Transcript of OH-00077

Mercedes Key Upshaw

Interviewed by

John Wearmouth

on

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Typographic Note

- [Inaudible] is used when a word cannot be understood.
- Brackets are used when the transcriber is not sure about a word or part of a word, to add a note indicating a non-verbal sound and to add clarifying information.
- Em Dash — is used to indicate an interruption or false start.
- Ellipses … is used to indicate a natural extended pause in speech

Subjects

African American teachers
Education
Rural conditions
School discipline
Segregation in education
School integration
Rural schools

Tags

Pomonkey (Md.)
Key store

One room school house

Transcript

John Wearmouth [J]: This is John Wearmouth interviewing Mercedes Key Upshaw at her home about three quarters of a mile west of Bryans Road on Maryland Route 227. The date is March 12, 1990. Mrs. Upshaw is a retired black school teacher. The one of the 15 or 16 that I've interviewed in the past several years. This is part of the Charles County Community College Oral History Program. Mrs. Upshaw is the daughter of John Wesley. John Wesley Key.

Mercedes Key Upshaw [M]: James, James.

J: James Wesley Key who was a very prominent respected citizen in this community for many years and did a great deal to organize the community when it came to looking for a better education and better living conditions in the black community of the entire Bryans Road Pomonkey area. Mr. Key as I understand it held down two jobs. He ran a store and also worked for the government. Is this true? At Indian Head?

M: Yes.

J: And fortunately he had some children and a wife who could help him out in the store when he couldn't be there? How many children were there?

M: 11.

J: 11. How many are still alive? Roughly half of them?

M: Four.

J: Four? Okay.

M: I'm the youngest.

J: Alright you're the youngest and you were born in 1919. How old would the oldest be? The first born?

M: [19. 91.]

J: 91? Okay so you were the baby of the family.

M: Yes.

J: By 20 years. Younger than the oldest. Okay what do you remember about family life in the Key household that you like to think about? Happy moments? Nice, pleasant, healthy family affairs? Picnics, entertainment, the helping your mother around the house, working in the store.

M: Singing.

J: Okay.

M: Papa would sing.

J: Decent voice?

M: Fair.

J: Okay. No radios?

M: Yes we had radio but we could only listen to certain things.

J: You mean your mother and father kind of—

M: Education. Religion.

J: Alright. Not not that?

M: No.

J: Were you allowed to listen to some of the great comedians of the 30's? Remember Eddy Cantor?

M: Yes.

J: Jack Benny?

M: We listened to Amos and Andy.

J: Amos and Andy. Okay early black comedy huh?

M: Yeah.

J: Back in the early 30's yeah. Okay how much discipline was there in the Key family? Was it pretty tightly run?

M: Yes it was.

J: Okay and who was the boss?

M: Papa was the boss.

J: Well believe it or not that was a little unusual. Often or not it was the mother who was the boss. Did your father give your mother control over household matters though?

M: Yes.

J: Okay so they drew the line: this is your responsibility.

M: I guess they were both the boss.

J: Alright. In their own respective areas of interest and knowledge.

M: Yes.

J: What—when did your father begin working the store? Did he start the business?

M: Yes in 1900.

J: When you were—

M: I was told.

J: Was there an older building on the site?

M: I'm not sure.

J: Was it ever considered a burden to help out in the store? What was the attitude of the children towards waiting on the public?

M: It was never a burden. It was something that we had to do.

J: You accepted it?

M: Yes.

J: And did you find it even a little bit interesting meeting people?

M: I [did meet people].

J: And was it a way of really getting acquainted in the community? Was there anyone around you didn't know in those days?

M: We knew everyone.

J: Okay.

M: And once in a while a stranger would come.

J: Okay where was the nearest post office?

M: Bryans Road.

J: Bryans Road about—

M: Right at the corner.

J: Okay you could walk it from here right?

M: Yeah. We'd walk to school.

J: Do you remember your first day in school?

M: No.

J: Did you go alone do you think?

M: No. It [inaudible] the elementary and the high school was on the same grounds I think. The same building. And—

J: On Metropolitan Church Road?

M: Yes.

J: Okay so that's a long—that's a long walk from here for a little kid.

M: Well we didn't walk all the time. We had a car. My brother drove I think. But it was about—I guess about six of us in school at one time.

J: Do you remember some of those early teachers?

M: Yes. My first grade teacher's name was Ms. Turner.

J: Turner?

M: Uh-huh.

J: And her first name?

M: I can't remember.

J: And some of the others?

M: And my second grade teacher was [Lynn Gladys Coleman]. And she is living today.

J: Where?

M: Washington, DC.

J: Does she ever get down here to visit?

M: She comes to the meetings.

J: I should talk to her. How old is she now? 15 years older than you if you [inaudible].

M: Older [inaudible phrase]. I think her birthdate was [inaudible].

J: Okay I should say for purposes—

M: 84.

J: 84. [Definite]. Okay so I interviewed Alcena Key Clark.

M: Yes.

J: Clark about a year and a half ago and she was a sister of Mercedes. Younger sister—older sister.

M: Yes.

J: Older sister yeah.

M: Yes.

J: Okay so were there only the two teachers in the Key family?

M: No.

J: That's interesting. How many altogether?

M: Mama had eight girls. One died a baby. One was a nurse. And the rest of them were teachers.

J: That's a tremendous record. Were your parents both set on getting as much education as possible for their kids?

M: That's right.

J: They strongly felt that this is the only way.

