

SOUTH CUMMINSVILLE: FOR THE LOVE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PART I: A TOUR OF SOUTH CUMMINSVILLE

Tim: My name is Tim Canady. And I've been living in South-ville for 59 years. And I want to take you all around the neighborhood to show y'all where I grew up at.

Deqah: Tim Canady knows everybody in South Cumminsville. It's partly because he grew up here, but it's also thanks to the kind of work he does.

Vanessa: Tim is the President of the South Cumminsville Community Council, but before that, Back in 2011, he and some friends started an annual event: the South Cumminsville family reunion picnic.

Tim: When we started out, we had like maybe 50 people, whatever. Then the last one we had was 2019 and we had over 500 people.

Deqah: Tim offered to take me around so I could talk with some of the folks in the neighborhood.

Deqah: When we went out, it was early spring, trees were starting to bud and you could hear how alive the community was -- there were people playing music, mowing lawns, dogs were barking, and kids were playing at the park.

As we were walking, Tim recognized someone across the street.

Tim: You wanna talk about SC? ... So tell her about it!

Deqah: Daryl Williamson was raised in South Cumminsville and moved back just a few years ago. I asked him what he used to do for fun.

Daryl: Oh, we would do anything from pickin apples and raid peoples cherry trees and playin in the Creek. This used to be a pool over here when I was growing up, in that parking lot with the pool, that was a School and there was a pool...that parking lot is sitting on a pool.

Daryl: That was the first restaurant my grandfather took me to, Mr. Gene's, I thought every hot dog was 12 feet long.

Vanessa: What the heck is this magical place with 12 foot long hot dogs?

Deqah: Gene's hot dogs? It's a stand that's been a neighborhood staple for years. People **love** Mr. Gene's. But, unfortunately, it's one of the few neighborhood buildings still around from people's childhoods.

As Tim and I walked to the corner of Elmore Street and Beekman Avenue, he pointed out a large, three-story building...

Tim: Everybody went to this, this school elementary school right here. Before, there wasn't no bridge. You could just cross the street. Now, the street wasn't this wide. What we got right now. It was all houses, all way down.

Vanessa: Houses aren't the only thing to have disappeared in South Cumminsville. Stores have, too.

Deqah: As we walked by vacant lots and empty storefronts, Tim pointed out where the drug store used to be. And a grocery store called Fay's Market.

Vanessa: Back in the day, you could get fresh produce at Fay's. Now, it's a beer and cigarette place.

Deqah: As we were walking down the street, we ran into none other than the Vice President of the South Cumminsville Community Council, Derrek Fagin. He told me that, over his lifetime, the neighborhood's changed for the worse.

Derrek: This whole street had another grocery store, barber shop, uh, bars at the end of the street, another grocery store on each corner. And it was a real vibrant community. Even up in here, all this went all the way through right now.

Deqah: So What happened to this vibrant community? Well, Derrek blames the highway, which tore this community in half.

Derrek: It actually killed the community. They tore the entire street down all the way down to Colerain; they eliminated the entire neighborhood. They really devastated this neighborhood.

Deqah: As we left Derek and the highway, we walked by a row of neatly kept two-story, single family houses with nice yards. And Tim stopped at a house he recognized.

Tim: Ms. Williams?

Annie: Yeah?

Tim: Can we come on in?

Alberta: Yeah, come on in! All right!

Deqah: Once inside, Tim introduced me to two sisters: Annie Williams and Alberta Warton.

Deqah: Nice to meet you!

Annie: My name is Annie Williams.

Deqah: What's your name?

Alberta: Alberta Warton

Deqah: Are you from South Cumminsville born and raised?

Annie: Yes, well, not actually born and raised. I was born in the West end. We moved out here in 1960. I was in the sixth grade, when our family moved from West end on Charlotte street out here on Draymond, right across from Gene's Hot Dog. The home, the house is no longer there.

Deqah: We all sat down at a long dining room table, with the smell of roast chicken coming from the kitchen. And I asked Alberta and Annie to describe South Cumminsville.

