Transcript of OH-00127

Nellie Gray Carter

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
Race relations
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School integration
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United States Naval Ordnance Station (Indian Head, Md.)

Tags

One room school house

Transcript

John Wearmouth [J]: This is John Wearmouth interviewing Nellie Gray Carter at her residence on Maryland Route 425. Two or three miles from Pisgah would you say? The Pisgah Mason Springs Road?

Nellie Gray Carter [N]: Yes.

J: She is a retired black teacher and she's in our series that we've been working on all this year. The date is December 23, 1988. This interview is part of the Charles County Community College Oral History Program. May I call you Nellie for this interview?

N: Of course.

J: You can call me John. We have with us during the interview Mrs. Carter's daughter Ruth Carter Swann and she is not especially nosy. She just wants to see what is going on and I'm glad she does. From time to time we might turn the machine off and collect our thoughts. I told both ladies to just let me know and we can stop it temporarily and get it going again. Nellie let's go through this thing again of where you were born. This time it's for the record.

N: This is for the record. I was born in Ripley. Ripley, Maryland.

J: That's on Maryland Route 225. Not far from Marshall's Corner.

N: Right not far from Marshall's Corner that's right. But I don't remember living there because my parents moved to Pisgah when I was still a baby.

J: What was the occasion of that move? What did your father do for a living?

N: He always worked for the government, worked at the Naval Powder Factory. That was his first and last job. As I recall or recall my parents telling me they—we lived with his parents shortly after they were married until I was born then they moved to Stuckey Road in Pisgah. [When they got] that was a rental home there but shortly thereafter even before I entered school they bought a home here on 425 not far from where I'm living now.

J: So you probably have known Mr. Luther Stuckey most of your life would you say?

N: Well he didn't—he wasn't a part of our community in my early days. He came here later. But I've known him ever since he's been here in the county.

J: He's the first one we interviewed in this series.

N: Is that right?

J: Even though he didn't teach here long.

N: No.

J: He still was a professional trained teacher.

N: Right.

J: And number two was Mayme Ransome.

N: Mayme Ransome I remember her.

J: So your father never was forced to farm for a living I gather?

N: No, no he never—

J: What about his parents did he come from a farm family?

N: I think so, yes. They were farmers as I remember. I mean I don't really remember them but hearing my parents talk about them they were farmers. I don't remember my grandmother or my grandfather on either side. Neither my mother's side or my father's side.

J: How many children were there in your immediate family?

N: I was the oldest of ten children.

J: The oldest of ten?

N: The oldest of ten children.

J: How'd they put up with all that?

N: I don't know. I wonder somehow how they managed because my mother never worked. She only stayed home, took care of the home. He always worked.

J: What kind of work did he do again over there? Was he on the powder line for example?

N: He was on the powder line at Indian Head.

J: Okay do you ever recall him or your mother or perhaps both being concerned about accidents over there?

N: Yes.

J: They lived with it. They just lived with it.

N: Yes they lived with it but that was a great concern, the safety at that time.

J: It must've been.

N: I do remember at one time he was sent to Dahlgren from Indian Head—

J: Across the river.

N: Across the river and he would only come home weekends. But that lasted only a short while. Maybe six months as I remember.

J: How much schooling did your father have and where?

N: He didn't have too much. About fifth grade I think my father and mother both. I heard them talking about how far they had to walk to school. And who their teachers were but—

J: Did they go to different schools?

N: Yes.

J: Where do you remember?

N: My mother went to the Pisgah School I believe. That was down on—it was right behind the Smith Chapel Church—

J: Oh on the road to Port Tobacco from Pisgah.

N: There was a school back there called Pisgah School. But I think my father went to Port Tobacco that was a little one room school in Port Tobacco.

J: Did he ever mention his teacher?

N: I don't remember.

J: Well it couldn't have been Minnie [Hill] she was there but that was much, much later.

N: Oh no, no, that was later. Minnie was during my time.

J: You know Minnie?

N: Oh yes. Minnie and I—

J: You got to get her down here I must interview her.

N: Yeah now Minnie had taught a few years before she came to the county the same year that she came to the county I started teaching. We started teaching here in the county the same year.

J: So you have known each other for a while?

N: Oh yes. However, I think she had taught a few years.

J: Did your family feel that it was fortunate to be with a government job to be on a government payroll as far as security's concerned?

N: Yes, yes.

J: Not all your neighbors were I guess?

N: No not all but you know a fair number of the people that lived right in this area were.

J: What were some of the names of these Indian Head employees? Black and white.

N: Let me see. There was Henry Barbour. Joseph Taylor. Ryce I don't remember his name his first name.

J: George?

N: I think it was George. George Ryce. The Smith's up the road.

J: Bowie?

N: Bowie's. You know the majority of the most of the people at that time that lived right in this area were Indian Head workers.

J: What method of transportation was the most popular?

N: Walking.

J: Imagine that.

N: I was telling my granddaughter just the other day. She couldn't even imagine that. I said I can remember the people coming along in the morning. Giving a little hoot and the other men would join them. They would walk to Indian Head and work.

J: Now how many miles is that from here. I just drove it.

N: That's a—now it's about—

J: Excuse me just a minute.

N: Going to Indian Head—

J: That must—now did they go across the footbridge?

N: Right. That's what I was getting ready to say.

J: What was the shortest way between Pisgah and that footbridge?

N: They would go through Marbury and there was a bridge across the river that took—

J: Across the Mattawoman right.

N: Yeah that would take them on into Indian Head. Now I don't know exactly but I'm sure it was good six miles.

J: I would think so.

N: Even that short distance—I mean the short bridge.

J: Were bicycles used at all?

N: Yes, yes some of them had bicycles.

J: In spite of the rough road. Imagine riding a bicycle on gravel six miles.

N: Yes, yes, yes. Right, right through a footpath in the woods. But my father had a bicycle that he used. But like I say walking was the mode of transportation.

J: Do you remember the year the man was held up and shot at this end of the bridge, Mr. Carpenter?

N: Yes very well—

J: Okay you wouldn't have been—how old you must've been about nine or 10 years old?

N: I don't remember how old I was but I remember the incident very well because the whole community was upset over the events. And the boy that did the shooting lived just down the road from us.

J: Was he a local boy?

N: Yes he was a local boy. In fact there were the two of them. They were cousins.

J: Did you know that the man that did the investigation just died a month ago?

N: I didn't know.

J: Sheriff Cooksey. Robert Vernon Cooksey died down at Cobb Island a month five or six weeks ago. And we interviewed him about three or four years ago.

N: I wonder if you even heard about—I guess you know about it. It was Ms. Lula's brother. Ms. Lula Swann's brother.

Ruth Carter Swann [R]: I remember you all talking about that.

[Note: Ruth does not have a mic and is hard to hear when talking.]

N: Yeah.

J: It was especially sad because it was a young family and he left seven orphan daughters. The oldest one was 12 and the youngest was one. I just read the article recently. Anyway, then in this neighborhood back about 1900 there was the famous Bowie murder. Another Indian Head employee was coming home one night. It involved three white people. Two sweethearts a girl and her promised. The man had dishonored this woman's daughter and the woman of the dishonored woman and her brother met this young man coming home from work and killed him.