M: That's right. My father said—my father said, "I couldn't make my brothers and sisters go to school but I can sure make you go."

J: And he did.

M: And he did. He said, "When you finish high school you haven't done anything."

J: And he knew that way back then.

M: Yes.

J: That's at a time when maybe only one youngster out of ten in this county actually got a high school diploma black or white. If you finished seven grades before 1930 or 35—

M: All of my family I think finished high school.

J: Did they all get high school diplomas from Pomonkey?

M: No, no my sister Eleanor who's living across [there inaudible]. She'll be 89 this summer. She went to Dunbar high school in Washington.

J: Did she live in town?

M: She had to. We didn't have a high school here then. And my only brother went to Hofstra in Washington. All the rest of us got high school diplomas from Pomonkey.

J: I see. Okay as soon as Pomonkey was ready to—

M: Alcena was—Alcena was first class.

J: Now did Eleanor ever teach?

M: Eleanor did but she only had a high school education.

J: I see. Did she teach in Charles County?

M: Yes but I guess for a year.

J: Okay that's interesting. What a record I haven't interviewed anyone else with that many children going into teaching. That's really—that is really something.

M: Well in those days there weren't any jobs for blacks other than teaching and nursing. Now you can be anything you want to be.

J: Well I hope the youngsters today realize what the situation used to be.

M: Yes.

J: Think they do? It's hard to tell. Okay how well did the Key children do in school as far as grades are concerned?

M: We're average.

J: Okay and did you for the most part have homework assignments in those days?

M: Yeah. It wasn't ever—didn't excel because of the I guess the environment. We went to church. We went to school. What else did we know?

J: That was your life, your world.

M: That's it.

J: What did young people in their teens do, black families in the Pomonkey area for entertainment? You made your own didn't you? Whatever there was.

M: Went to church. That was entertainment.

J: Church picnics once in a while?

M: Yes.

J: [Bizarre]

M: [Inaudible phrase].

J: And special holiday programs?

M: Yes. Children's day.

J: Okay. Were the children encouraged to take part in music productions as much as possible?

M: Yes my father gave us music lessons when we were young. All those who wanted it.

J: Which of the Key children had the best voices?

M: Clarice and Odetta I think.

J: Are they still with us?

M: Clarice? Deceased. Odetta lived in Portsmouth, Virginia.

J: She's a long way down.

M: Yes. She taught down there for years. She's retired from teaching.

J: Within the Pomonkey Bryans Road black community did you feel that the Key family was better off than most?

M: Yes.

J: Economically, education?

M: Yes.

J: Alright and the way you felt about yourselves I have a hunch nobody pushed the Key family around too much.

M: No because you couldn't push my father around. Whether you were white, black, or green you couldn't push him.

J: Okay [Inaudible].

M: My mother was [born] like that.

J: Okay so he wasn't an aggressive belligerent sort. He just believed in holding his own and being treated with respect.

M: That's right.

J: As he should have been. And was he for the most part treated with respect because people knew they couldn't push James W. Key too far.

M: He was. That's right.

J: Okay that makes a difference. I have a hunch you're a little bit like your dad in that respect are you?

M: You don't push me around.

J: No. It comes through. It comes through and it pays in the long run I think. Don't you—hasn't it been a help to you in your life to let people know how you feel and where you stand.

M: Yeah. They said I was a good disciplinarian.

J: Okay they need a few out there today. Okay now where—who were your best teachers in high school? The ones that you really respect even today for getting the most out of you academically?

M: High school, that's been over 50 years ago.

J: That's right. That's right.

M: And the principal was [Enolia Pettinger]. And you would.

J: And that's a name I haven't heard. [Pettinger]?

M: [Pet—Pettington]. But she was—she's [MacMiller] now. She's still living.

J: Where?

M: Baltimore.

J: It may be that—

M: I don't whether I respected her or was afraid of her.

J: Where is the line? Where do you draw the line?

M: I don't know she was—

J: But a good teacher?

M: [Yup].

J: Okay and she got the most out of her students I'm sure.

M Yeah well she made you pay attention.

J: That helped. That helped. When you were in school would teachers contact the families of the students sometimes if the problem got a little bit too big to handle?

M: Yes, yes. They'd tell little things.

J: Okay. Alright and what kind of support did they get from these families?

M Oh you'd get a good spanking. Yeah.

J: So this meant the teacher could do this knowing that there'd be a sympathetic response at home.

M: Very few parents would be mean to the teacher in those days because you went to school to see about your child you found out what was happening good or bad.

J: Did you in your early teaching career feel that community respect as a teacher?

M: Yes.

J: It was always there to support you?

M: Yes. Especially when you taught black children.

J: Okay alright. They tell me it's not always there today.

M: It's not there at all.

J: [It hurts].

M: In my last two or three years.

J: What was your last full year of teaching?

M: 1976.

J: Okay so you've seen it the way it is today pretty much. Okay how did you determine where you were going to go after high school? What choices did you have?

M: Alcena went to Bowie so I'm going to Bowie.

J: Alright okay. So she brought back a good report on Bowie? Did she like it?

M: And then—yes—and then Bowie was a state school and it was cheaper. And though when I went to college Papa had I think four children in college at the same time. But in those days you could write a note and tell the president that you'd send the money later.

J: And they knew you would. And they knew you would.

M: Yeah I had a brother and sister in Hampton.

J: What was the difference quality wise between Hampton and Bowie? Quality of instruction? Caliber of the faculty? Do you have a feel for that?