Annie: Well, it does, it's not that warm, fuzzy feeling, you know, that you once had growing up

Alberta: Things change!

Annie: It always was like a, more like a family uh community cause everybody knew everybody.

Alberta: Yea

Tim: In our community when we was growing up. If you did something, and so and so said, Imma get you.

Alberta: Imma tell your mama!

Tim: tell your mama, then she went and talked, she went and called, tell her you out here, acting a fool, and then they get on it, you know, but th th the whole community, I think were caring about all of you.

Deqah: But Annie and Alberta told me that, thanks to the highway, their close-knit community just isn't what it used to be.

Annie: They tore down homes all along that stretch. On Beekman, where 74 is running now I know that good 25 homes, they took down. Just tore down, to make the interstate for access from 74 to come through the neighborhood. That's what they did. They divided our community. Then they actually had no, just cut off and dead-end Bordon and Bordon

Annie: We walked that stretch...I had friends on the other side of Bordon and would get what? I got to walk across the bridge. No. Yeah. And then they dead end Dreadman down. So they just locked us in. Basically. They locked us in.

CREDITS

Deqah: Welcome to Urban Roots, the podcast that takes a deep dive into little known stories from Urban history.

Vanessa: We're your hosts, I'm Vanessa Quirk

Deqah: And I'm Deqah Hussein-Wetzel. And welcome to the third and final installment of our Lost Voices of Cincinnati series.

Vanessa: In this episode, we're taking a tour of South Cumminsville's past and present. It's a community that, like many Black neighborhoods in Cincinnati, has been divided and, over time, diminished.

Deqah: But it's also a place with a long long history of black entrepreneurship, black ownership, and black churches — a place where, from the beginning, residents have fought to improve their community, and support each other.

Vanessa: Exactly, which is why we're gonna start this episode way back when, before South Cumminsville was even part of Cincinnati, and tell you the story of someone named Sarah Fossett.

PART II: SARAH FOSSETT, A CINCINNATI HEROINE

Sean: I think she really was one of the, the uncredited Changemakers in Cincinnati that really defined what the black community could look like legally and economically.

Vanessa: That's Sean Andres.

Deqah: Sean is the co-founder of this boss blog called Queens of Queen City, which seeks to uncover the stories of important women in Cincinnati's history.

Vanessa: So they sound like they're kindred spirits then!

Deqah: And Queens of Queen City is actually how I first came across Sarah Fossett.

Sean: There's so much unknown about her, that uh, I really want to find and, and uncover and let the world know, because this woman is incredible.

Deqah: Sean has been digging around archives, trying to find everything he can about her.

Sean: She comes from a family of enslaved people and she was born in 1826.

Vanessa: While Sarah was likely born in South Carolina, she was sent to New Orleans as a young girl.

*****ROMANTIC FRENCH MUSIC*****

Sean: There, she studied under a French hairstylist and she became very good at what she did. And so she became top notch hairstylist. And so she was sought out after, by elite white society.

Deqah: Once Sarah got to Cincinnati in the 1840s, word spread quickly about her mad hairstyling skills. Soon enough, Sarah had a little hair empire on her hands.

Vanessa: Sarah became part of Cincinnati's Black elite. And she became pretty politically active, too.

Sean: This elite black society that was, doing their own thing, being super successful. And it was more than abolition. They were fighting for justice. They were fighting for equality. They were doing so much here in Cincinnati that really would later on inspire the national platforms. And Sarah was very much a part of that.

Deqah: While she was running in these elite abolitionist circles in the early 1850s, she met Peter Farley Fossett, the man she would soon marry. Peter was renowned for his culinary skills.

Vanessa: In fact, he learned how to cook from his mother, a woman who had been enslaved by Thomas Jefferson and used to run the kitchen at Monticello.

Sean: [Peter Farley Fossett. And later on, they would open their own catering business, which Sarah would also get involved with. And they became the most successful catering business in Cincinnati. Peter and Sarah were true equals in marriage and in business.

Vanessa: Sarah and Peter were also equally devoted to their activism.