N: I don't remember that.

J: No you wouldn't that's 1900. So this has been a wild neighborhood.

N: Yes it has.

J: Now there's a footbridge across the Mattawoman. In those years which became very decrepit and resulted in the construction of a new bridge much better than the old one which was dedicated in 1922 and that's the one your father.

N: I'm sure that's the one that he—

J: It had a drawbridge so that it could go up and sailboats could go through on the channel.

N: Mhm. I'm sure that's the one that they used to go to Indian Head.

J: At about what time did he start using an automobile first?

N: 1923 he bought his first car.

J: Was it new or second hand?

N: It was new.

J: And where did he get it where did he buy it?

N: At Indian Head and I think that was Carpenter's Auto.

J: That's right on Strauss Avenue.

N: I remember him buying a new 23 then he got a new 26 and a new 25—I mean seven.

J: And you know that was unheard of in other parts of the county for anybody in those days to be able to buy a new car every three years. So that tells you a lot about what it meant to have steady employment. It was not seasonal. You had a paycheck coming in. I did myself, my career was with the government. And as you know Indian Head is about to celebrate its 100th year and all day I've been doing research on it over in Indian Head and I worked this in between those other sessions. So that's why I'll be asking you a few questions about your association with Indian Head before I even get into teaching. What did your mother and father expect of their children when it came to education and how much encouragement did you get?

N: Well they encouraged us all to go to school and get as much education as possible but I don't believe they pushed as hard as they might have.

J: Do you think it could be because they felt it might not work out for you and you would be disappointed in some way?

N: Well no we didn't have the means to do only so much you see.

J: That's what I mean. If they had led you on to believe that you could go for sure in just about any place then they may have had to say to you we can't help you. And that would've been a setback.

N: Yeah, yes.

J: So anyway did—how many of the children did go on to high school?

N: Let's see I think they all—all of them. Yes everybody all ten.

J: That's remarkable and all went to Pomonkey I gather?

N: Yes. They all went to high school.

J: What year did you begin Pomonkey?

N: I'll have to think. I finished in 27 so it must have been 23. Must've been 1923.

J: I would guess. Who were some of your teachers there?

N: There was a Mr. McDonald. I don't even remember his first name.

J: Now this was a completely segregated establishment wasn't it? Faculty and student body.

N: Oh yes, oh yes. That's right. You know—

J: It's been a while. It's been a while.

N: That had been so long. There was an Earhart also and there was Ms. Morris. I don't remember her first name.

J: How good were they as teachers compared to the experiences you had let us say 10 or 15 years later? How good were they? Backgrounds, subject matter.

N: Well at that time I thought they were great but thinking back today and seeing what the high school people are getting in their courses today we got very little looking back.

J: Was it a matter of curriculum, teaching technique, motivation, logistical support? A lot of things involved. Lack of preparation possibly on their part?

N: It could've been. They were definitely interested.

J: They were committed.

N: They were vehemently committed to their jobs and they tried very hard. I think the biggest thing, the biggest hold back was materials. They didn't have access to too many materials back there at that time. Even books you know.

J: No teaching aids that we—

N: No teaching aids.

J: Where did the books come from? Were they brand new?

N: No for the most part—

J: What happened? How'd you get them? What were the conditions?

N: They were used books.

J: Used by whom where?

N: By the white school.

J: Okay, just tell it.

N: Not only the books the furniture. We didn't get any of those new things. As I remember that's been a long, long while but I can't remember the new things coming in. I think we got when they were used and the white schools wanted more—wanted new books or new furniture we got what was left.

J: When did J. C. Parks begin being the Superintendent of black education? Do you know what year? While you were—

N: I was in elementary school.

J: So boy he was in it a while.

N: I knew I was in elementary school when he was supervisor because he took a great interest in me I don't know why.

J: At what time? When you came back to teach?

N: No when I was still in Elementary school.

J: Oh well that's—maybe he saw some promise in you.

N: Evidently he did. In those days they had—each school had recitation declamation contests.

J: They're gone now aren't they?

N: And evidently I was pretty good at it and I won the contest in my school of course. I won it in the county. And Mr. Parks and my teacher took me to Annapolis to the state contest and I won third place there.

J: What grade were in?

N: Sixth. That was sixth grade at that time.

J: Just for starters you had some courage just to get up there in front.

N: Right yes. And I did the sixth and seventh grade in one year.

J: What were some of the subjects that you spoke of. What did you declaim on?

N: The girls all had recitations. My happened—for that particular one was the Psalm of Life. I remember that.

J: The sum of life?

N: Psalm.

J: The Psalm of Lie.

N: Right. And the boys all had declamations. It was called recitation declamation.

J: Oh for heaven's sakes. Which do you think was the more difficult?

N: Declamation. But I happened to be a girl so I got a recitation.

J: Well I still think it's good experience [inaudible phrase].

N: Yes.

R: That was J. C. Parks who take you to college when you first went?

N: Huh?

R: Didn't J. C. Parks take you to college when you first went?

N: Yes, yes.

J: At about what point in your life did you begin to think seriously about teaching as a career?

N: When I entered high school.

J: That early?

N: Yes I always—even before that as a little girl I wanted to be a teacher for some reason. And through high school that was my aim. And even though my parents were just poor parents they said we'll try.

J: Were there any scholarships available?

N: No such thing. We didn't even—

J: No grants?

N: No grants, no. That's what I'm saying it was hard. It was hard.

J: What a terrible waste of a great natural resource. The young people.

N: It was very hard and you see even though we had a high school there was no transportation and that's why so many boys and girls in our county didn't get a high school education. They—

J: How did you get there from here? You were fairly lucky. You weren't half a day's trip like the Rock Point people.

N: Right but I couldn't—there was no way for me to get there each day. I went to stay up there and boarded right across from the school.

J: And how far away from there? Eight miles?

N: From here?

J: From Pomonkey.

N: At least more than eight. It's about 10. A good 10 miles. But I had to—my parents would take me there on Sunday and I would have to stay until Friday. And I was just a little girl when I went up there. I was only 11 years old.

J: Who did you stay with?

N: Mrs. Nancy Myers.

J: Was that a rooming house type thing? Were you the only one rooming with her?

N: No she had several girls. There were four of us there. When I first went she only had two girls and later on she took two more. And she would sometimes board the teachers. But I had to stay there so you see it was really a struggle. My parents had to pay for me right on through high school.

J: What was it like in Pomonkey for young colored people? Recreation, eating places, social life, was there a lot of high living and excitement?

N: No there was none as I remember it.

J: Where did you go if you wanted to buy a sandwich? Was there a restaurant in the village?

N: No there was no restaurant there. No if you wanted a sandwich you'd go to the store and buy something and make your own sandwich.

J: Where was the nearest grocery store to the high school?

N: To the high school um—

J: There was no Bryan's Road then was there as such?

N: As such no. You said you interviewed Alcena Clark? Her father had a grocery store right near where she lives today.

J: That was a pretty good walk from school.

N: Oh yeah. Oh yeah but you didn't think about it. It didn't seem long in those days.

J: No movie houses, skating rinks, bowling alleys.

N: No, no.

J: Sounds pretty bleak.

N: You made your own fun if there was fun. You had little parties.