M: I couldn't say because they taught you how to teach at Bowie but Hampton you got, you didn't get the methods. You got the—

J: The curriculum for the subjects—

M: That's it. Yeah.

J: So between the two you could get what you wanted then?

M: Well I had to get a BS degree. See Bowie was a three year normal when I was there.

J: So you got a certificate from Bowie which enabled you to teach what grades?

M: That's right. Any grade from one to eight I think. Or one to seven.

J: Okay what were your best subjects in your opinion? What were you really good at?

M: During my teaching career?

J: Yeah what pleased you most?

M: English. Spelling.

J: Have you done any writing ever? Done any composition?

M: No. No.

J: You could you know.

M: I know but I'm not—too late. [It is] too late.

J: Well I don't know. At least now you have a little time to sit back and think about—

M: Well now I am more interested in doing stuff in crafts.

J: Okay. You're doing what you want to do, what pleases you most.

M: Yeah. Like that thing on the door. I thought that was pretty.

J: It is. Did you do that? Your design?

M: Yes, yes.

J: I like that.

M: I get those plastic pieces from coca-cola.

J: Huh. It is pretty original design. Did you ever teach art?

M: No I wasn't god enough. But now I [inaudible] I go to art classes and do some of these things.

J: Wat was your first teaching assignment and was it in Charles County?

M: Charles County all the way. I had a—my first teaching job was at a school called Jacksontown. I had 28 children grades one through seven. They were the nicest children I have ever taught in my life.

J: Now that's over here at Liverpool point?

M: Yes. Near Nanjemoy.

J: Jacksontown Road?

M: Near Nanjemoy.

J: Okay.

M: The children were very, very—and their parents—very nice, but the building was just horrible.

J: Can you describe it for the record? First time you saw it how did you feel?

M: I cried.

J: Had Mary Neal ever been there? Had Mary Neal ever taught there?

M: I don't know. I don't think so.

J: Her first teaching assignment was over in that neighborhood.

M: But I don't think she taught there. Alcena taught there but I think just a few months. I'm not—

J: What was the [setting like]?

M: I'm not gonna tell everything that I know.

J: You're not?

M: No I'm not.

J: You tell whatever you want.

M: I'll tell you no sir.

J: Whatever you feel comfortable about.

M: But they couldn't do anything with Wesley Key, though they had to give us something and that something was nothing. That was an old house with a blackboard in it.

J: Not even meant to be a school?

M: [Inaudible] correct.

J: No running water? No electricity?

M: Oh I didn't get electricity and running water—I guess I had taught 12 years.

J: How long were you at that school?

M: One years.

J: One year. Do you remember—

M: But I taught at Indian Head and they had running water and electricity.

J: Long before anyone else.

M: Because it was on the government, yeah.

J: Okay did you teach at that school on Swan Circle?

M: I guess it was Swan Circle. Where Ms. Neal taught? Yes.

J: Right.

M: Very nice.

J: In a nice building that had been a library originally.

M: I don't know what it was but it was very nice. Very nice and outdoors was the bathroom but they you know had running water. And had electricity inside. And it had two rooms but we didn't use the one room.

J: What were the names of some of these families in the Jacksontown area that you kind of remember with some—

M: Posey.

J: Posey alright.

M: Yes because the oldest brother was a classmate of mine in the high school. Posey, Smith...

[Inaudible phrase].

J: Mostly farm families would you say?

M: No I guess—no they worked at Indian Head in the government.

J: How the heck did they get to Indian Head from there?

M: From the [cars.]

J: How'd you spend your first winter there teaching at that? Another uncomfortable situation?

M: Yes. I had to make the fire at school.

J: Old iron stove.

M: Mhm old but—

J: I suppose there was absolutely no fire protection.

M: Oh no.

J: If that building had caught fire that would've been the end?

M: [We] would've just run out of there and that would've been it.

J: Do you remember some of the more common illnesses that you know noticed there in the youngsters.

M: No. Nothing that they would call those illnesses, child diseases.

J: Was there much ringworm in the neighborhood in those days? Children not wearing shoes in warm weather?

M: Everybody went barefoot.

J: Well you would've noticed it if they had it. You would've noticed it. How did children when they came to school give you some clues about their living conditions at home? What would you notice about their behavior, their dress, their attitude?

M: You would know the living conditions because you had to visit every home.

J: Okay. For what purpose?

M: That was a part of your...

J: In the contract?

M: No it wasn't in the contract but we were taught that in college that you visit the home.

J: Alright. How frequently? Once a school term?

M: No. I guess I can't really recall but we had to take census so you had to go to the house. The census was taken by the school teacher.

J: Had you ever seen more humble living conditions in your life before that time?

M: The house that I lived in was lovely. The house is there today. I rode down not long ago and it's there and it's beautiful. The man that I—the man that lived in the house built the house himself.

J: What was the name?

M: Jackson. Lee Jackson. He built a church too.

J: Do you know Albert Jackson by any chance?

M: No.

J: I interviewed one of the Jackson's a couple of years ago from that Jacksontown Road area. He worked at Indian Head all of his life.

M: Most of them worked at Indian Head. Mr. Lee Jackson built houses, a carpenter.

J: Was he able to make a pretty decent living?

M: I would guess so. I guess so. And then I lived in that house but I didn't like it. It wasn't a home but it was a house.

J: More comfortable by far than the school building. Did—

M: It was Mr. Jackson's old house that was the school building.