Sean: they were almost definitely involved in the underground railroad; but we can't definitively prove it because there is so little evidence because of the dangers of being, uh, a conductor on the underground railroad, it was even dangerous being an abolitionist. you had to hide behind a lot of smokescreens.

Deqah: But Sarah certainly did not live in the shadows. By all accounts, she was an exuberant person, always out and about in the community, helping where she could.

Sean: She was, uh, almost this, uh, social butterfly people respected her. Even white people respected her. And she was gifted things all the time. She was gifted this silk quilt that had, an insane amount of squares. And so each square represented one of her friends. So it was 186 squares. So you see her as the pillar of the community.

Vanessa: That's so sweet. Such a sweet story!

Sean: I know

Deqah: While Sarah Fossett may have been known for her sweetness, it was her courage that changed the course of Cincinnati's history. But, you'll have a hard time finding that story in the history books.

Vanessa: The story begins in 1862.

START OLD TIMEY MUSIC

Sean: Sarah was late to an appointment And so she was running, running, running, trying to get there and she thought, you know what, I'm going to get on this, the streetcar. And so she did, haha!

Deqah: This was still the early days of street cars, when they were still pulled by horses.

Vanessa: Even before the street car became electrified in the 1890s, the invention was a really big deal for Cincinnati. It's what allowed the city to grow and expand beyond the downtown. And it allowed people who weren't rich enough to own their own horse to get around Cincinnati, like never before.

Deqah: Well, not all people.

Sean: It was for white people.

Sean: was up to the street car. So streetcars have the ability to deny black people, um, seats.

Sean: Sarah tried getting on to the platform, but was stopped by the conductor. He started trying to push her off and Sarah held onto the rails as the horses were starting to move. gripping tightly fearing for the fall, she could have been trampled, ran over by the wheel and. These street cars were heavy. She could have been plowed over by horses.

Sean Andres: So while she was gripping for her life, the conductor was hitting her hands to try to remove her. So she tried to bite his knuckles as he tried to pry her hands off, finger by finger just trying to bite his hands.

Vanessa: After three blocks — three entire blocks fighting the conductor and holding on for her life — Sarah let go.

Deqah: Thankfully she survived, but not without suffering some major injuries. And while she recovered, she decided to **do something** about the injustice done to her; so she sued the railroad company for a thousand dollars in damages.

Sean: She didn't receive the thousand dollars. However, she did get \$65 for being refused passage.

Vanessa: It may sound like a paltry result, but the ruling actually had really meaningful ramifications for African Americans in Cincinnati because the case set the legal precedent for a more integrated Streetcar System.

Sean: As a result of this case. Black women and children were legally allowed to ride inside of a street car while black men could ride outside.

Vanessa: And do you think that part of the reason why she decided to press charges was because of her position in the community? Do you think that there was a sense of maybe civic responsibility

Sean: I really do. I really do think that she kept on for three blocks for that reason. Uh, everything she did was for the community. This was no exception. I think this was a moment that really defined the rest of her life and how she, and even how Peter would operate in society. You can tell that there's this justice element to Peter and Sarah in their work and how, and, that I think definitely was sparked by this.

INSPIRING CHURCH MUSIC

Vanessa: It was after this pivotal moment in their lives, that Sarah and Peter moved to one of Cincinnati's newest neighborhoods: Cumminsville.

Deqah: Cumminsville encapsulated what today we know as Northside and South Cumminsville. It was mostly rural at the time, but had many abolitionist churches and colleges, making it an important stop on the Underground Railroad.

Vanessa: Until the street car arrived, it had been pretty removed from the rest of Cincinnati. It wasn't even annexed into the city until 1873.

Deqah: And it's around this time that Peter and Sarah both got involved in starting a local church, The First Baptist Church of Cumminsville.

Vanessa: It was the first church in Cincinnati to be built and financed by African Americans.

Sean: It was central to a black way of life, black churches in Cincinnati in particular were places not just of worship, but of social consciousness, and justice.

Sean: This church, the Baptist church was really the foundations of making Cincinnati so much better for black people, so much more livable and really provided, opportunities through Sarah's organization and Peter's leadership.

