

# Transcript of OH-00212

Jane Eleanor Gray Wheeler

Interviewed by  
John Wearmouth

on  
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## Format

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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

Agriculture  
Communicable diseases  
Education  
Horsemanship  
Race relations  
Rural conditions  
Rural schools  
School discipline  
School integration  
Segregation in education

## Tags

La Plata High School  
One room school house

## Transcript

John Wearmouth [J]: This is John Wearmouth interviewing Mrs. Jane Wheeler at the Wheeler residence on Courthouse Road. We're doing the interview as part of the Charles County Community College Oral History Program. The date is June 6, 1980. We're interviewing Mrs. Wheeler who before her marriage was Jane Eleanor Gray. She was born just a matter of a few hundred yards from where the interview is taking place right here on the very same road. We're about three miles from old Port Tobacco about two miles northwest of the old village. Some two miles from Maryland State Route 6. Mrs. Wheeler about how far would you say we are from your birth place? Walking distance?

Jane Eleanor Gray Wheeler [W]: Oh yes a couple hundred yards.

J: Good and there are still members of the Gray family living there where you were born and your father probably before you?

W: Mhm yes.

J: What are the earliest memories you have of life here in this neighborhood? What stands out? Little things that might have happened to you as a very, very young girl even before school? Very early impressions?

W: Well the baby lambs. The baby lambs and the baby kittens and the things like that were great events. When a little baby colt oh my that was a real, real interest.

J: So you were born on a working farm?

W: That's right.

J: And this was your father's occupation. This was the way he made the living for the whole family?

W: That's right.

J: Do you recall how m any acres he was working when you were a youngster?

W: It would be a guess but I would say 100. Not more than 150. 100 but you see he had to work with horses and on good days plowing with three good horses you didn't plow but three acres. So you know a field of 20 acres that was a big week's plowing. Then it was [inaudible phrase] a whole different [before] you planted corn or.

J: So one man and a good team would have an awful lot of spring work to do with even as little as a hundred acres?

W: That's right. Well of course—

J: Considered little now but not then.

W: That's right because you didn't have the machinery then but you did have more help. He had a couple of men on the farm that helped with the feeding and getting in the wood. That was a big chore, the wood for the house. You ran your kitchen stove and you ran your dining room stove and you ran a couple upstairs and if you had special company then a living room fire.

J: Well the main reason I wanted to talk to you this evening was to talk to you about your teaching career in the county. Before we get into that I really think that it's pure history what we might discuss about your early days here on the farm and as a member of a family that depended entirely on agriculture I think that's a very important part of local history.

W: [It wasn't too] well there plenty of lean days. We always had plenty to eat and we always had a roof over our heads and the food was no problem which isn't true in people who don't live in the country. When it came to money and things money would buy there were plenty of lean days.

J: How many children were there?

W: Five of us.

J: How many boys?

W: Three boys. My sister and I were the oldest and then Arthur and Bill and Bob were the boys.

J: And did all five of you have certain types of chores to do as you were growing up depending on your age and strength and so forth?

W: I was more of an outdoors person when I was just a kid. They used to put me on a horse and send me down to get the cows and [canter] the cows to pasture when school wasn't in session. Course I was crazy about horses. Always have been crazy about horses.

J: This was saddle or bareback?

W: Well I had a saddle as I grew older but it was bareback when I first started. But that was partly my father said you were safer on a horse without a saddle than you were with a saddle because if they threw you and your foot part they could kill you. You know the horse would panic. If you were bareback and they threw you, you had a better chance of getting out. So that was part of the reason they didn't let me—they made me learn to ride bareback and then when I was about 12 they got me a saddle. Of course that was big doings when I got that saddle that Christmas.

J: How did you view your family situation? Did you feel that the Gray family was reasonably well off compared to your friends and neighbors? Did you view yourself as being—

W: Yes we all had about the same. There was no great gulf there. I guess in a sense we were fortunate. My mother's brother lived in Philadelphia and he was unmarried at the time and he used to send us books. He sent me all the Alcott books and things like that. So I felt very fortunate having books at my disposal. Then even though my family didn't have much money they did take always took a daily paper and they always had magazines. What was the little magazine they bought for me when I was just a child?

J: [Inaudible].

W: I can't recall the name of it now but it was some child's magazine and that was high days and holidays when that came.

J: How about excitement and recreation? What things would you and others on the farm be doing now let's say when you were oh between five and ten years old? What do you recall as having been just a lot of fun?

W: Well see my sister was four years younger than I and my brother was eight years younger so they were a little too young to be a whole lot of companionship. We had an aunt who lived with us and she used to read to us and I have an old copy of Uncle Remus upstairs now that she read to us. She'd tell us tales. All sorts of tales of things that happened when she was growing up. There used to be an old side saddle over there that when she was a young girl and they sent her out to some private school in La Plata and she rode that side saddle. I used to think that side saddle was just great. I couldn't imagine how she stayed on it.