J: Oh. Who did you depend on to do repairs, emergency maintenance work there on that building?

M: Didn't do any.

J: You couldn't call on the county school board? Did—

M: I don't recall.

J: Did Mr. Parks ever visit the school?

M: Yeah he visited the school and he brought back the...what do you call it? Superintendent. The State Superintendent with him and he was—

J: Huff—Huffington?

M: And he was as mean as a dog. As soon as he saw a black teacher while he was—Oh we were scared to death of him. If I knew then what I know now I would've handed it to him. He was so mean.

J: And he'd come down from?

M: Come down from Baltimore in that old school house.

J: And seeing those conditions you got no sympathetic word from him?

M: None. None. And he was just as mean. He'd say anything to you in front of the children.

J: What a [help].

M: Yeah. He did—[inaudible phrase].

J: What did Joseph C. Parks think of him did you ever find out?

M: [Inaudible] never say anything about him.

J: Okay well I've heard him mentioned many, many—

M: I know, I know. They say he was my godfather but I don't—

J: Mr. Parks?

M: Yeah.

J: Does he still have a daughter living in the area?

M: Yes a very nice daughter.

J: Maybe I should talk to her. *[Note: Interview OH—00047 is with Lillian V. Parks the daughter of J.C. Parks]*

M: She's very, very nice. But I don't know about [inaudible phrase].

J: He was here a long time wasn't he in Charles County from World War I?

M: Yes he came the year I was born. 1919.

J: Okay so he was here a long time.

M: And stayed until he died.

J: And all you remember him. And all you—Slater remembered him.

M: I guess so.

J: He stayed with them for a little while.

M: He did? Well now that I don't know. But I'm sorry you didn't get Georgia. Georgia Butler Lucas.

J: No I didn't.

M: That's where Mr. Parks lived for years. And of course the Butler's got the best jobs.

J: Oh. And where was this? Where did they live?

M: Right up the—right in walking distance up here.

J: Oh this side of Bryans Road?

M: Yeah right there. Right on that hill but see she's married. She married at 81 or 82 something and she's gone to Cleveland, Ohio.

J: Oh boy. [Inaudible phrase].

M: I'm telling you she was my principal.

J: Did she know her job? How'd you like her? How'd you get along with her?

M: I liked her as a person but it wasn't her fault that she got the best jobs.

J: That's true. So it did make a difference knowing Mr. Joseph C. Parks.

M: Yes it did.

J: It's a wonder you didn't just give up teaching that first year.

M: No didn't any of us because there wasn't anything else out there to do unless you go and clean somebody's kitchen. And we weren't brought up like that to clean our own because Momma when I was 18 well there was a job in Bethesda and it was a doctor and his wife I think. And they wanted me to come and clean their house for five dollars a week and I needed some money.

J: This is before you went to college?

M: No I went to college when I was 14—I mean 16.

J: You graduated from high school at 16?

M: 15.

J: Yeah 15.

M: I graduated from college at 18. My birthday came in June. [Last of June I'd say]. And I went to—[inaudible phrase].

J: Yes.

[Tape Interruption].

J: What differences were there between the children on Jacksontown Road and those at Indian Head? The kids themselves were these two different groups?

M: Yeah well those children at Indian Head had more experience than those at Jacksontown.

J: And their families were more comfortably situated economically?

M: That's right. Yeah they had—

J: Steady government jobs.

M: And they lived you know right around that circle. And they had running water and [inaudible] necessities.

J: This was a whole new world [inaudible phrase]?

M: Yeah, yeah.

J: And there were very few places then in Charles County that could boast having that much [modern] living in it.

M: Yeah. But my—we had it in my house because Alcena and I put it in there.

J: Oh for heaven's sakes. The family—the family house?

M: Yeah.

J: Huh.

M: We had a bathroom. But we didn't have running water. We'd have to take the water up there and put them in tub.

J: Oh you had the tub upstairs.

M: That's right.

J: Okay so you had a gravity feed. It just dropped.

M: You'd go up and put the water in the tub.

J: Was this while your mother and father were still living?

M: That's right.

J: Okay. What—

M: My parents—my mother died in 47.

J: Oh okay and your father?

M: Married again.

J: Okay.

M: In 48.

J: What was the year of this disaster here at the store? The robbery?

M: 74.

J: 74 because I remember that happening. Was this a relative who was killed in that?

M: My brother.

J: Your brother. Okay and what was his name?

M: J. Wesley Jr.

J: J. Wesley Jr. Did they catch the responsible party?

M: Yes.

J: Was he anyone you had ever known?

M: Never seen before.

J: As I remember he came down here from the Washington area.

M: That's right.

J: Did the store keep open after that?

M: No. His wife didn't want it open. She closed it.

J: Okay that was the end of the Key store?

M: That's right.

J: So 1900 - 1974.

M: 74 that's right.

J: Three quarters of a century serving the Bryans Road area.

M: Right. That's right.

J: Was the Bryans Road center always in your lifetime called Bryans Road?

M: No.

J: When did that name begin to be popular?

M: I guess when I was born.

J: Okay. And before that?

M: In the bible it said—

[Tape Interruption]

J: So how many years were you at the Swan Circle school?

M: One.

J: And then where did you go?

M: Rock Point.

J: And did you—

M: Look I don't think—I don't think that's right. I taught at Jacksontown.

J: Right.

M: And then I went to Rock Point.

J: Ah okay that's alright.

M: Now Rock Point was a schoolhouse but it had no electricity, no running water.

