very white.

CM: Well, it's not advertised, you know, and that's another reason. But people don't move out of Lake Barcroft. How can you move? Beautiful home, the lake is there, and walking distance to the bus.

EC: So, it's a lovely location?

CM: Oh, it is, really.

EC: Yeah. There were a list here of some organizations that you're involved in, or that I'm told you're involved in—the National Capitol Auxiliary?

CM: That's the lawyers' wives.

EC: Okay.

CM: That's wives from the District, Maryland, Virginia.

EC: And what kinds of things do you do?

CM: Well, we usually have meetings, get-togethers, and lunches. And they honor the Supreme Court wives every year.

EC: So, is it—

CM: And then, I have the Traveler's Aid. I used to be on the board of Traveler's Aid, the board of the Legal Defense Fund.

EC: What do you do as part of those boards?

CM: As part of what?

EC: So, when you're on the board of the Legal Fund, NAACP Legal Fund, what kind of work do you do with that?

CM: Well, we decide on policies, you know, and what cases we should go into and recommend, and things like that.

EC: Is that difficult?

CM: Not really.

EC: Yeah.

CM: Not really.

EC: Are there cases that are memorable to you that you were involved in deciding to go forward on?

CM: Well, really, *Brown* is the one that really stands out.

EC: Yeah. So, are there other things that you can think are important for people to know about your life and about the work and things you've been involved in?

CM: No, I'm just an ordinary person, really. [Laughs] No, I'm blessed to have gone through what I did, you know, and in those times, and coming from Hawaii, especially.

EC: Yeah. There's a quote in one of the history books that I like, and it talks about ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and I think that there's a lot of that in the Civil Rights Movement.

CM: I'm only an ordinary person doing ordinary things. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs] Very, very modest.

CM: No, I just feel blessed, and you do what you have to do. You raise your family. And with Thurgood being away a lot, I made it a point to stay home with the children, you know.

EC: Um-hmm. Well, thank you very much for being with us. I know that it's a challenge and that you are eager to get home.

CM: Well, I don't mind it, really. I just want to say it's been a blessing. I think I live a charmed life. Of course, after having putting up with John, [laughs] and my oldest son. No, they've been wonderful, really. And to see them fifty-five years old, my God! [30:00]

EC: John, are you going to speak up?

John Marshall: No, I'm the younger, though, the younger of the two.

CM: Yeah, my other son is fifty-seven.

EC: Yeah? So, do you still—

CM: I can't imagine. I can't imagine that!

EC: [Laughs] I was going to say that must be an interesting way to know your age, by watching your children.

CM: Well, they've been a challenge. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

CM: No, but it's been wonderful, really.

EC: Yeah. Well, thank you very much. We appreciate it.

CM: You're welcome. Unless you want to ask my son—

JM: No, no, no. You've said it all.

CM: He was, well, to begin with, a Marshal, and then became the director of the Marshals Service. And he's now with the Transportation Department.

[Recording ends at 30:49]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council