J: She rode it from here to La Plata?

W: She rode it—well I don't—

J: Distance of about seven—

W: I rode to McDonough Institute from September until Christmas.

J: How long a trip was that? 45 minutes?

W: Well it was about six miles and they had a colored man there who took my horse. Got the saddle off of him and tied him up and my father would carry oats or something out so he'd have a little lunch in the middle of the day. We did very well. We did very well. One time I was going up Jenifer's Hill with him. Of course the roads weren't very good.

J: Now where's Jenifer's Hill in terms of today's geography.

W: Well when you come out of Habre de Venture Road and come along and that first hill was Jenifer's Hill. But you see then it had a right angle turn there and it curved at the top.

J: Close to the house? Closer to the house? Closer to the Rose Hill house?

W: Closer to no—

Roberta Wearmouth [R]: The other way.

W: Not any closer to Rose Hill house. I know the road veered off to south of the present road.

R: [Where the Vacchiano Road].

W: And I was riding him up the hill and he got a little ginger in him.

J: Past where the Port Tobacco [inaudible phrase].

W: And a truck, soft drink truck came over the top of the hill and the light hit the bottles and he the horse, Dixie, looked up and he saw that light glaring on those bottles and he whirled around and began to plunge coming down that hill. A friend of my father's was in a car below and he said, "That girl's going to be killed." But I wasn't. I got him stopped and turned him around and took him back up to the truck and the man in the truck got out and let him by. It was the light on the bottles it wasn't the truck because he wasn't afraid of trucks. If they'd given me a little time I could have talked him by it.

R: How [inaudible]? [How old were you]?

W: I suppose I was 13 or 14 somewhere in that.

J: Did the other girls at McDonough think this was pretty daring for you to ride in all that distance?

W: Well they used to give him apples and play with the horse a lot but I don't think they thought it was anything unusual.

J: Well on the farm again what role did your mother play in the home economics? To what extent did she involve herself in preserving foods, making clothes?

W: Well when I was little we had help in the kitchen all the time so the dish washing, the peeling the potatoes and that kind of thing didn't have to be done. My aunt finally left and went up to Washington County and then she took a much more active part. Before she sewed for us and read to us and you know things of that sort but she really didn't have too much of the work to do.

J: To what do you attribute this early fondness for literary pursuits? Born with it or the fact that you had reading materials available to you?

W: I think my family appreciated books and literature and would read to us and tell us stories and I think that had its effect on us. Just like I think it would have its effect on any child today. If they're read to in the home and around books and see people sit down and enjoy books then I think they too are going to enjoy books.

J: When you went to school, a formal school the first time, you already then had three or four years of exposure to literature?

W: Oh yes.

J: And proper speaking and reading comprehension. How much formal education did your mother have?

W: Well she was a high school graduate. She went to school.

J: And your father?

W: No he didn't have very much but he was the youngest in a large family so I think that you pick up right much from that. Then Aunt Katy was a college graduate and they lived across the road and they used to get together and read the new books that would come out. Somebody would get hold of one and they'd all get together in the evening and read.

J: What in house activities for recreation or what sort of games were there? Card games for example? Were those popular?

W: Oh yes they had card games and later on there was [inaudible phrase] and all those things, [Pitch].

J: What were some of the popular card games that the family all participated in?

W: Well Setback. That's a form of Pitch. Then there was a game called Hearts. I think we used to play that. They had several—

R: Rook?

W: I can remember Pit now I don't remember Rook. Do you remember Pit? So many wheats you know and you trade them off and everybody's screaming, "Two, two, two, two, two." And you're hoping you'll get to write two or you'll write three. That was when we were older. All going to high school or home from college or something we did that.

J: What event on the farm or events had the most marked effect on family life? For example introduction of machinery of one type or another? Communication facilities, modern conveniences?

W: Well there weren't very many modern conveniences.

J: What was most appreciated of these?

W: Well I think maybe when they got electricity. They could have an electric refrigerator. We had an ice box before but they are miserable things. You put cream in it and somebody'd hit the cream pitcher and it would upset and you'd have to clean that thing out. You'd have to go to La Plata to get ice. Of course we thought that was great when I was just a little child they had an ice house and my father used to come out here on the little pond and cut ice. He always made

himself sick. They'd cut the ice in squares and pile it on I don't know whether it was a wagon or sled or something and take it down to the ice house. Have you ever seen an ice house?

J: We saw one at Hanson house.

W: It was way down in the ground and it was lined with logs. Then with straw and you put the ice down in it. Now ice would last until probably August. They used a lot of milk on the farm. At one time they made over a hundred pounds of butter. My father was running a truck route to Indian Head and they'd have to keep that butter cool so they built him a little dairy. They put in a trough and put cold water in that trough in the morning and put ice in it. It would keep the butter from getting too soft and they'd keep the cream from getting too sour. If it gets sour it ruins the butter.