J: Okay now how close was this black school to the white school down at Rock Point? Do you remember?

M: About a mile or less and they both looked alike.

J: Okay the one is still standing down there. One of the Butler's is living in it now. [Inaudible] Butler.

M: [Inaudible]? He's still living? [Laughs]

J: So is his son. His wife died though about two years ago.

M: I don't know her.

J: See I can put you in touch with some of these things. I forget what her name was but her son works at the Catholic [Inaudible phrase] and I know him. I found some good photographs of his father taken in 1937 and I have prints made from that for the family.

M: Oh yeah? And it's right on the road. The schoolhouse. And the old schoolhouse—I mean the white school house up near the church.

J: Back towards—alright back toward the church that's right.

M: Near where the church [inaudible] yeah.

J: That's right okay. Now how many—how many children did you have there and what grades?

M: All one through seven.

J: One through seven.

M: I don't know how many I had.

J: And who were some of the families down there that you got to know through the kids?

M: Briscoe.

J: Okay. Butler's [inaudible]?

M: Butler. I guess yeah Butler.

J: Must have been some of them.

M: Mhm but that's been so long.

J: Yeah, yeah. Do you remember the year that you were there?

M: Yeah...39, 40.

J: Okay how old were you when you started teaching at the Jacksontown Road?

M: 19.

J: 19.

M: Just turned 19.

J: And how old were some of the older kids that you were teaching?

M: 16.

J: 16. How on earth did a 19 year old girl maintain discipline? You did though didn't you?

M: Yes I did.

J: And I suppose—

M: They didn't have any problem there.

J: That's amazing.

M: They were just...you just [go on] about your work, did your work because they were so nice.

J: Were you able to get any assistance in the classroom from some of the older students? Some of the better older students?

M: I didn't.

J: You didn't?

M: Because in those days you would teach the fourth and fifth grade together. Second and third. First grade had to be taught by itself.

J: What were the subjects that you were required to teach in those first years?

M: [Inaudible].

J: Any geography?

M: Yes. Called it social studies.

J: Social studies, a bit of history?

M: Yes.

J: Did you ever teach any history of Charles County?

M: No. Didn't have it in the books.

J: That's why this sort of thing's important.

M: Uh-huh.

J: And where did you live down there at Rock Point and with whom?

M: Mrs. Lewis.

J: Mrs. Lewis.

M: And she died about four or five months ago.

J: Did you sort of keep in contact with her after your—

M: Her daughter and I are very close.

J: Where was the house located? Do you remember?

M: At the end of the line we said.

J: The very end—

M: The school was there and all the way to the end of the—had all these houses right on the line.

J: Okay so you were close to the old shucking house?

M: No, no. The line went from the school straight down. The shucking house was that way.

J: Oh, oh, oh.

M: That's why I said I should know how to shuck oysters. Because they got up before day in the morning and they went down to the shuck house and they shucked oysters. Oh that was an interesting thing.

J: How many of these families who had children in that school depended on that shucking industry?

M: All of them I think.

J: Okay. More than were in farming?

M: And—they didn't farm because they didn't own the land. [Old Lancaster—Spellman Lancaster] owned that whole place.

J: Okay so they were renting from the Lancaster family?

M: That's right. They could buy that home but they couldn't own the land because of she moved her house up to Issue.

J: Mrs. Lewis did?

M: Yeah.

J: Oh it's still standing?

M: Yes it is.

J: Oh for goodness sakes.

M: Nice home.

J: That's interesting.

M: The people would come in October from [Chris field] and they stayed until spring.

J: Black people?

M: Yes and they lived see....

J: This is—this is interesting.

M: [Spellman—Spellman] Lancaster had—had some homes about five or six just like [shared them] you know.

J: Little shacks.

M: Shacks. And the people lived—

J: Were you ever inside any of those?

M: Sure.

J: Were they finished off inside?

M: No.

J: Just the outside wall.

M: Yeah.

J: Share—worse than sharecropper type—

M: Yeah. And they'd bring them over here. I don't know how I guess in [bus and boat]. And they'd shuck oysters and I'd have to put the children [inaudible phrase] you know.

J: Oh boy I see. So all the family came over?

M: Yeah. [Inaudible] late comers. And then they would leave like March or April.

J: About what time would they arrive?

M: October. And then this man that came along with them was the foreman. And he made good money you see. And they could really shuck some oysters and then the people who lived there would do the crabbing. And then the people would go—I know I don't [inaudible phrase].

J: Okay.

M: The people would oyster and crab. They were all water people. Fishing and—

J: Do you remember whether or not there were a few black families who owned their own boats?

M: I don't know but I assume. I don't know.

J: Did you ever try your hand? Did you ever go out on one of those boats?

M: Yes. When I was on a skiff.

J: Okay paddle or was it a motor?

M: Paddle.

J: A flat bottom small skiff?

M: I don't know what kind of bottom it was but all I knew I was on one of these little things.

J: Did you ever do any fishing yourself down there? So every—how many years did you teach there at Rock Point? Just that one year?

M: [I was closing the school down].

J: Okay. Was that the last year for that school?

M: Yes it was.

J: And this was 1939?

M: Yes. Wait a minute, 38 - 39, 39 - 40. Had to be 39 - 40 [inaudible]. In 40 - 41 I was up in Indian Head then I closed that up. Then I went to—

J: Yeah what was—where was next? Your third school?

M: Indian Head.

J: And how long were you there?

M: One year.

J: And that school closed too?

M: Yes.

