

Queen Alice Spragens

The Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation

May 27, 2019

[00:00:01.270] - Nicky Hamilton

This is Nicky Hamilton, and I'm here with Queen Alice Spragens to talk about her life growing up in Sewanee as part of the Sewanee Black History Initiative. Ms. Spragens, I want to thank you for sharing your story with us today. We are at the St. Marks hall, and it is May 27, 2019. If you don't mind, would you please tell me your full name and where you were born and when.

[00:00:34.510] - Queen Alice Spragens

Queen Alice Spragens. I was born in Huntland, Tennessee, August 18, 1936

[00:00:41.640] - Nicky Hamilton

Thank you. So I'm just going to start from the beginning and ask you to please tell me a little bit about your family and where you grew up.

[00:00:53.770] - Queen Alice Spragens

I grew up in a little town, Huntland, Tennessee. My father was Tom Tate. My mother was Queen Esther Baker Tate. They came to Sewanee in the early '40s, I say around '40. They worked at Old SMA, which was a military school then. And they worked there until they retired. And then I went to school. Kennerly school in Sewanee, went to the Franklin County- went to the Old Townsend High School in Winchester, which was an all black school, then graduated from there, then worked around in Sewanee and lived in Sewanee. Just done normal things, going swimming, to the movies and working. And. After I got older, I got married. I think I was 24 when I got married. I have one daughter, Tanya Monique Page, where she lives in Nashville. I have one grandson, Ingram Tate Page. And. I still live in Sewanee, still work in Sewanee. I work for the vice chancellors. I have worked for four. I started with Ayres, and the Williamsons, the Cunninghams, and the McCardell. That's just about it. I've lived in Sewanee pretty well all my life. Enjoyed it. I like Sewanee.

[00:02:37.610] - Nicky Hamilton

You said you lived here when you were eight. Can you tell me some stories about your childhood?

[00:02:45.590] - Queen Alice Spragens

Well, my childhood stories was not very exciting. We didn't do much then. Played in the Woods, walked, hiked, and we had a lot of fun then with the seminarians because they would come and get all the black

kids and take us on Whitty Roasters and sit out in the Woods and tell ghost stories. And we'd go swimming and we were doing something with them pretty well all the time. We sure were. And that was fun. And other than that, I was just home.

[00:03:25.790] - Nicky Hamilton

Who were your friends growing up?

[00:03:28.790] - Queen Alice Spragens

Oh, gosh, my friends growing up in Sewanee was the Hills, Loretta, Alice, Betty, then I had- oh, gosh. It was a lot of people in Sewanee at that time, a lot of people. So I had a whole bunch of friends and we, on Saturdays and Sundays and we didn't have anything to do, we would go walking in the Woods, walk to the Cross and sit out at the cross and talk and just do normal stuff, talk about boys and everything and just do all that stuff. And I enjoyed going to the movies. I liked to go to the movies.

[00:04:08.550] - Nicky Hamilton

Where did you go to the movies?

[00:04:09.750] - Queen Alice Spragens

We went to the movies up here at the Sewanee Union Theater. Mostly go to the matinees on Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

[00:04:18.810] - Nicky Hamilton

Did you all have cookouts? Like, what you're doing today?

[00:04:22.950] - Queen Alice Spragens

We'd go to the Lakes and have cookouts Winnie Roasties. We usually go to the Lakes. And we had a place that sit over there. It was called a clubhouse. It was a barracks that the boys used. They moved them when they cut their school out. They moved one of them over there and we had it for, like, a clubhouse. And we would go there on Saturdays and Sundays and we'd have- we liked to dance, play music and dance and just do stuff like that.

[00:04:57.670] - Nicky Hamilton

Do you recall your favorite song that you all liked to dance to?

[00:05:01.030] - Queen Alice Spragens

My favorite song?

[00:05:02.290] - Nicky Hamilton

Mhmm, that you all liked to dance to?

[00:05:03.790] - Queen Alice Spragens

Oh, gosh back then. I can't even remember. I sure can't, that was- I can't even remember. But there was quite a few of them and we have socials and just everything. Somebody was always having birthdays. We celebrated everything. If somebody was havin' a birthday, we'd decorate the place and we'd have a big party and stuff like that.

[00:05:33.490] - Nicky Hamilton

It sounds like you all had a real community.

[00:05:35.470] - Queen Alice Spragens

Yeah. So we had a little tight community that everybody would be there. And it was all mostly the same people. And we'd all be there. And a lot of things we had back then the seminarians would come. They would come, too. They sure did.