J: Was this ice pure enough to eat or to use to chill soft drinks?

W: Oh you could use it to chill things and we even used it for iced tea but I doubt the purity was a great. I don't imagine it passing it a test of purity.

J: Probably not. Anyway there were no illnesses that you [got] or that sort of thing?

W: No there was nothing that came from it.

J: On that subject of illness what were the things, what were the types of illnesses that families feared most in this part of the county?

W: Diphtheria.

J: Diphtheria.

W: Diphtheria was one, Typhoid Fever was another. There was a lot of that around the county.

J: Much Malaria in the early part of the century?

W: I don't recall any with us. Now I think certain people had it in certain places maybe.

J: Down in lower land but perhaps not in Port Tobacco.

W: Probably. Well evidently they had a lot according to the things you read that Port Tobacco had Malaria that just wiped the settlement out or certainly decimated it.

J: Who were some of the better known family doctors that practiced?

W: Well let's see. We were lucky because Aunt Katy lived right across the road from us and her brother wasn't too well and he came down and lived with them and he was a doctor from Cumberland. So he vaccinated us for Smallpox and every time we had a sore throat or something he would say well do this or do that or do the other. So we had the benefit of his experience for a while. Then there was old Doctor Owens in La Plata but we didn't go to doctors. Later on there was Doctor Bicknell over at Marbury that we went to more than we went to anybody else.



J: So you didn't frequently need a doctor?

W: No we had no serious illnesses. My sister had Mastoid but she came out of it without any—

J: No surgery required?

W: No surgery.

J: Any hospitalization?

W: No hospitalization. Nothing at all. She had her tonsils out when she—I guess she was in college when she had her tonsils out. Bob did too.

J: Was the World War I flu epidemic serious here?

W: Well it evidently was. I taught a family in La Plata and the father and mother and those children died in the flu epidemic. I can remember it. I was still at I guess Sandy Hill School. Or maybe that was during the World War. World War I wasn't it.

J: Probably late, late World War I.

W: And we didn't have anybody. Now we did have a little girl, a dear pretty little girl, that died with Tuberculosis. She was the only child I can remember in the school that died.

J: That was rather rare was it?

W: There was a lot of Tuberculosis around here. There was a family of colored people lived in this house right next and they had worked for all of us and three of them died within a year I think. Of course my aunt said, Well I'm not surprised they died. All they eat is syrup and corn bread and they won't put a window up. They don't believe in fresh air." So she thought it was the way they lived that caused it. But there were lots of families—the Marbury family I think Mrs. Marbury lost her whole family and she was the only one that lived. Then there was Cousin Vinny...I forget her last name. Anyway she married a Speak and her whole family died of Tuberculosis.

J: Well it was communicable.

W: The Albritton's lost several to Tuberculosis. Great big strong people when they get about grown and just snapped them off like that. Now of course this hearsay with me because I didn't know that. I did know the colored ones. I didn't know the white—the Brawner. Cousin Vinny Brawner, that's who she was and the whole Brawner family. She was the only one left alive of the family.

J: So living out in a rural location with lots of fresh air and eating lots of good food was no guarantee that you would escape any of these diseases that science hadn't learned to control.

W: That's right.

J: How old were you when you started in at the Sandy Field Elementary School?

W: Oh you see I must have been in about the sixth grade then.

J: Your first year of formal—

W: My first couple years I was home then the next years, two or three years I was down at Port Tobacco with my aunt. And then when she got sick she taught me at home that year. I finished up whatever grade it was. I don't remember now. Fourth or fifth.

J: So this would have been what about 1915 if you were at Port Tobacco?

W: Somewhere in there.

J: Using the building that still stands?

W: That's the same building and that's right there.

J: What were the names of some of the students there at Port Tobacco?

W: Goodness well the Hyde's.

J: Probably three or four.

W: Henry Albritton I think was there. There were some Miles. Other than that I really can't think of anybody else.

J: Probably not a very large.

W: No huh?

R: [Inaudible].

W: No see Margaret is younger. Margaret and my sister Adelaide were about the same age and Frank was younger. He was Arthur's age. So you see they would have missed that.

J: So what time did you—about what year did you leave the elementary school?

W: Must have been somewhere around...I graduated from high school in 24 so it must have been somewhere around 1919.

J: Alright when you say high school you're talking about McDonough Institute?

W: Mhm.

J: Which served as well perhaps a little more than a high school I would say by today's standards. It might have been called a prep school.

W: Well they did a tremendous lot of good.

J: I think it was probably a cut above the average public high school I think.

W: Well I think from what they get today. Mary [Nally] was said to me one day that, "I see youngsters come in here that are going to the community college." And she said, "They are not as good as we were when we came out of McDonough."