J: Did you ever go to La Plata to catch the train anywhere?

N: Not during my high school days. When I went to college I would come to La Plata. That's the way I would come home.

J: You father had to get you over there?

N: Right. By this time he had a car. By the time I went to college yeah he had a car at that time.

J: You were what 13 or 14 when he got that first car.

N: Yeah I finished high school at 16.

J: Okay when did you enroll in college? The fall of what year? I assume it was the fall.

N: 1923. No I'm sorry it wasn't then. It was 25. 25 because I didn't go four years. I went to Bowie which was at that time a normal school teacher training.

J: That was the usual thing.

N: Right. So I only went two years there. Which took me roughly out at 18.

J: How well prepared were you academically going from Pomonkey high school to college level? As well as any of the other kids?

N: Yes I kept up.

J: That tells me something right there. And it tells us something about the quality of instruction there considering what was available.

N: Right I kept up. So they must've been what they were doing everywhere else evidently.

J: That's very good. And you were 18 when you finished normal?

N: Yes.

J: So when you finished you started sending out applications? How did this work?

N: No.

J: What approach did you take to get that first job?

N: Well Bowie at that time was a state teacher's college. There was a teacher shortage in the state. You signed a contract when you went to Bowie to teach at least two years in the state.

J: Good idea.

N: So after two years you were under no obligation. So you knew when you came out if you made well and came out you had a job. You automatically had a job.

J: Who determined where you would go for those two years?

N: The Supervisor in the county which was J. C. Parks for me.

J: And he'd already known you for what 10 years, eight years?

N: Since I was in third grade.

J: Did he and his wife ever have any family of their own.

N: They have a daughter. She still lives in the home in Bryans Road.

J: I should talk to her.

N: And she was my daughter's classmate in high school.

J: I will. Okay so where did you go? Where were you sent in the county?

N: I was sent to Marbury now that little school was a one room school. It was on the Pisgah Marbury road 485. It was really nearer Pisgah than it was Marbury but it was called Marbury School. Two miles from here I guess, two, two and a half. I walked of course to school.

J: From where?

N: From just across the field. My home was just across the field from where we are today. And I was the teacher, the janitor, the nurse, the cafeteria worker.

J: How well had—and you went to Bowie you said?

N: Yes.

J: How well had they prepared you for this sort of thing? Did they give you any hint at all about what teaching would be like other than the academic side of it?

N: Oh yes we had a good idea from it.

J: You weren't terribly—of course you had been through grade school here yourself.

N: Yes.

J: And had times changed very much during a say 10 year period from 1920 to 1930?

N: No, not really. It hadn't really changed that much.

J: No light, no sanitation, no finer things or—

N: No none of that. None of that.

J: What sort of schedules did you draw up to share so the students shared some of the unpleasant maintenance jobs? Did each know exactly what he or she had to do?

N: Oh yes they all pitched in. We had boys who would come early to help with the fire. We had some boys who would get the water. See that the water was gotten in. We had those that would clean in the afternoon. Some to sweep, some to dust.

J: Were they pretty good about it? Did they really relieve you of the burden?

N: Oh they loved it. They helped and they were glad to help. They were very cooperative.

J: And what was your PTA like in those early years? What did they do for you a new spanking green young 18 year old teacher? How much did you depend on their support?

N: I depended wholly on them. In my first job there was the Queen who was my president. What was his name? James Queen. And I don't know but it seemed that they were anxious to help in every way. It sort of made them feel good to have a big part to play in the school. And whatever I wanted they were anxious in trying to help me get whatever it was. If it was supplies or I can remember them coming out making building a little closet for us. A little cloak room that we didn't have. It was just one square building that I had there. Or if something broke down, desks, tables, bookcases, they were there to help. The parents were very cooperative.

J: And the children noticed this didn't they? That their parents were supporting the system and respected you and the system.

N: Oh yeah. And I think they helped more back then in those days than the parents do today. And the parents have everything today. But they don't give too much support today.

J: They don't feel so needed. Your parents new you needed them.

N: That's true.

J: And they delivered.

N: They delivered.

J: And they delivered.

N: They did.

J: Who was the teacher immediately before you?

N: Her name was a Mathews. I don't remember but I know Mr. Parks told me when I went there. He said, "You'll have one problem and that's attendance. So that's the only problem you'll have. It's a good school but you will have an attendance problem." So I went there with that in mind and I did everything I could to make the children want to come to school. And I would have little prizes. It might not be—

J: What was behind the problem? What sort of a—what caused it?

N: I don't know. Well for one thing they lived so far away. They had to walk and I don't what else.

J: Did truancy increase in bad weather?

N: Yes, yes it did. But after I was there and worked on that problem. I just about solved it in five years. The first year that I was—no thanks. The first year that I was there I had two children that made perfect attendance and I took them on a trip to Washington and we toured the city and of course all the other children new about it.

J: Did you drive?

N: No. No I didn't drive. The next year I had five students who made perfect attendance and it kept getting better until at the end of five years there was no problem again.

J: Motivation rewards, a carrot always works. We forget that.

N: Yes, yes, yes. So they—it just worked out fine and we stayed in this little school for five years. By that time they—

J: Five grades?

N: Seven grades.

J: And you taught them all?

N: I taught them all.

J: How on earth could a teacher keep order in the school?

N: No problem, no problem.

J: Did you divide them up into groups by grade?

N: Yes.

J: You had to have—

N: Yeah and a lot of times grades were combined in things like social studies and science and health.

J: Was this encouraged by Mr. Parks?

N: Yes, yes it was.

J: Okay what sort of dictates or instructions did he work under? How closely supervised was Mr. Parks?

N: How closely supervised was he?

J: Who called the shots for him?

N: I guess the superintendent. I'm sure it was the superintendent.

J: I'm just wondering how closely your instruction paralleled that of white schools grade for grade. Did you ever get a feel for this?

N: Now I really don't know. He was the black supervisor then we had of course the white supervisor. They were supposed to work together and we were doing the same things. Now whether we were I don't know. I don't whether we were doing the same things or not.

J: What was the feeling of your students toward the system with respect to things like dirty tattered books? How did they feel about that?

N: I don't think they knew. That was the only thing they knew you know. They didn't know they were left over books. The children didn't know that.

J: That maybe they came off the press that way.

N: Right [laughs]. No it never phased them.

J: Good just as well. It would have been a morale factor if they had been aware.

N: Yes it would have but they weren't aware of that. I'm sure they weren't. And then as the years passed it got better.

J: What were your strong suits in education? What were your favorite subjects as a learner?

N: My favorite subject was always reading I think.

J: Okay that's the big one.

N: That was always mine and towards the end of my career that's all I taught.

J: Okay did you ever teach remedial reading?

N: Oh yeah.

J: Did you know Mrs. Lowe?

N: Lowe?

J: Because she was in speech therapy. Virginia Lowe. One of the county's very first speech therapists.

N: I don't remember her.

J: What was one of your most challenging experiences in teaching during that first decade? Where were the problems? What gave you the most grief?

N: I don't know what gave me the most grief. I loved every minute that I was teaching. When we left—they built a new school in Marbury.

J: Same site?

N: No, no, down, down near Grays.

J: Close to down town huh?