[00:05:53.770] - Nicky Hamilton

What was some of, like, your favorite meals or dishes you enjoyed with your family or when you were doing those cook outs?

[00:06:02.770] - Queen Alice Spragens

My favorite meal. I want to say my favorite meal would be fried chicken. I like fried chicken. I don't like very much food. I can eat a hotdog don't like hamburgers very well. I don't eat the red meat and just normal things.

[00:06:26.050] - Nicky Hamilton

Who made the best fried chicken according to you?

[00:06:27.430] - Queen Alice Spragens

In fact, mother would make it. She would go out and kill the chicken and then fry the chicken. And it would be good. And she could make the best peach cobblers and stuff like that. Yeah. We sure did.

[00:06:46.090] - Nicky Hamilton

So you, obviously, given your age, you grew up in changing times in the US. Were you aware of those changes? And was there anybody helping you to make sense of those changes?

[00:06:59.770] - Queen Alice Spragens

We were aware of those changes. But. When we lived in Huntland, the little town, on the farm, we didn't see very many people. ya know, living on a farm, you didn't venture out very far, so you didn't see. But then after we came to Sewanee and was affiliated with the mom and Daddy working for the University and the University, we were aware of the change in times. But we never had a hard time, not affiliated with the University, we didn't. We didn't have a hard time at all. But we knew the changing of the times and everything, you knew. We went in a lot of places that back then, Afro Americans didn't go in. But as long as we stayed up towards University and around, we went in pretty well where we wanted to. We did.

[00:08:01.550] - Nicky Hamilton

So how has your experiences growing up shaped your perspective on life?

[00:08:14.790] - Queen Alice Spragens

I learned a lot of things. I learned- gosh, a lot of things just myself learning, reading. I like to read. I read everything, reading. And I like to do all that. And I learned right from wrong what we could do, what we couldn't do and just everything.

[00:08:40.330] - Nicky Hamilton

Are there some things that you learnt from your parents or your teachers or your mentors?

[00:08:46.990] - Queen Alice Spragens

you know then, back then, You learnt from your parents because whatever my parents told me, that was it. That's what I done. You know, you didn't back talk. You didn't do anything. So we learn a lot. Just listening. Sometimes you listen, then you're thinking I ain't doing that. But you don't say "I'm not doing that."

[00:09:10.330] - Nicky Hamilton

Can you say some of those things that you overheard that you like, "I'm not doing that." Can you say more about that.

[00:09:19.490] - Queen Alice Spragens

Then after I grew up, I knew what to do and what not to do. If things was wrong, I knew it was. If I was somewhere, I thought things weren't right, I would leave. You didn't stay. Then you left.

[00:09:38.910] - Nicky Hamilton

Yeah.

[00:09:39.270] - Queen Alice Spragens

I would leave and go home because I know I'm getting in trouble either way. Back then, your parents didn't play. They didn't play back then.

[00:09:55.250] - Nicky Hamilton

So other than your parents, who were some mentors of yours?

[00:10:01.410] - Queen Alice Spragens

I had a teacher, Miss Gertrude Kennerly, a grade school teacher. She was a mentor. She was just like your parents. She see whatever you- if you're doing something wrong, she told you. and she gave you a whooping, too, if she had to.

[00:10:19.290] - Nicky Hamilton

She was your teacher.

[00:10:20.310] - Queen Alice Spragens

She was my teacher, Ms. Gertrude Kennerly. She was the teacher from the- I think we got her at maybe about like the third grade, up to the fifth or 6th grade. I think when she quit and another teacher- 'cause she retired and another teacher took over. But Ms. Gertrude, she was a teacher and a friend. She was just like your parent. Really.

[00:10:49.930] - Nicky Hamilton

Where did you go to high school?

[00:10:53.770] - Queen Alice Spragens

Winchester, Townsend High School.

[00:10:57.790] - Nicky Hamilton

And then what did you decide to do after high school?

[00:11:01.570] - Queen Alice Spragens

What'd I do after high school?

[00:11:03.190] - Nicky Hamilton

Yeah.

[00:11:03.370] - Queen Alice Spragens

Mostly went to work. Yeah.

[00:11:05.470] - Nicky Hamilton

Did you think about leaving Sewanee?

[00:11:08.830] - Queen Alice Spragens

Nah uh. Never did.

[00:11:09.790] - Nicky Hamilton

Why is that?

[00:11:10.990] - Queen Alice Spragens

I really like Sewanee. I never thought about leaving Sewanee. Then after I got on up and got grown and got old, I have never thought about leaving Sewanee. A lot of people did, but I didn't. I always liked Sewanee. It's quiet to me, and peaceful and I always liked it. I raised my daughter up here and I always liked Sewanee.

