

Oral Memoirs
of
Nancy Harris Ford

An Interview Conducted by

Drew Fedorka

November 16, 2013

History Harvest

Fall 2013

University of Central Florida Public History Center

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Interview Histories

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Transcriber	Natalie Delgado

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the Public History Center, University of Central Florida, Sanford, Florida.

Project Detail

Creative Sanford, Inc. is a non-profit organization created to manage *Celery Soup: Florida's Folk Life Play* community theater productions. The original idea for the *Celery Soup* project came from Jeanine Taylor, the owner of a folk-art gallery on First Street in Sanford, Florida. Their first production was *Touch and Go*, which took several years of planning. The play focused on how the people of Sanford overcame obstacles throughout their history. Some of these stories include the fall of Sanford's celery industry, the Freeze of 1894-1895, and the closing of Naval Air Station (NAS) Sanford in the 1960s. Richard Geer and Jules Corriere, partners from Community Performance International, were in charge of assessing oral histories, converting them into scenes for the play, and writing original songs. Director Geer also used an all-volunteer cast from the local community, many of which were not experienced actors.

During the process of producing the show, Creative Sanford decided to rehabilitate an historic building, the Princess Theater, which was located on 115 West First Street and owned by Stephen Tibstra. The Creative Sanford offices are housed in the Historic Sanford Welcome Center, located at 203 East First Street. As of December 2013, the Executive Board for Creative Sanford included President Brian Casey, Vice President Trish Thompson, Treasurer Linda Hollerbach, Secretary Dr. Annye Refoe, and Founder Jeanine Taylor. The Board of Directors consisted of Cheryl Deming, Juanita Roland, Wendy Wheaton, and Dr. Connie Lester, a professor of history at the University of Central Florida. Honorary Board Members included: Glenda Hood, former Florida Secretary of State and Mayor of Orlando; Valada Flewellyn, a local poet, author, and historian; and Jackie Jones, a local entertainer and arts advocate.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Nancy Harris Ford is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on November 16, 2013.

Abstract

In an interview on Saturday, November 16th, 2013 Creative Sanford, Inc. actress Nancy Ford discusses Dr. George H. Starke, one of the characters presented in *Remade - Not Bought*, the local community play created by Creative Sanford. Creative Sanford is a local community group that gathers artifacts and oral histories from community members to create a play based on Sanford's history. Ford talks about Dr. Starke as her physician and his impact on the

community, as well as on her family. She recalls paying Dr. Starke in food as a child, something directly recreated in the play.

Nancy Harris Ford

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Drew Fedorka

November 16, 2013

Sanford, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Fedorka This is Drew Fedorka. Uh, we are at the [UCF] Public History Center in Sanford, Florida. It is Saturday, November 16th, 2013. Do you just want to introduce yourself for the camera?

Ford I'm Nancy Ford, and, um – actually, I'm Nancy Harris Ford. My maiden name is Harris. I grew up here in Sanford and left. Was gone about 36 years and came back.

Fedorka Okay, and when did you leave Sanford?

Ford I left Sanford in 1973, about a year after I graduated from Seminole High School.

Fedorka Okay, and what brought you back to Sanford?

Ford Uh, a combination of things. One is home. And, in 2008, when the economy did what it did, I found myself unemployed, and I needed to make some choices. So I chose to come home, where I had a support system.

0:00:56

Interest in Sanford's history

Fedorka Okay, um, now did you have any interest in Sanford's history before getting involved with *Celery Soup*[: *Florida's Folk Life Play*] and Creative Sanford[, Inc.]?

Ford Not really, because I am Sanford's history. [*laughs*] You know, a lot of the things they do in Creative Sanford[, Inc.] in the shows that they write, I remember. So I'm not just learning them. I am learning new facts about these things, But a lot of these stories, they're my stories – some of them. And I remember these things.

Fedorka Right so...

Ford It's interesting that what you call "history," I call "my life."

0:01:30

Interest in Creative Sanford, Inc.

Fedorka Right. Of course. Yeah. Okay. So what got you interested in Creative Sanford?

Ford Well, when I came back, my sister – my sisters knew that I was interested in acting and performing, because I had done it when I was in Memphis[, Tennessee]. And she saw an advertisement for the show – for *Touch and Go* – and asked me if I would like to go. And so we went to see it, and I thought it was so interesting, so I said, “Well I think I’ll audition the next time around.” So the next time around, I auditioned and I really enjoyed it, so I’ve auditioned every time since.

0:02:08

Characters Ford plays in *Remade - Not Bought*

Fedorka Okay, great. Um, so you play a number of different characters in *Remade - Not Bought*. Do you want to go through some of the different characters?