Deqah: Sarah and Peter didn't just use their money for the church — they used it to build up the new neighborhood they called home.

MUSIC BEAT/END

Sean: They were both buying property in their own names, leasing it they were really developing the community, through their own money.

Vanessa: And Sarah continued to develop her neighborhood, even after Peter passed away.

Sean: after Peter died, she inherited all of his money. And by the time she died just a few years later, almost all of that money was gone. So she had donated it all back to the community. So she was deeply invested in the wellbeing and equality of the black community in Cincinnati.

Deqah: Thanks in no small part to Sarah and Peter's investments, Cumminsville became home to a small, but vibrant community of working class African American families, mostly around Follett and Dreman Avenues.

Vanessa: And that's mostly how it stayed, for decades. Until two milestones in Cincinnati history changed Cumminsville forever.

1930s MUSIC

Deqah: First, as we talked about in our prelude episode, mid-century urban renewal practices demolished whole swathes of the West End, where the majority of Cincinnati's Black population lived at the time.

Vanessa: After what happened in the West End, African Americans throughout the city were forced to relocate...so they moved to places where they had ties, neighborhoods like Evanston, Avondale and Cumminsville, which had these small Black communities.

Deqah: By the 1950s, Cumminsville was predominantly African American.

Vanessa: But almost as soon as it became a Black neighborhood, the City of Cincinnati started buying up property, including the land that held the First Baptist Church, and they started tearing down the buildings.

Deqah: Which takes us to the second thing that shaped Cumminsville's future: the Interstate highway.

MUSIC ENDS / HIGHWAY FX

Vanessa: Like the street car before it, I-74 was made, for white people to get around. It allowed them to speedily get to downtown from their homes in the suburbs, but it wasn't really designed for the Black residents of South Cumminsville, then or now.

Deqah: The highway completely disrupted the fabric of this neighborhood. Replacing homes and stores and gardens with asphalt and speeding, dirty cars.

Vanessa: Cumminsville became two neighborhoods -- Northside, where many stores and homes continued to develop, and South Cumminsville became a more industrial neighborhood with factories and companies.

Deqah: South Cumminsville was also where most African Americans lived and worshipped. But because of the highway, the neighborhood was separated from so much that used to be part of the community.

PART III: THE WEST END, THE HIGHWAY AND A RIOT

Vanessa: But the highway wasn't the only reason why South Cumminsville started to decline in the 60s and 70s.

Deqah: While we were on our tour, Tim Canady wanted me to talk to someone who remembered this part of South Cumminsville's history particularly well.

Tim: That's my brother right down the court. Now he know everything.

Deqah: Ok, cool.

Tim: When he was coming up. It wasn't nothing like this.

Wilbur: So much has changed around here!

Tim: I know! Yeah.

Deqah: Wilbur Canady owned a construction company in South Cumminsville for many years. But before that, he was a politically active youth.

Wilbur: Well, the first sit-in, I went to was, I was in 10th grade at Hughes high school and it was about the Vietnam war and I just walked in school. All the teachers came down and they recognized us. For the next week, the whole school was taught about why the war was going on and what was going on in the war and everything. And that was our first, my first sit in.

Vanessa: As Wilbur got older, and the 60s progressed, he got more radical in his politics.

Wilbur: I used to be a black panther and we had a meeting one time out in Lincoln Heights with H. Rap Brown was there and H. Rap Brown said, burn baby burn. And somebody said, why are we burning up our own neighborhoods? And not burning up they neighborhoods? And H. Rap Brown say, I don't care what they do in they neighborhoods, we want to burn them out of our neighborhoods. And if you burn the white man out, he won't come back. That was in the sixties. Ain't no white man came back here yet.

Deqah: Wilbur remembers the riots of 1967 and 68 as pivotal moments in the neighborhood's history.