N: Close to down town right. And of course I—by that time I had learned to drive and I had to drive to school. And that first year it was another one room school.

J: Were you still living at home?

N: Still living at home. That first—when we first moved in that fall I enrolled 76 children. This was one room, one teacher, seven grades.

J: One teacher, seven grades. Wow think of that.

N: Well they knew that was too much I couldn't handle that. So they gave me—

J: What do you think the average was at this time? Per school, students per school?

N: About 25 in a one room school. But this was 76 children and they knew I couldn't handle that. This is a new school. New one room well by that time when they realized what was happening there with the enrollment increasing they gave me a new teacher who was Alcena Clark.

J: That's what she said that you were sort of her supervisor in principal.

N: Did she? In principal. So what they did they just put a partition in that one room while they were working on another room. She taught on one side of the partition and she taught on the other until that other room was finished. And now I'll be challenged there. I don't know how we got this idea. We wanted our school standardized. There wasn't a standardized school in the whole county black or white.

J: Standardized in what way? In what respect?

N: In everywhere. In materials, building, programs, and everything. So we told Mr. Parks what we had in mind. He got material from the state department with everything that we had to do, everything that we had to have. Playground equipment and all that other stuff we got with our parents and PTA. We worked on it and that little school in Marbury was the first standardized school in this county.

J: Now that's something for the record isn't it. I'm glad you mentioned it. Okay what were some of the factors of standardization? Tick them off. How about the plan itself? The physical appearance of the building?

N: Well of course that was—

J: Was it painted on the outside?

N: Painted. The lighting—

J: White? Green?

N: It was cream with brown trim. See it was a new school we could work with it very well.

J: Decent lumber to work with.

N: Right. Well the county did that when they put it up, the painting you know. We had the correct lighting, the correct ventilation, heating. We had all of that.

J: What was the lighting like?

N: Well windows on the—

J: Not electric lighting?

N: No, no I wasn't talking about—

J: Okay still natural light.

N: Well still natural light yes.

J: Did you have a kerosene lamp or two for emergencies?

N: Oh yes, yes, yes.

J: Hanging from the ceiling?

N: Well no we had electricity in this school. Yeah we had electricity.

J: What year was this that's pretty early?

N: That was way back then. That was in the 30's.

J: Where did the electricity come from? Did lines come into the building or did you have a generator located somewhere?

N: Yes now wait a minute let me think [and my thinking]—

J: To what degree were the sanitation facilities standardized?

N: You mean for outside?

J: For outside.

N: Outside restrooms. They had to be clean of course. They had to have a certain number of commodes. At least two for each one. They had to have enough sufficient—

J: Ventilation?

N: Ventilation.

J: And how far were they from the school building itself?

N: And they had to be certain distance from the school [now] that I don't remember what that was how many feet but I mean we had that whatever it was.

J: Did you have a well? Did you have your own water supply?

N: We had our own water right on the premises.

J: And how far was that from the outdoor toilet facility?

N: Oh that was a good distance. That was in front of the building. The well was in front of the building and the restrooms were far in the back.

J: As a teach how involved did you get in matters of hygiene? Personal cleanliness health habits? You had no school nurse. Did you from time to time have to call the students to task for not taking care of themselves?

N: Oh yes. Yes we had—that was one lesson, one class that we spent quite a bit of time on. Health, we called it Health.

J: And it was very important.

N: It was quite important.

J: And did the kids take it seriously? Did they really understand the import of it?

N: I think so. Well we hope they did.

J: Did during your teaching years did you ever experience an epidemic of any sort in the neighborhood that kept all the kids home? Measles? Outbreak of measles? Typhoid? Scarlet Fever? Flu?

N: No I don't think so. No I mean we would have five or six kids out or something but no real epidemic that I recall.

J: Well I think that's phenomenal too. In spite of everything they were strong enough to ward off all those strange diseases that were very common. Typhoid fever was very common in the rural areas.

N: Yes I don't remember ever—

J: No electricity, no pumps, no heat wells, and shower wells and were never clean.

N: Right and the same things were in their homes. They didn't have them in their homes either you see so.

J: Did you feel that some of the kids were taking their instruction home with them to their parents? You hoped?

N: I believe they were. We wanted them to. I think they did.

J: As a teacher how close did you get to what was going on in the community? Could you sort of interpret through the child what life was like at home? General conditions?

N: For the most part yes. That's because you know—

J: Maybe more so than today don't you think?

N: I think so.

J: They were close to teachers.

N: They liked to talk to the teacher and I think you had a pretty good idea of their home life. And then not only that the parents liked for the teacher to come into the home as a visitor.

J: How often were you required to visit the homes?

N: There was no requirement. There was no requirement but we did it anyway. We wanted to and the parents wanted us to.

J: How many times during the school year per family?

N: Oh I don't know, three of four.

J: Really?

N: I'm sure.

J: And if you had 76 families you were in trouble.

N: Yeah well we didn't actually have 76 families but we did have 76 children.

J: What other school districts bounded the Marbury School? Other elementary schools whose territory backed up to yours.

N: Chicamuxen.

J: Chicamuxen.

N: And Mason Springs yeah and Pisgah. I guess that's all. Mount Hope further down.

J: So your little kids came from a maximum of what distance now to school? Three miles?

N: Well I'd say two miles. I don't think any of them came any further than two miles. After we went down in Marbury in the new school.

J: And they all walked?

N: They all walked. And then later on they closed the Chicamuxen school—this is a number of years later though—and they transported those kids by bus up to Marbury. By this time they were getting modernized.

J: What year are we talking about when they began to bus? Just before World War II?

N: I really don't—I don't know.

J: During your first 10 or 15 years was there ever any opportunity in which white school teachers and colored school teachers had a chance to get together? Talk, compare notes, socialize a little bit, discuss mutual problems?

N: In those first years—

J: How complete was the separation?

N: It was complete. In those first years no there was no getting together.

J: Total loss all the way around. How did you feel about that?

N: Well I guess that's the only thing we knew and we didn't pay too much attention to it. We took it as a matter of fact.

J:When did you begin pursuing additional formal education? After you taught a few years? When did you find the time and the money to go back?

N: Money was scarce but after two years I started out in summer school. I went to Hampton and I continued to go there until I got my degree and then—

J: Your Baccalaureate? Got your B.A.

N: My B.A. and then I studied from Catholic University. These were extension courses from Morgan State, New York University. I guess that's about it that was nearby.

J: As you progressed with your formal academic background what effect did that have on your income? Was there a lag there?

N: I don't know what you mean.

J: Did your pay scale increase to keep up with your degree?

[Tape Interruption]

J: You said your father worked for the government at Indian Head and we all know that since the fall of 1890 believe it or not that has constituted a very important part of the daily life of many people who live in the western part of Charles County. When the railroad came through La Plata in 1872 that offered outlets ingress and so forth to the people who lived in the center part of the county but it left the western part of Charles County still pretty much isolated and still pretty much dependent on river travel. As a child of a government worker at Indian Head what special privileges did your family have with respect to medical care and transportation and commissary?

N: For medical care they at Indian Head there was a dispensary for that any of the family members could go free of charge. And for transportation to Washington he was issued a pass. A family pass and any member of his family could go by boat from Indian Head to the Navy Yard. Spend the day shopping or whatever, going to the dentist or whatever you needed to do then come back that evening on the boat.