Ford [laughs] It was interesting. I played, um, Tasha in the continuity scene – is who’s the mother of one of the young ladies. And that role – the continuity scenes were designed to link the stories together so that they made sense. And, um, I also played Tasha’s mother in one of the scenes, remembering when the, uh, I guess the Woolworth’s counter, one of those restaurants which I actually remember when we used to go to the back window to get the food at the restaurants. We couldn’t go in and sit down. I remember that. So I played that character. And then I played Dr. Starke’s in another scene. And, uh, the Tasha character just kind of weaves through most of the show.

0:03:13

Role of community theater in remembering history

Fedorka So it’s interesting that you said a lot of these things have been touched on your own personal life that you experienced. What role do you think community theater plays and community understanding on history in remembering history?

Ford Well, I think that it’s really important, because, if we don’t remember our past, especially the things that aren’t very pleasant, then we’re doomed to repeat it. Now, I have a son who’s 20, and we would get tired of me telling him sometimes that, when he wanted these shoes and these clothes that cost so much money, and I would tell him, “Well, you know, when I was growing up, my mama bought our clothes and hoped they’re fit. And most of the time, bought them too large, because we couldn’t try them on and she couldn’t take them back. Because we were colored.”

So, you know, especially for European Americans, we know a lot of your history, because we were exposed to it on commercials and television and stuff like that. But our history was kind of downplayed. And even among ourselves, we don’t realize sometimes the richness. When I say “ourselves” – the African-American community. Sometimes we don’t understand or really, fully realize the richness of our history. And the importance that certain things play. It was just kinda the way we lived.

0:03:13

Role of community theater in remembering history

Fedorka Right, and—so some of these scenes are dealing with some of the, um, more troubling or challenging aspects of Sanford’s history. Um, in what ways, um—let me think how to phrase it. And, does it—does it change the memory of these experiences at all in some of these scenes?

Ford It—it doesn’t change the memory. It changes the meaning. Uh, for example, the butterfly scene. I remember school integration. So when I’m going through that, I remember. And people say that I play that scene and I seem so—it seems so real, because I really was angry about school integration. [clears throat] Although, for me, it was the opposite. It was me going to the “white” school, so to speak, not the other way around, as it was in the butterfly scene. But I didn’t want to be there. I had no choice. I got thrown into an environment that I feel changed my life in a way that was not for the best.

When I was at Crooms [High School], I was a—an honors student. I was in the National Honors Society. I was on track to be Val of Sal. And when I went to Seminole [High School], I did not get the same attention that I got at Crooms. Because the curriculum was so different, and the books were so different, because we got hand me down books at Crooms. Things were so different that I was not academically prepared. And even though I did well, I was in and out of the Honors Society at Seminole. And I didn’t go to college. And I found out later about the, uh, work-studies. And I wasn’t counseled, so I didn’t know. I didn’t know what was available to me, and I didn’t graduate college until I was 50. And I think a lot of that had to do with the fact that I got shoved into an environment where I wasn’t welcomed. I didn’t feel welcomed.

0:06:55

Choice of scenes in *Remade - Not Bought*

Fedorka It seemed that watching *Remade - Not Bought*, there’s a very specific choice of scenes. The types of topics that we’re touched on. I think of this really cool scene, I think of the butterfly scene, which is obviously one of the main highlights of the show. Um, the one of the restaurant that you just explained. What was the decision-making process, which scenes to highlight?

Ford Well, I wasn’t really involved in that, so—I wasn’t involved in choosing which scenes went into the play. You have to talk to the playwrights about that.

Fedorka Right. Okay. Uh, do you feel like there’s any—obviously, I mean, there’s—some of these scenes are kind of arbitrary in the way that—in the topics that they—in the—obviously the big comment that they’re trying to reconcile is Sanford’s history of racial tensions. And they’ve picked little snapshots to touch on. Do you think there’s any that would have been more effective to include?

Ford Well, I don’t know about effective, because I think the scenes they included were very effective. Um, there’s so many from which to choose. And I think that

the ones that they chose show different aspects of the racial tension, like the pool scene.

I don't know how to swim. I never learned. Uh, there were two pools in Sanford. The white pool, we weren't allowed to go to. The black pool was always so crowded when it was open that you couldn't swim in there if you tried.

And the beach? Well, there were no lifeguards at the beach we were allowed to go. We'd go to New Smyrna Beach. And our parents were afraid to put us in the water because they both, you know, fearful for our safety. And every summer, kids drowned. Every summer. So our parents were very fearful of that.