J: Who were some of your friends at McDonough in your graduation class at McDonough?

W: Theodore Davis teaching down here in Port Tobacco. Catherine Albritton that died with Tuberculosis when she—her second year of teaching. Beautiful girl.

J: Her sister [Louise] by any chance?

W: Hmm?

J: Related to Louise?

W: Mhm cousin. Let's see Mayme Paget who is dead. Fish Bowling who is dead. William [Bleck]. Marianne Hayden who is dead. A lot of them in the graveyard now.

J: Was [Sydney Vacchiano]?

W: No he was somewhere in grade school in McDonough. Then he was younger.

J: So you finished up at McDonough in 1924? Did you go into college immediately?

W: Yeah went right into normal school.

J: And that was Towson?

W: Mhm.

J: It's known now as Towson State.

W: And now it's Towson State but then it was just the normal school.

J: And that was a two year course? At that time Towson did not have a four year baccalaureate curriculum?

W: That's right.

J: And what was your plan when you went to Towson? What did you want to be? What were you preparing yourself to do? Did you really know at that time?

W: Well No indeed I didn't have the faintest idea. I would kind of liked to gone into nursing but I had a cousin who well during World War II he was head of draft up in Washington but he was a doctor. He came home about the time that he was in Europe during the World War I. He came home and said well what are you planning to do and I said, "I'd kind of like to go in nursing." And he said, "Not on your life you're not going." So that just takes care of that. And I didn't know enough to argue with him. I guess it's a very good thing I didn't.

J: This was a cousin?

W: Uh—huh. So I went to normal school and I was very fortunate. I got an excellent critic teacher to do my first practice teaching under, my first seven weeks. She was excellent. Anything I ever amounted to I give her credit for.

J: Well how long had you been at Towson before you were able to get into practice teaching? When did they push you into that? Late in your second year?

W: I guess at the beginning of my second year.

J: Beginning of the second year.

W: My first semester was spent in practice teaching on my second year.

J: Now would your major have been education?

W: Mhm. Elementary Education.

J: Elementary Education. Do you remember the courses that you took?

W: Well.

J: Which were really required.

W: Well I guess everything we took was required. We had to do a lot of observing. They had a practice school there with the normal school. Everybody tried to get the child into this practice school. I was not too impressed because they had so many things the teachers out in the county didn't have to work with.

J: For example?

W: Well they had better books.

J: Teaching aides?

W: More teaching aides that are pictures. Things of that sort than the average person who's teaching out—

J: This was in the immediate Towson neighborhood?

W: Mhm but I didn't do any of my practice teaching in that school. I did it all out well some in Baltimore County but some out in Anne Arundel County and that's where I had the excellent teacher was out in Anne Arundel County. But they sent us to school and they showed us so many things, taught us so many things. I liked the subject matter courses better than I did the [inaudible] courses. [Inaudible phase] most of them were kind of free loading courses.

J: Do you recall how expensive your education was at Towson? You were there a full two years and your family supported you pretty much in this?

W: Yeah but you know we could go then for 300 dollars a year. I—

J: Tuition?

W: Most of that was free was furnished by the state if we would come back into the county and teach. But my mother inherited a little bit of money. She used it to send me to normal school. Then when I got out and Adelaide got a scholarship to University of Maryland then I—

J: Your younger sister?

W: Uh-huh.

J: Four years?

W: Four year scholarship. I helped her out a little. So even though I didn't have a whole lot when we started teaching received 85 dollars a month. Then during the Depression we went back to 75 a month.

J: So you got out of Towson spring of 1926 possibly?

W: And went to work in Cedar Point Neck one room school.

J: Came right back to Charles County and you started teaching in the fall of 26? Cedar Neck Elementary School?

W: Yeah and that's the year they—

J: What road would that school have been on?

W: Have you ever been down to Goose Bay Marina? Well when you go down that hill, long hill, the school stood right on a little flat piece of land there [inaudible].

J: How far back from the marina?

W: Well [inaudible] I don't know it was quite a ways from the marina. After you come on the high way you see and you come down and you make a right angle turn to go to the marina past the Meryl Ferguson farm. Well right across from his farm there's a little flat piece of land. That's where the Cedar Point Neck School was. But it's long gone.

J: Long gone alright. How many students were in this class?

W: I think I had 33. Six girls and 27 boys.

J: That's a pretty good size class. Alright how far did they have to come on the average to get to school?

W: Well they had a little horse drawn vehicle that brought the children from Cedar Point Neck and bring them in in the morning and take them back in the evening.

J: A very early school bus. Were most of them children of farm families?

W: Farm families the majority of them.

J: No government employees involved in those days at all?

W: No. They were country people who had a stable place in the community and they saw to it that their children upheld their reputation. If they didn't they had them to answer to.