J: And for the record I just want to point out that your father was Charles Gray.

N: Right.

J: Do you remember the name of the boat that was made available to you?

N: No.

J: And was there ever a time when the whole Gray family turned up at one time to go to Washington? Did you once in a while?

N: Oh yes, yes the whole—

J: All 11 or 12?

N: Well no I don't think we ever went—

J: It wasn't a very big boat.

N: No, no I don't think we ever went all at the same time. Not with the 12 children and the mother and father.

J: Was it a pleasant trip?

N: Very pleasant.

J: Was this the boat that had the big single chimney in the middle and sort of a canvas roof over the back?

N: Yes I think I remember that.

J: Was that the [Burco]? B-U-R-C...

N: I'm not sure.

J: That was the boat until 1940 so we're talking about any period before that was the [Burco]. It was an old navy torpedo boat converted.

N: It might have been.

J: How long a trip was it?

N: About hour and half or two hours.

J: It wasn't very long.

N: Yeah it would move right along.

J: What would take you to Washington? What were the purposes other than?

N: Shopping was the main thing.

J: Okay where did you go?

N: After we got there—

J: What were the favorite stores?

N: We would then take a streetcar to go down town.

J: 7th Street car?

N: 7th yes and 7th Street was our main shopping street.

J: That was it in those days. Lansburgh's, the Hub.

N: Lansburgh's, yes Hub furniture, all of that.

J: [And Hex] and [Cans].

N: Yes, yes Cans was there too.

J: Those were the big three and they're gone now from that neighborhood.

N: Right and the five and tens all right there together.

J: So this was an outing? Was a big family outing.

N: It was an outing.

J: Now where would you eat with a large group of children in those days? No fast food places like we know them now.

N: No but you know—

J: Where could a family go and get served reasonably well.

N: Well in the five and tens at that time they had counter service—

J: Was there—there was a [Crusty's] Woolworth's nearby? Both?

N: Both there were both of them yes. So we could eat there which that was the cheapest place. And then there were restaurants on 4th Street that we used to go. We—

J: Remember the names of any of them?

N: No I don't remember the names.

J: Was it fun riding the trolley, the streetcar?

N: Oh yes I liked it.

J: Do you remember seeing the one in Indian Head? The electric, the little electric train they had at Indian Head on the Naval Reservation not in the town but inside. They would use it to pull workmen around and supplies.

N: No I never saw that.

J: Now when you went to the dispensary, these were Navy doctors and pharmacists and [core men] that treated you?

N: Yes. Yes.

J: Did you ever hear of any friction between them and the civilian doctors at Indian Head? Was there some resentment there?

N: There might have been but I didn't know about it.

J: Okay there was actually later.

N: There probably was but I didn't know about it.

J: So all you had to show up to this dispensary was proof that you were the children or the wife of an employee of the government there.

N: That's right but in later years of course they stopped that but in those early years that's the way it was.

J: Was there a store that you could shop at for groceries on the reservation? A commissary of some sort.

N: No. I mean if it was I didn't know about. I don't think there was. I don't think there was.

J: There was for a while. Now where did your family shop mostly for groceries from their home here? Any stores in Pisgah? General purpose?

N: Yes there was always a store in our little town. There was the Bowie store. There's always been a Bowie store ever since I can remember. Not these Bowie's that's there now but—

J: Was there another store on the opposite corner at one time? Who ran that?

N: It was a—

J: [Bergunia].

N: Yes. So there were two stores there.

J: How often would you go all the way into Indian Head to shop? Did you ever really have to go into Indian Head to shop? Eli's for example.

N: Eli's been there since 1919.

J: That's right.

N: I mean for clothing and that sort of thing we would go to Indian Head for that but for groceries we did most of it locally.

J: Did you ever go to La Plata for shopping that way?

N: Yes, yes we'd go there. I'm not thinking as a child now I'm thinking as we got older. Yes we would go into La Plata shopping. There was Farrell's that was—

J: By the railroad tracks.

N: Right by the railroad tracks and then Bowling later. But I can remember the first store I think was Farrell's was the famous one in La Plata.

J: So you never really had any serious childhood illnesses in your family I gather?

N: No not really.

J: Did your mother have any favorite home remedies that she would use on you for colds or aches or minor wounds?

N: Yes. I can remember a cold remedy was she called it onion syrup. That was only onions and sugar. It seems to me that she would slice the onions and put a layer of sugar and then more onions and then that was pressed together till it made a syrup and that was supposed to be it.

J: My mother used to put that on my chest.

N: I can remember [Inaudible phrase].

J: You'd get well just to so you wouldn't die.

N: Just to think—and then later there was my this was later. In later years after I was married my mother in law gave me they call I think it's hog's foot oil for colds. And I still have it. I went to throw it out not too long ago and she told me don't throw it out please keep it. It's been there I know for nearly 50 years.

J: It [may] not being a miracle cure for something just don't throw it away.

N: So she said don't throw it away but I'd be afraid to use it. I really would be afraid but it was hog's foot oil. I don't know.

J: Do you recall some of your little kids coming to school with infections that you had to treat? Did you ever have to send any of them home? Broken bones that maybe they didn't even know they had?

N: No.

J: Who were some of the serious afflictions that you ran into once in a while as a teacher?

N: Let me see.

J: Any fights at school that you had to break up?

N: Oh yes there was always little fights but nothing too serious. You know nothing that you know that I couldn't handle really. No...I can't think of any.

J: At about what time in your teaching career did you begin to think seriously that integration might just come about in your life time? When did it begin to look at all promising? Was it a gradual thing or did certain things happen that made it appear just around the corner? Think back to the temper of those years in the 50's and early 60's.

N: Yeah in the 50's and the early 60's...that's when I felt that it would come about and that is when the teachers were sort of integrating. Not children but the teachers. We would have certain meetings where we would go and the white teachers would go too.

J: Okay so you were just breaking the ice this way.

N: Breaking the ice—

J: Who's idea was that? Was Mr. Barnhart involved in that in anyway?

N: Barnhart he probably was the principal then—

J: I would think. Did you know him?

N: I knew him. He was probably the first superintendent that did that yeah—

J: Okay and he had no roots here at all you know he was from Pennsylvania. So I would believe that he would have done everything possible.

N: And he was—I remember him as being a very fair person.

J: Yeah, yeah he was indeed. When he retired you know he went to Nigeria to teach and then he came back and died of a heart attack fairly young. Yeah I know his wife she's still here.

N: I didn't know that. Well I know his wife too—

J: Henrietta.

N: Yeah.

J: She's remarkable.

N: She's in our retired teacher—

J: Tell her that you finally met John Wearmouth. Yeah she's great. So do you remember being pleasantly surprised when the first get together occurred of this type? And what was the atmosphere like and where did it take place?

N: I really don't remember.

J: At another school?

N: Yes I'm sure it was in another school but I don't remember which one. I don't know it was probably in La Plata that was always our sort of central meeting place. I'm almost sure it was La Plata. And we had different meetings as I recall. And there was no, it was no big thing you know everybody was pleasant.