J: You must have had a magic touch of some sort. Where next?

M: Tompkinsville.

J: Back down there at [Inaudible]. Was this a better building anyway?

M: Two teacher school.

J: A two teacher school. Right here on the main road?

M: Uh-huh.

J: Okay and who were some of the families down there whose kids—

M: [Inaudible phrase]. [Neal]. [Claude]. [Brawner]. Ms. Minnie Brawner was a, you know, person who believed in education.

J: I think I've heard her name too. She ever substitute teach?

M: No. She was an old lady. She didn't live long after I went down there.

J: What sort of school activities did you put on or supervise that were intended to raise money to buy little things?

M: Dances.

J: Dances.

M: See people were [inaudible].

J: I see okay.

M: But you know you couldn't do that in Jacksontown.

J: Oh because of the religion?

M: Yeah, yeah.

J: For heaven's sakes that's interesting.

M: I [had the same thing] where I was brought up you couldn't dance.

J: So your—

M: See my father didn't allow us to dance or play cards or nothing.

J: That was a strict old school—

M: Or nothing.

J: And whether or not you were poor had nothing to do with that.

M: That's right.

J: Now the Jacksontown Road school where did most of those families go to church? Do you remember?

M: Mount Hope.

J: Mount Hope okay that was Methodist?

M: Baptist.

J: okay.

M: And then one called Emery.

J: Emery okay.

M: [But] the lady where I lived went to church. That was Methodist. United Methodist.

J: Okay I think that's still open.

M: Yes that was re—

J: I believe Harvey [Custer] has [responsibilities]

M: Yeah, yeah because nobody down there.

J: So did you have any experiences there at Tompkinsville that sort of stick with you? Anything outstanding? Any differences between that and the previous schools?

M: Well you could make a little more money because you have dances and things like that.

J: Okay, alright. Did you charge the students or people in the neighborhood that came in?

M: People came or I didn't have—the teacher didn't have to do the work. I was just there and the parents would sit at the door and take the money and everything.

J: Okay I see. Was it called the PTA? Your support group?

M: Yes.

J: They had this name for the teacher's association?

M: Yes.

J: Pretty active group were they?

M: Yes.

J: Okay and who were some of it's big supporters that PTA Tompkinsville?

M: I don't know. But I wasn't [transferred]. [Inaudible phrase] I was [transferred] in the later years.

J: Okay what was his first name?

M: Ralph.

J: Ralph Butler?

M: Uh-huh.

J: Okay was he a good person to work with?

M: Yes very, very, very nice.

J: What—how old a man was he?

M: I went to Bowie with him so he was about three years older than I—

J: Okay so a young man.

M: [Inaudible phrase] St. Mary's County.

J: He still alive?

M: Yes. He plays music. He has a band.

J: Oh for heaven's sakes still active. Okay did you ever have any say Mercedes in these transfers? Going from school to school?

M: No I didn't.

J: Did you ever object in anyway?

M: No, no you had to work.

J: Okay. There was just no question about it you were—

M: [Inaudible phrase].

J: directed to go and—

M: Go where you send me.

J: Okay.

M: I only objected one time.

J: Okay. Which of these early schools did you kind of miss when you left?

M: Tompkinsville. I stayed there 10 years.

J: Oh okay so you were there till what about 1950 or 50 I would say.

M: [Oh no]. [51 I think].

J: Okay.

M I think it was 51 then I came to J.C. Parks.

J: Oh okay. Way back home here then?

M: Yes.

J: Way up here, okay.

M: Yes but I lived in Washington so that was a job.

J: You mean you commuted?

M: Yeah. It wasn't bad then.

J: What route did you have to take? What highway did you use?

M: I came through town and then came 210.

J: I see okay cross South Capitol Street Bridge?

M: Uh-uh I didn't come that way. I came by Alabama Avenue because I picked up passengers. I picked up four or five people on the way so we came the other way.

J: What part of the district did you live in though? South?

M: South Dakota.

J: Southeast?

M: Northeast. On South Dakota.

J: Oh okay alright.

M: The better part of Washington, DC then but not now.

J: How far were you from the say Congressional Cemetery?

M: I don't know. I was exactly 30 miles from [inaudible].

J: Where was your husband teaching when you met?

M: Bel Alton.

J: Bel Alton? Okay and was it because of him that you were living in Washington?

M Yes.

J: Okay. Did he ever teach in a District school?

M: No. He was not a teacher.

J: Oh, oh. A government?

M: A premed student.

J: Oh for goodness sakes.

M: [Inaudible phrase].

J: Well what conditions did you run into at J.C. Parks? Better?

M: Oh yes well we had electricity and running water.

J: The whole plan—the building?

M: Yes. [It's] that building way in the back.

J: Okay I know where it is. I know where that is. Now between the time—

M: And then you had a lot of teachers there. A lot of good—eight or ten.

J: So that's a whole new ballgame too for you wasn't it?

M: Yes. It would be two, two first grades. Yeah and I taught first grade.

J: Huh. Well did you at this time notice any differences between the nature of the students that you had gone to school with?

M: I had gone to school with Pomonkey because you see same school but they just named it J.C. Parks.

J: Okay. Were the students coming from some of the same families you had known most of your life?

M: Yeah I taught my cousins and nephews and nieces.

J: Okay. What was the attitude of their parents toward teaching and education at this time? We're talking about 20, 25 years after you got out of school. Any changes beginning to take place?

M: I guess so.

J: In the attitude?