J: Okay there's a part of the discipline problem today. One of the reasons you didn't have such a serious one I'm sure. What were the names of some of the families? Not necessarily names of the children but what families were represented?

W: Well [Greisch], [Hindulsh], Clemens...Jenkins. Wallace Jenkins I don't know whether you knew him. Lives in White Plains and excellent tobacco farmer.

J: Any [Gray's] at all?

W: Martin something or other. He's a preacher. McArthur [Grail] was one who is dead. They all did pretty well.

J: How long were you at that school?

W: Just one year. Then you see—

[Tape Interruption]

J: Where were you located? Where did they put you?

W: I went to Marbury for just a few months [over then they]—I taught third and fourth grade over at Marbury. That didn't last up until Christmas. Then I went into La Plata. There I stayed.

J: In the new consolidated building school? How many grades were at the La Plata consolidated school?

W: Well from one through 12. They had 10 teachers to start out with. Five in the high school and five in the elementary.

J: So there at La Plata what grade did they put you in? What grade was yours?

W: Well let's see. I think I first started in teaching social studies in the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. Then one year I had a third grade class. They had a large third grade so I had a third grade class and the other teachers, Ms. Wills and Ms. Thompson, [and later] Mary Fairfax Cooksey had the upper grades. And then we went back again to the social studies and language arts and what have you.

J: What comprised social studies?

W: History and geography, hygiene, that was just thrown in. They had spelling and English and literature. They had reading, math. I said spelling didn't I? Hygiene and then music that was taught in large groups.

J: Where was your strength? What classes or what subjects did you feel the most confident at teaching?

W: Well I guess I did my best work maybe in history but I got better results in teaching math. I was never particularly good at math but I evidently could teach it. I liked to teach reading but reading is a very difficult subject. Our children never did too well in reading. In math now they did very well. Often your whole class would be up to standard in math. But in the reading and vocabulary we fell down very bad.

J: How did you determine whether or not they were up to standard? Were there state exams or?

W: Yes they sent out standardized tests. Of course that's only an indication and in many cases I found that I had fourth grade children and you wondered well now why were they down in reading because they have intelligence enough they're good, but you find out they were just reading a little slow. They weren't—they hadn't picked up the speed. When they get to the sixth grade many of them were up to standard because they had increased that speed.

J: Did you suspect that part of the reason for this was a lack of interest in the home and also perhaps because in many cases the parents of these children had little more than six or eight years of education themselves?

W: Well when it comes to your stomach and your brain which one wins?

J: There has to be some sort of balance.

W: Well some reading work book, not work book, reading year book was put out. I remember a statement they made that 40, 50 percent of your people don't read. So if 50 percent of your people don't read why should you expect all your children to read.

J: True now we have indicated this but we are really talking about the segregated school system here. In all your teaching career you taught at white schools in Charles County?

W: Right up until the last what five years I guess. The last five years I think the first year we were integrated. I had I believe one little colored boy. But he was no problem. He got along fine with the children. The children got along accepted him. He did very well.

J: What school was this?

W: This was still at La Plata High School and Milton Somers was beginning to be called by that time. He was no problem. The next year I had three, four, or five colored children. I had one boy that I thought was very good. I had one boy that was up to standard with the white children. I had one that was nearly up. I had a colored girl [if she hadn't had such a nasty] [inaudible] because she could have been up to standard but she was so busy scraping you out on all the things you did that were wrong and what people had done to her.

J: We touched on an interesting point. During the late 20's and 30's times were hard here for everybody.

W: Oh yes.

J: Well all over the country.

W Oh absolutely.

J: There was no industry based in Southern Maryland and certainly—

W: Except we had food enough to eat and we had a roof over our head and we had wood we were warm.

J: But it took a lot of doing.

W: That's right. I can remember my father sold tobacco during the Depression from one to three cents a pound. He didn't get enough from the tobacco to pay the taxes.

J: Or even buy fertilizer?

W: No to buy anything. And you didn't buy anything you didn't have to buy. As I think I said earlier there were lots of things that money would buy that we didn't have. Fortunately my mother could sew. She could make our clothes and material was inexpensive. You could get good material for a little of nothing. When Arthur graduated from high school and this was in 36 I believe he had a hog and she produced a litter of pigs and he got his graduation clothes by selling the pigs from this hog.

J: Was a 4-H and big thing in those days?

W: Well [Matt and Wally] were mixed up in the 4-H more than I believe maybe Arthur was but not to that degree. He just happened to have a [copper hat that Holden gave it to him]. Times were tight. You couldn't replace your furniture, your machinery. You couldn't hardly replace the bridle. Your harness was all ribbed up. Your horses where you had fine horses before the horses got to the place where they were not very good and finally they—some old colored man had young horse and he couldn't feed him so he gave him to my father to feed.

J: Were the 30's worse than the 20's?