So those kinds of things, you know, were really meaningful. There's, um, the only thing—and I have spoken to them about this—it seems that in every one of these plays, I play the angry black woman [laughs]. Um, but we had some good times in the African-American community as well. And sometimes I'd like to see that highlighted. You know, like we had pic—church picnics, and things like that. And because they highlight some things that have nothing to do with racial tension with the white characters.

But almost all the scenes that involve African Americans have some type of racial overtone. Even the Starke scene. Even though it wasn't, you know, an uncomfortable thing, but even that had racial overtones and, you know, it's—there were other things that we did [laughs], you know, that had nothing to do with race—that had nothing to do with white people either. But, you know, a lot of the scenes they have with whites have nothing to do with black people.

0:10:12

History with creative license

Fedorka Right. What—do you see what Creative Sanford does—what *Celery Soup* does especially—with plays like *Remade - Not Bought*—do you see what they're doing as history or is it something different?

Ford It's both. It's history with creative license, because it's entertainment. And I think it's a good way to get a conversation going. Because when people go and they see these shows, then invariably, even participating, I learned things, and I go out and do research. Like, Dr. Starke was my doctor. Dr. Starke brought me into the world, you know, when I was born. He was the doctor who brought me here. He was my doctor growing up. But there were things that I didn't know about him, because, you know, why would I want to go study about Dr. Starke? But now in retrospect, I went out on the Internet and did research, because I do want to know. You know, so there are—and almost everybody that I speak with, after they've seen the show, they say "I didn't know this" or "I didn't know that." So yeah, it's a good way to get a conversation started.

0:11:24

Dr. George H. Starke

Fedorka

And it's interesting that you mention Dr. Starke, because he is featured predominantly throughout the play. Um, in what ways do you think he was a good choice to highlight as a central example of some of the message we get across?

Ford

Well, one thing is that he was biracial, you know? And uh, and that's one way—one of the reasons that he was able to do some of the things that he did, because he was fair. His skin was fair, his hair was wavy. But he was a very quiet man—a soft-spoken man. But, like they say in the play, he was a good man. And I remember going to him, up to my teenage years, you know—until I left here, he was my doctor—*[laughs]* I don't ever remember paying him. I imagine my mother paid him. I don't know whether she paid him or not. But it never occurred to me that he wasn't getting paid. That's not something that kids think about.

You know, and I know that I went to him once for something and he said, "Well tell Bernice such and such and such." that was my mom's name. So he knew his patients. It's not like now. You go to the doctor and they review your chart to remember who you are. You know, they make notes in their charts so that they can have conversation with you. But if I walked into his office, he knew me. He knew my name. He knew my mother's name. He knew my grandparents. It was very different.

And I didn't realize—well, I didn't think about the fact that he saw white people too. You know, I don't ever remember seeing white people in his office. I imagine they were there, but you know, that wasn't something that I thought about, because if he saw white people it was, because they couldn't afford to pay the white doctor. And that was not uncommon in the black community, because we didn't carry around a lot of the baggage it seems that a lot of the white people did.

0:13:33

Childhood memories of Dr. Starke

Fedorka

What are some of the memories you have of Dr. Starke of your childhood?

Ford

Well, I remember one time that, uh—I didn't like shots. I was actually very afraid of shots and I needed to get a shot. And there was a booster shot in the buttocks, and Dr. Starke had me stand at the window and look out the window, and he was talking to me. I don't remember what he was talking to me about. I also don't remember getting the shot. Just—it was just so much like the scene in the play. And when I saw that, I was like, "You know, he really was like that." That was not an exaggeration.

0:14:15 **Linking memory of Sanford to specific people**

Fedorka What role do you think the play has in linking the memory of Sanford and Sanford in the 20th century to people like Dr. Starke?

Ford Well, I think especially for a lot of the kids, it helps – helps you to know your history. History is important. Even though I didn't realize it when I was young, because I did not like history in school. Didn't like it at all. And now, I'm more interested in it, because I can see how – what they call progress. You know, the continuity of events and how it progressed from here to here and the next step. You know, um, Sanford was known as "The Celery City." Well, I could remember what that smells like. Interestingly enough, because my gather ran a celery crew. So I used to play on the bus – on his bus. and it is a very distinct smell. And I remember what it smells like. And I also remember what it smelled like when those celery fills were rotting, cause, you know, Celery Avenue is named Celery Avenue for a reason. There weren't houses down there when I was growing up. Those were celery fields. And so people don't know why that street is named Celery Avenue. And there's Celery Key and there's Celery something else, but those are housing developments now. But they used to be celery fields.

0:15:47 **Dr. Starke's office and his role in the community**

Fedorka And to bring you back to Dr. Starke. Dr. Starke's office was near Celery Avenue.