J: Nothing traumatic, nothing jarring.

N: Nothing dramatic happened no and we would—if we ran across the white teachers we knew a number of them. They were always pleasant.

J: Did you find that there was a mutual community respect there? Teachers a professional—you are a professional the other was a professional. It opened up another channel actually of communication.

N: That's right it was.

J: And I suppose the matter of equality really had to be faced. The requirements were the same for the blacks as for the whites and getting more and more the same each year coming together. At what point did your pays get together? At what point did you start to receive equal pay? How old were you and were you surprised.

N: How old was I? Well I can't remember the year.

J: Before World War II or after?

N: I think it was World War II it was probably after World War II. I'm quite sure it was. And the young man who went to bat for the colored teachers Walter Mills was a classmate of mine.

J: At Pomonkey?

N: No college classmate.

J: He was teaching here?

N: No he was teaching in St. Mary's County. But he went for the whole state. I mean we all thought he was going to lose his job because of that but he didn't. He kept on but that I'm sure that was after World War II.

J: How much was your starting salary in 19 what 27?

N: 27. 65 dollars a month.

J: Could you really live with that?

N: [Laughs] Did our best.

J: You were living at home?

N: I was living at home yes.

J: Did you get a little bit of a break because of that?

N: Oh definitely. I didn't have board to pay or a [roommate] or that sort of thing. I was still a child there in the home.

J: Yeah that's true you were what 18?

N: I was 18. So I did get a break there. If I hadn't been living at home it would've been really tough. But there were others who were boarding.

J: Who were not living at home.

N: That were not living at home with the same salary.

J: Yeah like Bertha and Mary.

N: That's right. That's right they had to board.

J: What was your favorite age group during most of your teaching career? About what grade level appealed to you most?

N: Fourth.

J: Fourth? Why that in particular? What things were happening at that age that were a challenge for you as a teacher?

N: I wonder. Well when I started I was started with all of them. Then when I went to Pomonkey I was assigned only second grade and I loved it. I had first grade and I loved that. But then I was moved to the third and it seemed like it was a little bit better. In the first grade you have to do everything for them. And you think it's easy but the first grade is the very hardest grade in school. Second grade is just a little better. Third grade to me is a little bit easier. When you get to the fourth grade they're able to do so many things for themselves. They're learning to become independent and they're at the stage where they're eager to learn I believe.

J: When did you hand out your first pen and ink? When did they begin using ink? I don't mean ball point pens. And did you use the [Palmer] method.

N: Yes but the [Palmer] method but not with ink. I used pencil.

J: Alright that makes sense. We went right to ink.

N: I don't think I ever used ink with them. We had the ink wells in the desk. I remember all of that but we didn't use the ink.

J: Did this begin in the fourth grade?

N: Yes.

J: Okay it did where I went to school too.

N: But not ink.

J: That was when? Next year? Sometimes even two years later?

N: What when we used ink? I didn't use ink at all.

J: Well that saved you a lot of problems.

N: No I didn't never use that.

J: You know the ball point pen is a blessing really. It really is.

N: Yeah. I never used that.

J: That was terrible.

N: You had to use the ink did you?

J: In a scratchy pen point that you would put in and take out.

N: Yeah I know those kind. I mean I used them myself but the children no.

J: Really clumsy, really clumsy.... Okay so it was the fourth grade. At what—did you ever teach at high school level?

N: No.

J: Did you ever want to?

N: No. No I had said I wouldn't mind teaching Sr. High but I never had any desire to teach Jr. High. I didn't think I would be able to handle that. I probably could handle them but I didn't want to.

J: How did you handle problems that had to do with mixed groups in school? Here in Southern Maryland and a lot of other places we had the usual recognized division blacks and white but within those groups there were other groups. Where I went to school up north all whites but they were mixed. There were eastern Europeans, there were western Europeans, there were Americans who were you know seventh and eighth generation and we had problems, jealousies, and antagonisms, and rivalry. Did you run into this sort of thing in the black schools vis-a-vis the blacks and those who like to think of themselves as being Indian or part Indian? Did this ever show itself in any way?

N: It didn't show itself. This Indian problem didn't come about until a few years ago in our county. When my—well my relatives became Indians but I didn't. I still remain what I had always been. And it didn't show itself in the classroom at all. I think it does now but not when I was teaching.

J: In a couple of communities it did. It did make an appearance.

N: Yeah I'm sure it did back then.

J: In the La Plata area it did and possibly in the Pomfret area. So I guess it must have depended on the neighborhood.

N: Probably so but that has been say in the past 15, 20 years right? Before that?

J: Late early 30's, late 20's, early 30's in La Plata.

N: Is that right? I didn't know that.

J: Edna Warren Simmons had to deal with it very early at Hill Top.

N: Is that right? I didn't know that. I wasn't aware of that.

J: And Bertha had to deal with it at La Plata. And sure enough in those communities there are some of these families. And I asked Bertha which was the most aggressive and she said it was the black kids not the Wesorts. They were very submissive and it was the black children who wouldn't have anything to do with it. So there you go.

N: Well now that maybe there was a little bit of that. You might have seen a little friction.

J: It wasn't general.

N: No it wasn't general but there was probably a little friction there too.

R: It was when we went to high school. When we grew up.

N: Huh?

R: When I was in high school it was.

N: It was?

R: We didn't have that many. We had one family.

N: You mean here at Mason Springs.

R: But in high school it was. I can remember [oh we not black enough. Maybe I shouldn't have did that being] I was on the black side I suppose if you divided up but they pretty much didn't want to be [logged] anyway. I think that was why you know. They wanted to be separate and they didn't want to be considered with us. And that kind of brings on antagonism because [kids were rejecting each other like anyway] that kind of attitude.

J: Ruth have you found that a bit complicated in your life to make the decision? Are you comfortable with where you decided you fit in because you could go anyway?

R: Oh sure my children could. See I just saw no reason to change after I became an adult. We have white background and Indian background and black background.

J: You have some advantages.

N: Her grandfather was a white man. My husband's grandfather he was white and we knew that. I don't who was Indian. Well there was Indian on my side and there was white on his side. But it doesn't make any difference.

J: It shouldn't but it does. Dog gone you got to deal with it. It's here.

N: It's here.

J: And I think you don't let it really bowl you over and that's fine. I can remember going to schools where I was a minority because I had an Anglo background. I was out numbered [my brothers and sisters by] the sons and daughters of immigrants who had just come over you know the generation before from Italy, Belgium, France, Russia and they didn't accept people like me who had been here a long time. So it just depends on what time and what place and this was in a big city in the north.

R: It's a shame it has to be that way.

J: Yeah it is. I guess it's the price we have to pay for living in this country. I'm not ready to go anywhere else right now I'll tell you that because when you get abroad you find the same thing.

N: Same thing.

J: I'll tell you one thing. You wouldn't want to be a woman living in Iran today.

N: No I guess not.

J: You been reading what they do to the gals over there? If their veil just slips down and they reveal an eyelash they're in trouble...really sad, sad, sad. Did—were you encouraged—did J. C. Parks ever do anything encourage his black teachers to prepare for integration? Did he warn you that there might be problems? That you should start getting ready and doing whatever you could to psych yourselves up for this.