W: Well I think we think we felt it worst. The farmers felt it in the 20's but you know the farmer's always get it before anybody else does and then by the 30's things were at very low ebb nationally.

J: So would you say that as many as—as large a proportion of 75 percent of your students in the 30's were from farm families? Was it that high?

W: Oh yes.



J: So you're talking about youngsters who had to work hard at home were coming to school perhaps hungry and tired and a lot of them were probably walking some part of the journey there to school even though—

W: Of course the buses started in '26. They began to bus the children in. But that's not exactly as rosy as it sounds because many of these children had to walk a mile or more to get to the bus.

J: The bus pick up point.

W: Then to stand and wait in the coldest days you know the bus was inclined to break down or not be there.

J: How were these children dressed for the most part? They were all able to come to school in shoes even though that may have been difficult to some of them.

W: Oh yes.

J: Did they wear what we now call overalls?

W: No you know at that time they frowned on them coming to school in overalls. They were supposed to come in little better clothes.

J: None of the bib type overalls? These were strictly for working?

W: Mhm. That's the way it should be today.

J: A lot of I suppose corduroy worn?

W: Yes corduroys for winter.

J: Flannel shirts?

W: Flannel shirts. And they were more inclined, a lot more inclined than the children are today to have galoshes. To have proper clothes to keep them dry and warm.

J: The old three and four buckle type?

W: Mhm.

J: [Inaudible] and rubbers and they weren't ashamed to be seen wearing—

W: Well today they'll tell you oh my shoes are water proof. I'll say since when? You walk in water you'll catch your feet wet.

J: I suppose many of those children had to walk a half a mile or mile through mud.

W: Oh yes plenty of them.

J: Before they got to the bus. It was either wear galoshes or rubbers or sit in school with wet shoes on.

W: We had once in a while we had a child come in with frost bite in the school because they had stood and waited for the bus.

J: Now in your first two schools you taught in what sort of heating systems were there? Let's say the first one.

W: Well the first one was just a wood stove. The boys built the fire in it and kept it going and cleaned the ashes out. The children did a great deal of the work in the school.

J: Was that job rotated? Was it on assignment so you knew every morning who was supposed to do?

W: No I had the oldest boy I had was Wallace Jenkinson. He came every morning and made that fire and had that fire going.

J: What about water at the school was there an outside pump?

W: No was a spring.

J: A spring.

W: You had to send the children down with a bucket to get water.

J: And him and her facilities outside in a separate building?

W: Mhm.

J: Electric light?

W: No.

J: Kerosene?

W: Kerosene lamps if you had anything at night.

J: And the Marbury School that was not a one room type building was it?

W: That was three rooms at that school.

J: A pretty substantial structure was it?

W: Well the primary group, first and second grade was across the road in this one building. Then there's the two room building with third and fourth and fifth, sixth, and seventh in that building. Calvin Thompson and I were there the first few months then we both went into La Plata.

J: Only the two teachers?

W: There were three. Margery Golden taught in the primary. She has since retired. She taught at Indian Head and has since retired.

J: Well was it a step upward for you to come into La Plata as far as the facilities were concerned and general equipment? How new was the building in La Plata?

W: Oh it was just brand spanking new.

J: Brand new.

W: Brand spanking new.

J: Is this the one that replaced that damaged by the tornado?

W: Yes [inaudible phrase].

J: Alright so it would have been brand new and probably considerably more substantial than the earlier building.

W: Oh yes it was.

J: And was it built near where the other one had been built?

W: No. The other school—you know where the hospital is? The school was just blown away with the tornado was somewhere in that area.

J: I see.

W: And then this school was put up you see more to the west.

J: Very close to the courthouse. And how long did you remain there in the school that was later called Milton Sommers?

W: Well let me see. I have to do some transfiguring. I went in there in 27. January of 27 and I stayed there until 42 I reckon. Somewhere in 42. Then Mack was born and I wasn't going to teach and they came and asked me if I would take a little school over at Pisgah. People didn't want to close the school up and I got 12 children so it was. Well I got a baby sitter for Mack and went in there and stayed there that year. Then I went into Indian Head School for 43 I guess and 44. Then Wiley was born in 45 and I stayed out a couple years with him. When Mack went to nursery school I got a baby sitter and went back into La Plata and then went back to the University of Maryland and got my degree.

J: When did you finish up your residence work at Maryland?

W: I really don't know 46, 47. Something like. 47 probably.

J: That gave you a pretty good feeling?

W: Oh yes. Oh yes I was pleased to have that behind me and then I took a few other courses. Some in La Plata.

J: So you got a lot of satisfaction out of teaching? Did you really enjoy it for the most part?