M: Yeah. I guess so. I can't [know].

J: Not quite so deeply committed perhaps to?

M: They wanted their children to have an education but it wasn't, "I'm gonna make you". Because when we came it just known fact that, "You going to school."

J: So there was already beginning to be a little bit of a change in the view point?

M: Yeah. Yeah.

J: Okay now when you were at J.C. Parks was there any serious talk about the possibility of integration in the near future? How did you feel about it at that time? Any signs—

M: While I was there we had integration.

J: Okay.

M: See I stayed there 20.

J: When you started teaching at J.C. Parks—

M: No, no, no, no, no, no. No. No talk.

J: Interesting.

M: And there's something I forgot to tell you. We had to make all of our own work when I was at [O. Smalls].

J: Okay yeah we [knew] and I overlooked it too. And what did that involve? How would you start out?

M: You had carbon paper and you made your—and you made your work. And you had to make it from your own experiences.

J: No [inaudible phrase] or addressograph.

M: No, no, no, no. [Inaudible phrase] of course I bought it myself. You put it on there and pulled it off. Put it on there and when it came off [well then you'd put other papers on] it was some kind of gelatin.

J: Okay was it messy?

M: Oh yes it was terrible.

J: Sounds like the old addressograph type thing. Was it a crank on it?

M: No. You pulled it up like this.

J: Oh for heaven's sake. Well that's some kind of [primitive].

M: And after the white teachers got their work books then you could go over to this house where they had them and get yours and they were all on the floor.

J: Where was this house? What—

M: In La Plata.

J: Do you recall up until this point when you began at J.C. Parks ever being part of any joint teachers meetings? White black meeting together.

M: Oh no we had our own. Charles County. One was Educational Association and one was Charles County Teachers Association I think.

J: But two completely separate groups?

M: Two completely separate. That's right.

J: Okay did you ever?

M: [Inaudible] well once.

J: Did you ever personally have an opportunity to talk to any of the superintendents of schools?

M: Talk to the superintendents?

J: Up to and including Mr. Barnhart.

M: Mr. Gwynn. I guess I talked to him. I don't know.

J: But you were much more likely to have to deal with Mr. Parks?

M: Yes. Yeah he was [boss].

J: Okay what did most of the teachers think of him with respect to his views on integration?

M: I don't know.

J: Did he ever talk about it to you?

M: No. I don't recall him talking about it. He was [I don't know]. He wouldn't have any job if they—[Inaudible phrase].

J: Now there's a thought right there. He could have talked himself right out of a job.

M: Yeah. Plus they'd had meetings. The black people would have meetings when I was a child and they would run before the board and ask for this and ask for that and before they got there they knew what they were coming for because he had told them.

J: Oh, oh so they were ready for it.

M: Oh yes.

J: What role—before we get through this—what role did your father play in pushing education in the Pomonkey community? Because his interest extended far beyond his own family didn't it.

M: He had yeah he had a truck or something like a bus and my brother drove it and he went to Indian Head and he picked up the Indian Head children and brought them to Pomonkey school.

J: Okay. Probably before you were even ready to go to school?

M: No I was—I was young then. I was going to school then because I remember the old truck or whatever it was.

J: So he operated one of the first school buses in—

M: I guess you'd call it that.

J: Not a bus but a truck that would—

M: Yeah it had the top on.

J: Okay what—

M: And he used to go before the board when he had to [inaudible], was active in the PTA and things like that.

J: Okay that's what I...and this board was the one that met at La Plata? Did he have to go to La Plata?

M: Yeah the board of education was in La Plata. It was in the courthouse.

J: What was his attitude toward the way he was treated over there when he went to these meetings? Did he ever say anything to you? Or to anyone that you overheard.

M: No I guess well he wasn't afraid.

J: Yeah. Were there times that he came home from some meeting upset?

M: Oh he said there's no point in going over there because they already knew everything before we got there.

J: What were some of the major causes that he was supporting in these meetings? What was he trying to get out of the board of education?

M: Well you see he wanted—they wanted typing for the students. See that...we wanted the same things that the white children had.

J: Okay. Commercial courses?

M: Uh-huh we had their books when we got through with their books. When they got through their seats we got the seats from the library, the old library.

J: Was this so that—

M: [Inaudible] have you checked out the Bertha Key? One time that Bertha Key was teaching over at La Plata—

J: They would hear from her.

M: And Mr. Parks sent—well she would go up and [intimidate]—Mr. Parks sent her load of seats from Lackey over there.

J: At La Plata Elementary school?

M: Yeah and she told him don't [want them over here].

J: I believe you.

M: She said don't you unload them here. And when they didn't unload them there why they brought them down to me.

J: You were where at that time?

M: Tompkinsville.

J: Okay.

M: And I let them come in there. I wanted to work. I didn't care what the children sat on.

J: Was this generally viewed by black teachers as something totally unfair? You remember your feelings?

M: We knew it was unfair but we had to work and we didn't want it [couldn't have been nobody's teacher].

J: Yeah right okay. Speaking of kitchens, how many times did you in your teaching career do what had to be done to see that some meal was available at school? A noon meal? Did you ever—

M: I did every day. I'd cook it on you know a big pot on the old wood stove.

J: Soups and stews and things like that?

M: Mhm. Mhm.

J: And were there times when you thought that those kids were getting their only square meal of the day in school?

M: Mhm.

J: Okay. Who contributed food for these pots?

M: I don't know. I mean I've really forgotten. I don't know—

J: But you did get a little cooperation from the families? [Inaudible].