N: I think he saw it coming years before it got here really. And he was quite a philosopher you know anyway. I think he saw it coming and he would tell us that we would eventually be one. He said, "Maybe not in my lifetime." But it was in his lifetime.

J: And he did see it didn't he?

N: He saw it.

J: Was he pleased do you know?

N: I'm sure he was. Yes he was quite pleased.

J: He wasn't from Maryland was he?

N: No he was from Kentucky.

J: Okay. When did you Ruth decide you wanted to become a teacher? You knew your mother had been one. Did you want to subject yourself to that same sort of life?

R: No you know I always said I never wanted to be one. And I think because I grew up knowing Mrs. Key and Mrs. Wheeler. You know my mother's friends. So from the time I was little I was used to seeing them around and people would always say when you grow up do you want to be a teacher like your mom? I thought no you know. Just because they expected that I think I decided I didn't want to do that but I ended up being one and I've enjoyed it. There are times when you think why am I here but I think I—

J: What was your first school?

R: J. C. Parks.

J: And what grade level?

R: Second. That was in 67. My first year was the first year of total integration in the county.

J: Oh so where were you when you met Anne? Port Tobacco?

R: Port Tobacco. That was in 69 or 70.

J: I guess yeah Peter started in 66.

R: I remember Peter he was in Mrs. Merritt's class I think about the time that—

J: Yeah and there was Mrs. Garth Bowling and Major Horsey was there. And the principal was from West Virginia some place what was his?

R: [Inaudible]. See what happened when I started in 67 Mr. [Inaudible] was my first principal. I worked at J. C. Parks for two years and I was off for a year on maternity leave. And by the time I was ready to go back Mr. [Inaudible] was made principal at Port Tobacco and he asked me to come down here and I followed him there and stayed there for two years.

J: Did you know Ms. Smith?

R: What was the first name?

J: Her father was a minister. Black Ms. Smith from the Smith Chapel Smith's. What was her first name again? She taught at Port Tobacco.

R: Did she?

J: She—her name was Smith but she called herself Smith. Ms. Smith.

R: I can't remember.

J: A tall person. Her father is a very tall man. He’s active in Democratic politics. They call him the preacher. I'm not sure he has a church.

R: Oh preacher Smith.

J: Preacher Smith that's got to be the one.

R: Sure um—

J: This teacher was either a daughter or—

R: His granddaughter. Big huge person.

J: I guess he was fairly.

R: [Elvira or] [inaudible] she was a [inaudible phrase]. I don't even know if preacher [inaudible phrase].

N: Raymond. His first name is Raymond.

R: Well she wasn't at Port Tobacco during the time I was there.

J: Well eventually she ended up there. So where did you teach that first year of integration which was 66?

R: No 67.

J: 67?

R: Two years 67 and 68. Because Momma was still there when I started.

N: Yeah I was at J. C. Parks at that time.

J: What was the mix that year? 50/50?

N: I guess it was about. Let's see.

J: So that first year you had a racial mix of about 50 fixed, 50/50 mixture. How did that work out were there any unforeseen advantages or disadvantages? What happened during that year that surprised you a little if any? What were you prepared for that just didn't happen?

N: I was prepared for friction. I thought there might have been. This was something new that was coming to us but I didn't see any. They were just children. I wondered how I would—how they would react toward me. They acted just like the other children.

J: You were still a teacher.

N: I was still the teacher. And I, really, I haven't seen that much difference in white and black children and all children.

J: Did they all show you the same deference? Same respect?

N: Yes they did. I didn't see any difference.

J: Were most of these kids from that Pomonkey Bryans Road area?

N: Yes they were.

J: So a lot of them were from families that worked for the federal government?

N: Most of them.

J: So they were in some ways a cut above your average student at that time?

N: At that time I guess they were.

J: It's not quite that way now because everybody—people have come into the county on all sides.

N: Right.

J: But at this time your greatest influx of federal government people were over here on this side of the county.

N: It was Bryans Road Indian Head.

J: So you were getting both black and white kids in your class that had been to school elsewhere even outside the state?

N: Mhm.

J: Was this good? Did you notice any difference in their cultural level with respect to what they thought about the arts and music and museums and this sort of thing through I suppose having been exposed to them in other communities? Were there any differences there?

N: If there was I didn't notice them. I didn't notice them. I did notice however the whites had a little more experience. They had traveled more. They'd been more places than our black kids had been so they were a little more experienced. As far as traveling and that sort of thing.

J: Well that was at a time when most high ranking commissioned officers and high ranking government people were white and it would be felt. You'd notice it.

N: Well you see at Pomonkey or J. C. Parks we didn't get those officer's children. They went to the Indian Head school. We got those from the Bryans Road area. Pisgah, Marbury, around in there, Pomonkey. Yeah but Indian Head that was a different group of children.

J: Your Lackey High School type.

N: Right. right and see that was that Indian Head Elementary.

J: How many years did you teach?

N: All together?

J: In an integrated system.

N: 67...not too many. From 67 to 73 yes not many. Five or six years.

J: And at the same grade level pretty much?

N: Yes.

J: Fourth?

N: Fourth grade.

J: Did you find during the past your last three years that the average student at that grade level was more competent than they had been when you started teaching? Quicker to learn?

N: Yes.

J: Okay we would hope so.

N: Yes.

J: We would hope so because look what they had been exposed to in the 50's and 60's.

N: That they weren't exposed to earlier—

J: When you started teaching I wonder how many of your children came from homes that even had radio?

N: Not many.

J: Or a telephone. Not many.

N: Right they didn't no. They'd only seen pictures of them.

J: And then in the late 60's and 70's what a different picture.

N: That's right.

J: Do you think the modern communication conveniences and systems had an impact on their learning desires and capacities and interests?

N: Oh yes I'm sure it did.

J: What do you think now Ruth? Has this thing swung around a little bit? Do you see in a detrimental effects on your teaching? Too much radio or television?

R: Oh yes. I see it in my own family. Kids spend too much time [inaudible]. They love it. They love anything, any electronic game or machine. Kids just seem to tune into that. Videos and things like that. Even commercials on TV are faster paced you know. I don't just the visuals and the music. Everything is moving too fast.

J: Well this is interesting to have the two of you here because we

re going from 1927 to 1989 you know teaching in Charles County and what an incredible change in what has happened in the world.

N: It has really been changed.

J: Tomorrow frightens me more and more. How'd you like to start out now?

N: I don't think I would. I don't think I would choose teaching now. I think I would go in a different field.

J: What for example?

N: I don't know. I really haven't thought about what I would do but I don't think it would be teaching and I love teaching. That was my whole life.

J: Well nowadays there are other ways of teaching. You don't have to do it in a school. There are other ways. There's a great career out there for young people who want to teach with the Department of Defense and live overseas teaching the children of military people stationed abroad. A marvelous experience. I know a few who've done it. How much—what was your experience of dealing with homework all the way through this thing? Were there any changes in emphasis from your beginning years through your finishing years?

N: Well homework, I always believed in homework.

J: Did most teachers?

N: I think so. I think most of them did but we didn't really rely on homework as the child learning that much it was more as reinforcement. If we taught something in school and we wanted it reinforced we gave them some homework. Hoping that he would do it and that his parents or older brothers and sisters wouldn't do it. This would reinforce what we had taught in school that day. Not a new assignment as such. That's the way I was doing it.