W: Yes I did but it was a very different time. You were dealing with people you knew and people who knew you. If there was any question you were backed up by the parents. Then the school backed you up too so taking it all in all it was a whole lot more satisfying than I guess—my greatest satisfaction had come from some of the children themselves. They come in and tell you how much they appreciated working with you and being in your room. and what have you.

J: What was the last year that you taught?

W: 69.

J: 1969.

W: That's the last year I taught a boy in my class gave me as a going away present. He has graduated from some very prestigious art school.

J: What's his name?

W: Bill Hill.

J: Well how would you like to be starting out right now as a brand new young teacher?

W: I think it would be perfectly horrible. I have a little niece that's just about trying to do that. I think she's finding it very trying.

J: When did the big—when did the change really become noticeable? When discipline began to breakdown, when you began to notice names in the class that you had never heard of before, when you began to notice that your students had less respect for teachers and for teaching, and when you began to notice that teachers had to be on the defensive and that families really weren't backing you? When did all this start to be—

W: When our county began to have an influx of new people coming in. Prince George's County began to move down here and they brought the same problems down here that they have in Prince George. I have a very good friend who was principal up there until she retired somewhere about the same time I did.

J: We're talking about 15 years ago I would imagine? 19—

W: And she said the parents wanted the children to have everything, wanted them to do nothing. She said one parent objected one day they were moving books or something you know on a carrier and the teacher leaned over and put the children and pushed them over so they could get the cart with the books in the hall. The mother came in complaining the idea, "Why did she push my child." She said, "I said to her, "Well would you prefer to have the books run into her? And the books all fall and the child be damaged by the cart?"" She said, "Next time I'll just tell them to go right ahead run over them." It's that type of problem I think. We have so many new people and the old county, the old country folks in the county are kind of lost in the rush.

J: Yeah well it's more of a loss than the rest of that. We've got a whole generation of young people that are paying a pretty stiff price.

W: And we've got a lot of young people who'd like to learn who want to learn.

J: That's right. What do you think the county and state governments could do if anything to bring this situation back on an even keel? Does it appear to be absolutely hopeless?

W: I heard something this week that I think maybe is going to make a change. I understand that they flunked 20 give or take a few either way in La Plata High School. This teacher was talking to me and she said, "A lot of them figure when they hit the half way mark that they won't flunk a senior. So they put their books down and did absolutely nothing. They just quit." And she said, "I hope they put it in the paper," and said, "I understand Thomas Stone flunked a 100." Well if they do that of course one of the places they made a mistake this thing of never failing anybody. Even if the teacher failed them frequently the office got this and passed that child that had failing grades from the teacher. So why have a teacher if the office is going to pass a child that's doing work that's not satisfactory.

J: Well that sounds like a step in the right direction.

W: Well it should never have gotten to the place it was in.

J: Do you feel that with all the expensive physical plant and equipment we have today that the quality of teaching really isn't what it was years ago?

W: Well the schools are too big. That's one thing. The schools are entirely too big. When we were in what was the old La Plata High School we saw these children coming in in the first grade. We followed them until they graduated from high school. They were closer to us, we were closer to them. Today when you have a class for one year you can't have that same feeling that you had when you had them—when they'd come back to you for recitations and for information and for recommendations and things like that. Today picture of them in the paper doing that.

J: Do you think the parents of 20 or 30 years ago had perhaps more real respect for education?

W: Well I think maybe they had maybe not for education but for the people who were teaching. They had respect for the people who were teaching. Again I think it boils down to the fact they knew them.

J: I wonder if all the degrees conferred during the past 30 years haven't perhaps cheapened education a little bit in the minds of many parents?

W: Well I heard that a young lawyer well not so young say that I think it was Harvard that graduated so many [inaudible]. The greatest percentage of them and he said, "You know darn well they weren't [inaudible] that good students."

J: Now when you were a young teacher and you had your two years at Towson under your belt. You had to be among the best in the group of the better educated people in the county. And the parents of 90 percent of the children you taught probably had very little education and as a result they respect you for what you had attained. Now a days that is just so many of the parents themselves have more education than the teachers. There's a different relationship there entirely. I don't know how—

W: Well I think if the schools were a little smaller, they didn't have this thing that I remember La Plata when oh they had a graduating class of 35 it was a big class. This year La Plata had 280 graduates.

J: And McDonough had 242.

W: Uh-huh and Thomas Stone had equally that many.

R: 300.

J: So what're we talking about 1,000 youngsters graduating from Charles County high schools?

W: That's right.

J: The quality of education has got to suffer. You think it can ever come back up again?

W: Well I hope so.

J: All these factors.

W: I hope so. As much as it's costing it ought to come back. We've got some fine young teachers and some fine older teachers. I know Milton Sommers see is losing three. Kitty Newcomb, Ms. Barbour, Jane Linton.

J: All this year?

W: All this year. They were you know they were kind of the back bone of the school.

J: What percentage of the faculty at La Plata consolidated was male and what part female?