Wilbur: Well, before the riots, every business around here was owned by white men. Elmore cafe over there. The bartender used to be Benny. After the riots came, then the man that owned the place decided he wasn't going to take care of it. So he gave it to Benny. I'm pretty sure on the land contract. So Benny bought the building and the business. And after that, Benny was one of the first really successful black men in the neighborhood. And then Hudson was, another guy that just worked in it and a delicatessen,, and a man owned the building. Same thing happened after the riots. He wasn't coming back. So Hudson became the second. Most successful black man in this neighborhood. He had two restaurants. He bought several houses and he did pretty good.

Wilbur: And neither Benny nor Hudson taught their kids the business, and so when they got ready to retire and carrying on, the kids didn't know the business ,so when the kids got the business, they sold it. The next generation it's like they just let it go.

Deqah: Then, just like in towns and cities across America in the 80s and 90s, South Cumminsville's factories shut down, too.

Wilbur: Uh white way lighting manufacturer down here on the corner of Dreaman, uh, Elmore. It used to be a one little bitty building. And the gentleman that started it, he kept it growing and growing and growing. And anybody in Cumminsville that wanted a job he hired. But it seemed like after the old man passed, then the generation after him, they just start deteriorating. The business just got less and less and less.

ENTER LOW-FI MUSIC

PART IV: COMMUNITY ACTION AND A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Rigel: Of the 450 500 jobs that are still here in the Beekman corridor,, less than 1% of those jobs are held by people who live in the neighborhood.

Vanessa: That's Rigel Behrens, the Community Development Planner at Working in Neighborhoods, or WIN, a Cincinnati not-for-profit founded in 1978.

Deqah: WIN does a lot to help South Cumminsville residents acquire affordable housing, which is in very short supply in Cincinnati.

Vanessa: For the last 10 years, Rigel has been embedded in South Cumminsville, working with the residents. And she's been blown away by how hard they fight for the good of their community.

Rigel: Folks deserve, they deserve to have, um, a good neighborhood. They deserve a city. That, well invest in and, and support them while they're taking care of it. I think about how much folks have been able to accomplish, and how hard people have to fight just to get a new crosswalk or new playground equipment or a school that serves the neighborhood kids and how much effort community members put even into their community garden. And I don't know if you got a chance to see that garden

Deqah: No.

Rigel: It's an amazing space. I mean, it's got a whole fruit, orchard situation going on And that's something that folks in the neighborhood get like that wasn't us going: you know, these different orchards are all the hot stuff in the planning world.

Vanessa: Another thing that's pretty remarkable about South Cumminsville is that every other resident here owns their home. And, to Rigel, that says a lot.

Rigel: And to me, I think that says so much about the degree of investment that folks in this neighborhood, -put into their community walk to down, a lot of the streets and see the amount of pride that people have in their homes, and how tight-knit the neighborhood is. It's an amazing, little neighborhood to get to work in, and be part of, and know folks.

MUSIC BEAT/END

Deqah: For the past few years, Rigel and her colleagues at WIN have been knocking on doors, asking hundreds of residents of South Cumminsville and neighboring communities about what they want to see in their neighborhoods.

Vanessa: A lot of the desires are similar. Most people want affordable housing. People want to see a flourishing business district with small business, like back in the day.

Deqah: People want the vacant lots turned into useful spaces. They want litter and trash cleaned up.

Vanessa: So WIN approached different community councils and convened a meeting. The idea was that maybe they would have more success in achieving their goals as a collective

Deqah: Three priorities emerged from that gathering, and they formed three working groups to spearhead those initiatives

Vanessa: A housing committee.

Rigel: You know, the housing committee was able to, to negotiate this deal with the Hamilton County Land Bank, to,, bring vacant lots that weren't being taken care of into the neighborhood

ownership And, convinced them to start a pilot program, if you lived in the neighborhood you could get that lot for a dollar.

Deqah: An illegal dumping committee.

Rigel: They are going hard. I mean, one of the things that they did is they organized sort of hike and cleanup things.

Vanessa: And an investment committee.

Rigel: The last year and a half, um, we've been working on like a, like a redevelop- industrial plan, with the neighborhoods collectively, like what do we want to see for Beekman street? What do we envision? Where are the opportunities? You know, um, what, what strategies can we use to do the kind of redevelopment that folks in the neighborhood want to see? We're just sort of continuing to, um, talk to residents in the neighborhoods and say, how do you feel about this? Is, is this right? It's not the city's plan. It's your plan.