M: Yeah, yeah. I think I went to the store and bought the potatoes and I believe the board of education paid for it but I'm not sure. Because they had to have a lunch.

J: When you say they had to have a lunch—

M: You had to give them lunch.

J: The law required it?

M: Yeah I think so.

J: And you as the teacher were the only one available to do it?

M: Yeah unless you had the big children. Big children would be peeling potatoes or something while you'd be teaching, you know.

J: Did you find that these—most of these kids were capable of being prepared to go on to high school? Were the majority—

M: They got the best we could give them.

J: Okay. And so that must have been pretty difficult for a teacher.

M: Yeah difficult for the teacher and difficult for the children.

J: Yeah, yeah. Did the need for kids on the farm upset their education too?

M: You know I didn't have so many farm children.

J: That's interesting.

M: Unless they were sharecroppers.

J: In some of my interviews teachers have mentioned the fact that sometimes the black boys would be pulled out of school if their fathers had [happened to need them at the farm inaudible] and economic necessity.

M: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Have you heard of place called [Banks O'Dee]?

J: Yeah, oh yeah.

M: Well see the children had to come across on the water. Well in the whole winter time they wouldn't come across it because the creek would be frozen.

J: That was what Swan Neck on the other side?

M: Banks O'Dee.

J: Yeah I've been down there recently and looked across that water. That is the mouth of Cuckold Creek.

M: I don't know. I would [have crossed on the—when I was taking the census while I went across on one of them boats they'd go the boats cross].

J: Oh yeah.

M: [Right in the back of his like that] and that's how the boats got across.

J: So he did like this like a [inaudible] moving across the water? Okay that must have been a fun ride.

M: Yeah but it's cold.

J: Here you a big city girl [Bryans Road]—

M: Cold and [I] seemed like a city girl from here.

J: I'll bet. I'll bet. Do you feel—and I'm beginning to feel—that the Pomonkey area for most of the twentieth century represented the center of black society and culture that really was a little bit ahead of most other black communities in Charles County.

M: It had to be. It had to be.

J: This is beginning to come through even to me.

M: Yeah it had to be.

J: The push given education here.

M: Cuz see we, we had parents that worked—

J: And look at the number of teachers from here.

M: Yeah we had parents that worked at Indian Head. And they made $18.52 a week.

J: When five dollars was sometimes it.

M: Yeah.

J: Okay that's interesting the economics of this whole thing. Your father, what did he do at Indian Head? What kind of work?

M: He was a laborer because he was unskilled. And he was gonna see that we had an education.

J: Okay. What percentage of the family income came from the store roughly? Maybe half?

M: I don't know.

J: Do you think you could have existed without the store?

M: Yeah.

J: But could you have existed without his government income?

M: My mother canned and they had a garden every year and she canned food and we had plenty to eat. We never been hungry.

J: So that was a big thing. Look what a grocery bill would be today for a family like—

M: And that's my thing today. I love to can. I got most [of that thing].

J: Oh really?

M: Yes.

J: My wife and I worked at the cannery over at Bumpy Oak Road for a [inaudible].

M: Well see I was in DC then.

J: You would've enjoyed that.

M: Mhm. But I'd like that now. But I do my own. I have a canner and I do my own.

J: Can we put down here now some of your thoughts on your final—on the years that you moved into an integrated system? What were some of the hardships? Spiritual and psychological hardships that you had to wrestle with if any? I'm assuming there were some.

M: I [can't say].

J: That's pretty tough isn't it.

M: Oh lord I think I cried.

J: Okay tough.

M: I didn't want to teach the white kids. And I had my reasons. Because we'd take an elementary—I mean a black child and turn [inaudible phrase]. And I was afraid to do that.

J: Yeah that's understandable.

M: You understand because I'm gonna have order in my classroom. You didn't come there to play. So a little boy came my—I don't whether it was my first year or second—he came into my classroom and he threw paper around and he acted which I thought wasn't right.

J: A white child?

M: Yes. And I would like to see him today. His name was [Stanley] and that last name I can't think of. Langley. And I told him to come up there and I made him lay across a chair like that because I was afraid [he would hitme] and I beat the hell out of him.

J: [Laughs]

M: And then I was scare to go back to school the next day.

J: Oh god.

M: But his mother said it was too much for him so I said well I'm not going to do that anymore because I would get in trouble.

J: Yeah that was one of the big things. Think of the teachers today. They don't dare lay a finger on anyone.

M: No you can't look at them. You can't look at them. I have a god son in the second grade at J.C. Parks and my niece is a [inaudible phrase]. I feel sorry for the teachers.

J: And the kids too really. They're being cheated. Those kids are being cheated by this attitude.

M: Oh yeah. The teachers [won't work now] and [maybe she was wrong]. Oh boy in first grade she said to him, "You got an attitude." [But see inaudible attitude]. Because he's black and he's speaking up. Speaking up like we wanted them all to do.

J: Right yeah. That's hard for those little kids to deal with. Did you find a difference in the preparation of these children both black and white grade for grade for grade? Did it bare out your feelings that the whites were getting the better of everything? Better equipment.

M: While we were segregated?

J: Yeah.

M: We knew it.

J: Did this prove itself during those first years of integration? Did you find that the little black kids were having a rougher time keeping up for a while?

M: Yeah for a while.

J: Okay. How long—

M: And see we got better schools, we got better books, we got better everything as soon as we integrated.

[Tape Ends]