J: And for the most part what was the attitude of teachers toward homework assignments? Did they cooperate with it?

N: Teachers?

J: I mean the parents. What was their attitude? Did you get support?

N: Oh yeah I always got cooperation yes. And if a child liked doing his homework if you contacted the parent most likely they would get with it and see that the child did it.

J: What problems did you have in communicating with the parents during the first couple of decades when so few of them had a telephone. Would this require sending notes home or personal calls on the parents? Which route did you go or both?

N: We I went both routes yeah. I would send them notes or just stop by.

J: Depending on how serious the case was?

N: Right that's right. We didn't have a lot of discipline problems in those days. That really wasn't the problem at all. I mean there would be little things here and there but not too many.

J: As a teacher how often did you have to provide little extras? Did you sometimes in the early years say 20's and 30's have to help out providing a little lunch, a hot lunch? Did you ever do that?

N: Yes.

J: Using the one stove in the school.

N: The one stove in the school yes. Yes we did that.

J: Did some of the parents send things to you once in a while for the lunch?

N: They would help. The little PTA would provide things for the kitchen for the lunches. And then different parents would do the same thing you know a—

J: A really major problem. How do we feed these kids? No cafeteria, nothing.

N: Everybody brought the—

J: No machines to stick a quarter in.

N: No none of that.

J: It was all up to the teacher wasn't it?

N: It was all up to the teacher.

R: It was like that in the 50's when I was in the elementary school.

J: Was it still?

R: I went to one of the last three room schools in the Mason Springs School [up there] until 57. We had no indoor toilets, no running water.

J: As late as 1957.

R: That's when I left and the school was still going on when I left. You know less than two years before total integration I went into a three room school. Mama was third and fourth grade—

J: It's interesting both of you taught in a segregated system. It's amazing.

R: No I didn't teach in a segregated system. I did some substitute work but the first year I started to teach was the first year it was integrated. But I was in school here in the county just half a mile from where we are now. But it's just amazing that less than ten years before there was total integration I was still attending a school where we had to go to the bathroom outdoors.

J: Where things were 50 years ago just like you'd been talking about.

R: Yes the way they were 50 years before. It wasn't that long ago in the 50's.

J: Do you recall any feelings of even bitterness during the most complete years of segregation with respect to this whole thing being so illogical and unfair?

N: Did I feel that?

J: Yeah did you personally.

N: Oh yes, yes I did.

J: Okay how wide spread was the feeling among colored teachers?

N: I think they all felt it.

J: Okay so nobody was kidding anybody.

N: No I don't think so.

J: You all knew you were doing without things. You were getting paid less and it was a completely different system.

N: Yes we knew that but it seemed that there was nothing we could do about it.

J: Completely separate and not terribly equal.

N: No not equal.

J: Well we've all lived through some exciting times.

N: Yes we really have.

J: How do you feel about it now? Hopeful that maybe we've been over the toughest part of it?

N: I hope we have.

J: You know it's not over.

N: It's not over.

J: Great strides have been made.

N: Yes.

J: And now I'm getting into this Piscataway thing and I'm going to find out some things that I'm sure they're gonna be hard to face. Hard to face. So you come from a family that could and did go at least two different ways, black, Indian, and maybe some white. Did some members of the family in the last couple of generations pass into the white world and stay there? That's amazing [inaudible phrase].

R: On my father's side.

N: I mean yeah on my husband's side.

J: There are people living in the county today well up in years who remember stories told to them by their parents and grandparents about the beautiful Swann girls of Port Tobacco. Did you ever hear that? They were beautiful, very attractive and eventually they lost them because in the 1890's or so they moved in to Washington. Moved into the white world and just simply disappeared. But they remember them to this day. The white Swann's.

R: My—who would it have been on my father—

J: They ran a restaurant in Port Tobacco. I know where it was but it's gone now.

R: They also owned a lot of land down on the water near St. [Ignatius] Church. I heard my husband tell me about a family who owned land there and eventually lost it or something [inaudible] or whatever. I think the name was Swann but I—

J: Jameson's, Swann's, Hawkins's…were neighbors in that area that were part of all three races you know. Did very well. Of course they didn't really do well until they left completely.

R: [Inaudible] a lot of my family. It was all three. That's why it really didn't make sense to say I'm Indian or I'm white. I'm just as much white as I am Indian or black if you look at it mathematically.

J: Right yeah.

R: Mama's—well my father's father which would have been my grandfather didn't you say he was the only one of his brothers and sisters who preferred to be black. The rest went off some place. You know we had cousins and aunts and uncles that we've never seen but they couldn't make it being black. You know with jobs and housing and things and they were able to go elsewhere so they went elsewhere.

J: Were there any Rose ever?

R: Oh yeah.

N: Okay you hit it. [Laughs]. That's the name. That's the name. That was her great grandfather.

J: Oh boy now he was something.

N: Judge. Called him Judge. Judge Rose.

J: Well educated man could have been anything.

N: Judge Rose that's her great grandfather.

R: [So now you know what I'm saying]. I can say I'm Indian but I can say I'm white too.

J: Yeah great. Yeah that's well.

N: She was descended. She's one of his descendants. I'm not but she is

R: [Inaudible phrase].

J: I know a lot of your kin. I do. I do.

R: I knew one—who was it somebody? [Inaudible] [pinch my head.]

N: Oh my goodness. Marian.

R: Yeah who was in the school system.

J: Oh yeah Cousin Marian.

R: Yeah she didn't know that I don't suppose. I didn't know her personally but.

N: I don't think she did either.

J: Do you know her mother?

R: No I just remember her at meetings and things.

J: Fine she would be delighted to know. Delighted to know.

R: Is that right? But I remember when I first started teaching she would be in charge of meetings or something and I would just sit there and think.

J: Marian the librarian. Yeah she's alright I just saw her recently. Alright so anyway I know that story. So you've got a lot of good background all the way around. That's great. Okay now I know—Ruth what things have we not said here that you feel should be on this tape about your mother?

R: Just the fact that she's probably the greatest mother there is and I think she—

Unidentified Voice: And grandmother.

R: And grandmother and undoubtedly one of the best if not the best teacher in this county. There were many but she was certainly one of the best. She would not say that but she was my third and fourth grade teacher and she also taught my sister. Her own brother and sister and many of the teachers who are living now. Some have even retired she taught. It just makes me feel proud. Sometimes I go to the store and meet somebody and they'll say are you Nellie Carter's daughter. It means something.

J: Who could contribute any more to society? One more question and this is loaded. What do you think your mother's reaction would be to be teaching today in your shoes? What would bother her the most?

R: Probably the lack of support and discipline. The family situation, the relationships are so different. When she was teaching, when she first started teaching she was a community teacher. She knew the parents and the grandparents and the aunts and the uncles of all the kids and it was like one big happy family. With so many people moving into the county now from different backgrounds and different experiences it's difficult to get that kind of relationship.

J: Very little social stability.

R: Oh it is very little. I think that's a great loss to teaching. I think that personal relationship was probably one of things that made her love teaching. I think of it as—

[End of Tape]