ENTER LOW-FI MUSIC

Deqah: The work that Rigel and the community members are doing is invaluable. It's amazing how much more they're doing across community lines, across racial lines. And as I've said before, and I will say it again, Cincinnati is a city of 52 completely divided neighborhoods. And the work that people are doing on the ground is all about trying to subvert those divisions. And have these communities work together to get the resources they need.

Vanessa: Also, the approach that they're taking, this process that they've gone through, is just as important as the plan, itself it's in stark contrast to all the city plans that have, you know, been inflicted on communities in Cincinnati? This approach that Rigel and her Colleagues are doing on the other hand, is about letting community members find common challenges together, right? And then create their own solutions and plans for how to overcome them.

Deqah: These efforts are all about enhancing the sense of belonging and pride that so many people in South Cumminsville have already. And, as we know from the story of Sarah Fossett, that has always been a part of this community.

OUTRO TOUR

Deqah: When I was on the tour of South Cumminsville with Tim Canady, he took me to a little spot that, for me, epitomizes South Cumminville's past, but also it's potential future. The south Cumminsville mural.

Deqah: Painted on the wall of an overpass, the mural is big, colorful, and whimsical. It depicts neighborhood heroes next to circus animals. Tim told me that the artist used drawings from children of the neighborhood for inspiration.

Tim: Carly Ann Newsome, she did this, and a lot of other people from the community, did all this.

Deqah: Wow.

Tim: Yeah. And we don't want to change it either. We want to leave it, leave it like it is, cause it, it says a lot. This is our mural of our community.

Vanessa: The mural, which is 15 years old, will hopefully remain for decades to come, reminding the residents of South Cumminsville that they stand on the shoulders of the community heroes that came before them.

START THEME MUSIC

Deqah: Reminding them that, yes, there's so much rich history in the past, but also a rich future to keep fighting for.

*** MUSIC BEAT ***

ENDING CREDITS

Deqah: Thank you for listening to Urban Roots. We're hosted by me, Deqah Hussein-Wetzel and Vanessa Quirk.

Vanessa: We're edited by Connor Lynch. Our theme music is by Adaam James Levin-Areddy. Story editing by Max Miller.

Deqah: Mix by Andrew Callaway

Deqah: A big thank you to the folks who made this episode possible: Tim Canady, Annie Williams, Alberta Warton, Scotty Lewis, Wilbur Canady, Derrek Faygin, Sean Andres, and Rigel Behrens.

Vanessa: So you know we have an IG! Where Deqah documents Cincinnati's historical buildings, including some of the buildings we talked about in this show, so if that's your jam, you should follow us on instagram at UrbanRootsCulture.

Deqah: If you'd like to know more about the topics we discussed today, then check out our website, urbanrootspodcast.com, where you can find blogposts that provide links and resources so you can dive deeper into the history we talked about.

Vanessa: The Lost Voices of Cincinnati series was made possible by a Truth & Reconciliation grant from ArtsWave. We'd also like to thank Invest in Neighborhoods for their support. They're an not-for-profit that works with Cincinnati community councils to create inclusive, diverse, safe, fun and vibrant neighborhoods.

Deqah: To find out more about Invest in Neighborhoods and learn how you can get involved with your community council visit [invest in neighborhoods dot org](http://investinneighborhoods.org).

Vanessa If you like Urban Roots, and would like to see more episodes from us, please consider donating to our Fundly page, you can find in our episode notes. Deqah, want to hit the good people with our tagline one last time?

Deqah: Urban Roots - looking back so we can move forward.

OUTRO

Deqah: Yes. So, um, okay. Thank you so much. Y'all

Annie: That was quick did we get through all the questions

Deqah: We got. We got...

Annie: You got the most important thing. I love my community

Annie: We love Cumminsville.

Alberta: We love it!

Annie: Oh yeah, we enjoyed it baby.