W: I have no idea.

J: Were there many men teachers in the county before 1950?

W: Well it was predominantly women. Predominantly women. Now understand there are more men going into elementary school which is a good thing. Which would be fine. But we get so many screwballs. I guess must have been in 66 across from me there was a man who taught art.

The poor soul was a lost soul I think. The kids threw material out the window, they jumped out of the window, his room was perfectly horrible and yet they kept him all year long.

J: They talk about tenure. What did that mean to you when you were a young teacher?

W: Well after you've been teaching two years it meant that they would have to have specific courses required.

J: And rather substantial [kind]?

W: Mhm.

J: I don't know whether today's tenure system is equal to that or not.

W: I think it is.

J: How was it during your later years of teaching about the same?

W: Well I don't know of anybody they fired. I can name a few that they should have fired. I don't know of anybody—when they want to get in. Well there was a dear little lady who taught and she had absolutely no discipline. Sometimes you know [inaudible phrase] stayed out and I went past her door one day and these colored ones were just yelling at the top of their voice. They wanted to get in line to get in the bus. I don't know why but I stepped in the door and I said, "You sit down immediately." And for some reason they all sat down immediately. By the time I was gone they were out of hand again.

J: This was in the 60's?

W: Yes.

J: What do you think has resulted in teachers having this fear of their students? In many cases I feel that they don't discipline because they're absolutely afraid of them.

W: Well we had a young man, a very nice young man from New York, and some colored boy threatened to kill him. Well I would have washed him up that office so fast it would have made his head swim. We were fortunate we had Mrs. Kane was there our vice-principal and she didn't take the time of day off of any of them. Black ones or the white ones. She certainly backed me up at every single time. One time she said, "Mrs. Wheeler what about George? The other teachers complain so about him." And I kind of laughed. I said, "Well Mrs. Kane once in a while I'm a little rough on George." Well she said, "Good. Keep it up." She said, "That's the only language George understands." And she said, "That's why he says he likes you." And I don't have any trouble from him.

J: You remember some of your more serious discipline problems during the first 10 or 15 years? Do you remember some of the particular—

W: We didn't really have any.

J: Didn't even have any that you can remember. That's amazing.

W: No I remember one of the displaced persons came in and of course his language was [out potent] I'm sure. He, I guess it was John Mitchell, came in and said, "Mrs. Wheeler someone's hosting crime but don't you say anything." Said he said something he shouldn't have said and one of the big boys slapped him. And he said, "So don't you say anything."

J: This was after World War II?

W: Uh-huh. I didn't say anything.

J: So they took care of it themselves.

W: And you know it's a lot better if they take care of it than if we got mixed up in it or if I got mixed up in it.

J: What about sports activities in the school? Do you have any feeling about the emphasis that's being put on sports programs now?

W: Well I think it's overly emphasized now but of course I know why that is. Because it's a way of reaching the niggers. They can reach them through sports more frequently than you can reach them in what else. But my experience with the niggers was that they could have done so much better than they did do. I had one class that I was really quite pleased with that they tried very hard and I thought they had a lot of potential. One of the boys that I had great hopes for.

J: This was following the full integration of the county schools?

W: Integration and the child died on the basketball court in La Plata. He had a heart condition and he had very bad feet. But he was a nice child and he had a lot of intelligence. He could've done a great deal for his people. One of the tales that I like to tell about him. The first year we were integrated we had absolutely nothing to work with. These children who didn't know their vowels, who didn't know—well they probably couldn't spell 'The' and get it straight. Their pronunciation was so bad they'd get maybe the first two letters in the word and then from then on it was just gone gibberish. But anyway this child was there in the second year and we had gotten the reader's digest still text and they were excellent. They were high interest level and low vocabulary level.

J: We're talking about middle 1960's now?



W: This must have been 67 probably. Approximately. There was a story of this: I fell so many thousand feet and lived. It was in the Reader's Digest but then it was written up with a little vocabulary and high interest level. I saw this great big old boy—of course that was another thing. They put him in desks entirely too small for him and the feet stuck out and the knees bumped and it was miserable anyway you take it. I saw him with his head down and I said, "Wayne, you aren't cheating on me are you?" And he looked up at me and he grinned he says, "I've got to find out what happened to him Mrs. Wheeler." I said, "Okay put your [inaudible] up on the desk and read it if you want to know no time like the present." So I said, "You don't have to put it down in your lap to read it." He was interested. He wanted to know. I thought that group had a lot of potential in it. But they are so cruel to each other. I guess maybe it was the next year. I had some right good girls and colored ones. I would say to them the boys were so [inaudible] and lazy. I'd say, "Well now what did you get?" I'd fix a key on the board if you had so many right you got this, and so any right you got that you know and so on. And [inaudible phrase] well I'd gotten this old girl a great big old colored girl—

[End of Tape]