[00:11:34.870] - Nicky Hamilton

What about your daughter's father?

[00:11:38.290] - Queen Alice Spragens

My daughter's father. We got divorced when she was ten years old and he still lives, he lives in Ohio. He has another family.

[00:11:47.350] - Nicky Hamilton

How did you all meet?

[00:11:49.210] - Queen Alice Spragens

We met- he worked up here. We worked at the same place because all the guys, the young guys would come up from Winchester and around. They would work at the dorms, then at the buildings and around up here. Then that's how we met. He was a Winton.

[00:12:07.030] - Nicky Hamilton

So what are one or two things that you would want people to remember most about your childhood?

[00:12:15.670] - Queen Alice Spragens

Most about my childhood, my childhood? I don't know. Just growing up in Sewanee, I guess. And the way it was and it was nice up here. Yeah, 'cause I was a country girl straight off the farm. To me, it was nice up here.

[00:12:42.470] - Nicky Hamilton

Is there anything about your history growing up in Sewanee that you would like people to know. If there was one or two things you wanted them to know?

[00:12:53.570] - Queen Alice Spragens

What would I want them to know about my history, growing up in Sewanee? I don't know. Just growing up in Sewanee, I guess, doing things and working and everybody I worked for, it wasn't like work you sort of enjoyed, you enjoyed going and taking care of kids. I raised a lot of kids in Sewanee 'till they got on up. I sure did come back. And they'd come back. And I'd work for the, raised the grandkids and stuff like that.

[00:13:36.630] - Nicky Hamilton

What are some of the families you used to work for?

[00:13:39.090] - Queen Alice Spragens

Oh, gosh. I worked for the Parkers, the Hodgesons. Oh, gosh. How many families did I work for? Out in Woodland, we babysitted out there all the time because they had a lot of babies out that way. We babysitted out there. Gosh all the time.

[00:14:16.450] - Nicky Hamilton

That's where I had my child.

[00:14:16.500] - Queen Alice Spragens

They call it fertile, something. I work babysit out there. But we had fun taking the kids out walking and all of that. We sure did.

[00:14:33.590] - Nicky Hamilton

It sounds like you had a good childhood.

[00:14:40.530] - Queen Alice Spragens

I did. I had a good childhood growing up in Sewanee. I sure did. I didn't have a bad one. Sure didn't.

[00:14:47.010] - Nicky Hamilton

What were your parents like?

[00:14:49.890] - Queen Alice Spragens

Strict. Daddy wasn't as strict as mother. Mother was- oh boy. When she said something, you better jump. Daddy would talk more than Mama, Mama would get them switches and she didn't do much talking.

[00:15:07.350] - Nicky Hamilton

What were your parents names?

[00:15:08.610] - Queen Alice Spragens

But I didn't get into much trouble. I had a sister and brother that did. But I didn't. And I didn't get into too much. They got whoopings every day. I got a picture of my parents and things out there in the car. It was Tom Tate and Queen Esther Baker Tate.

[00:15:25.830] - Nicky Hamilton

And where are your brother and sister now?

[00:15:28.830] - Queen Alice Spragens

My younger brother- I just got a brother living 'cause my sister passed last year. And my older brother, he's been gone about twelve years, and I just got my younger brother, David Tate. He live in Cowan. He fought in the Vietnam War.

[00:15:46.110] - Nicky Hamilton

Okay, well, is there anything else you'd like us to know?

[00:15:54.970] - Queen Alice Spragens

No, I guess not. I just enjoyed Sewanee, and I still do.

[00:16:02.170] - Nicky Hamilton

Yeah, you're a lifer, Sewanee lifer. You've had several jobs. Out of all the jobs that you've had. What would you say was some of your favorite jobs?

[00:16:11.950] - Queen Alice Spragens

One of my favorite jobs, I'd say, was working at Chen Hall.

[00:16:15.130] - Nicky Hamilton

Yeah.

[00:16:15.790] - Queen Alice Spragens

We had a lot of fun working at Chen Hall. Lot of fun men. Randy Did. Randy is my first cousin. We had a lot of fun working at Chen Hall. Meeting everybody and everything. We sure did.

[00:16:30.850] - Nicky Hamilton

Well, Ms. Alice, thank you so much for your time today and for sharing your story. That was a very meaningful contribution. So we appreciate you taking the time.

[00:16:42.310] - Queen Alice Spragens

Thank you. Thank you.