Ford Well, it's on the corner of 11th Street and Sanford Avenue. So Celery Avenue is what 13th Street kinda turns into after it makes that little catty-corner. So yeah, it's pretty close. And we used to walk. You used to walk everywhere. Nowadays, we hardly think about walking these days.

Fedorka Would you say Dr. Starke was well-known in the community?

Ford [laughs] I'd say that's an understatement.

Fedorka Okay. And...

Ford He was the black doctor. So all the black folks went to him. You know, because we didn't – the white doctors wouldn't see us. But that doesn't mean he wasn't a good doctor. He was probably one the best doctors in town, but we didn't realize that, because he was our doctor. He was the only doctor we knew.

Fedorka And was he known – well-known at the time, at least in Sanford, for his role in sort of crossing – crossing that color barrier by obviously, uh, white patients coming to see him? Was that well-known in the community?

Ford Well [coughs], they may – [coughs] excuse me. It may have been by adults, but I was a child, so that wasn't something that I thought about, you know.

Fedorka Right.

Ford So, you know, he—I know that he was a prominent figure. Everybody knew him. And Dr. Ringland¹ too. He wasn't in the play, but Dr. Ringland was the dentist—the dentist—the black dentist. And they shared an office. They shared an office space. Because when you went to the doctor and you went to the dentist, you went to the same building.

0:17:34 **Messages behind *Celery Soup* plays**

Fedorka Okay to—just a couple of last questions to bring it back to *Remade - Not Bought*. You said that one of the main role of, um, productions like that is just to get a conversation started. What types of messages do you hope that got across from a production like *Remade - Not Bought*?

Ford Well, I would—I would hope that some healing happens. Because there's a lot of bitterness still, um, in the community among both black and whites. There's anger. There, uh—we've come a long way, but we still have a ways to go. A lot of blacks are bitter and angry, because we feel—when I say “we,” I mean some blacks and whites. I don't mean all of any group. But many of us, uh, as a people feel that we've struggled.

And I know personally in my own life—because my name is Nancy, I got into doors that I wouldn't have gotten into if my name had been something else. But when I walked through the door, say for an interview, I could see the countenance of the interviewer's face change, because I was not what they expected. My—my maiden name is Harris. My name is Nancy Harris. I'm well-spoken. I'm articulate. When you speak with me on the phone, you don't necessarily know that I'm an African American, but when I walk through the door, it's obvious. And that hurts. And every time that happens, it hurts. So there's[sic] scars there. There's[sic] deep scars and they need healing.

[coughs] By the same token [coughs]—excuse me—I went through affirmative action, where a lot of white people felt left out. And I had—I had work as a result of affirmative action—a pretty good job. I was a machinist. And, in that shop—and I was in Rochester, New York, where they thought things were better—and the white guys, they would yell things at me across the shop. And tell me that I was taking the food out of some guy's family's mouth, because I shouldn't be there, because I'm black and female.

So we have these kinds of conversations. It gives the opportunity to know that we're all human. All the parts, the same ways. The human way. And that we all have feelings, and they should be honored. And that we all have rich culture and tradition. And I think it's important for us to learn about each other's culture more and more, so that we can appreciate our differences and move forward.

¹ Correction: Dr. Edward D. Strickland.

Because, in order to hold a person down, you have to stay down there with them. And it's important for us all to rise.

0:20:39

Role of *Celery Soup* in the healing process

Fedorka Um, do you think *Celery Soup* and *Remade - Not Bought*, um — it[sic] puts a very positive spin on a lot of these memories and do — do you think there's any — do you think it's does it effectively with this healing process?

Ford Um, yes. I think it does. I think anytime we address these things head-on, that it's effective. It may not always feel good, but it's like a shot. Doesn't feel good when you get it, but what it does is work. The benefit feels good.

0:21:18

Closing remarks

Fedorka Okay. Uh, thank you very much for your help. If you — do you have anything you want to say about *Celery Soup* or the just importance of it, the importance of community theater, the importance of approaching community's history in this manner?

Ford Well, I'd just like to say that I'm very happy that this project exists — that Creative Sanford exists. And that Creative Sanford sees the benefit of doing this work. And I hope that people will support it. You know, theatre is not well-supported in general, and in particular, community theatre. We have a lot of good, um — good actors and actresses in community theatre.

One of the things that I love about *Celery Soup* is that everyone who auditions gets cast. And even though I had experience coming into it, it's a wonderful opportunity for people who have never been on a stage before to get out there and see if they like it and have an opportunity to — to go someplace, because this is the way that — there are a lot of people that we see on television and on the big screen, who got their start in community theater. It's important and I do think it should be valued, and people should support it.

Fedorka Well, thank you very much...

Ford Thank you.

Fedorka For all your thoughts.

End of Interview