

Interview with Mrs. Withell Hall

Date: June 25, 2001

Interviewed by Tracy Caradine

TC: My name is Tracy Caradine, and I will be interviewing Mrs. Withell Hall today. Today's date is Monday, June 25, 2001.

Mrs. Hall, will you start by giving us some background information about yourself?

WH: Yes. As Withell Hall, I was born and reared here in Hawkins, Texas, and I grew up at the Little Sandy Hunting and Fishing Club here in Hawkins where my parents were employed. I spent all of my earlier years, most of them, at Little Sandy Hunting and Fishing Club. This was a private club where members would come from Dallas mainly where their membership, and it is still an existing club here in Hawkins of Little Sandy Hunting and Fishing Club.

Of my two parents, and my brother and I, made up one family. So actually I have had some good experiences here in little Hawkins, Texas, with growing up as a child.

TC: Was the hunting and fishing club, was it a black club?

WH: No, the Little Sandy Hunting and Fishing Club was a private club where memberships were gained by fee, and of course it took in memberships from Dallas, mostly. Now, you've probably heard of Thornton Freeway. Well, R. L. Thornton was one of the members there, and, of course, most of those streets that you hear about were either mayors, lawyers, doctors, and all from Dallas in terms of the membership there.

TC: Your early education was received here in Hawkins?

WH: That's right. My early education was received here in Hawkins with the public school system. So all of my public schooling was done here in Hawkins.

TC: What college did you attend?

WH: I attended Samuel Huston College, which is in Austin, Texas. And now we know it as Huston-Tillotson College, because that merger happened after my graduation. That merger happened perhaps in about 1952 when the two schools went together, but actually I am a graduate of Samuel Huston College in Austin.

TC: And you became a teacher?

WH: I became a teacher. Immediately after my graduation from Samuel Huston, I was invited by our principal that was my principal when I finished Hawkins Colored High School and received this invitation to teach in the public school system here in Hawkins, which was the Hawkins Colored High School. So after my graduation in 1950, then I did receive a job right immediately after graduation.

TC: And as a first-year teacher at the colored high school, what was your beginning salary?

WH: You know what, now that is an interesting question, because I don't really remember my beginning salary, but I can imagine it was probably about a hundred and something dollars, maybe. I am not sure of that, really. I wish I could remember what my beginning salary was.

TC: Can you describe the physical condition of the Hawkins Colored High School?

WH: All right, yes. Really, in my estimation, the physical condition of the school was really great. Now, our principal, who was T.H. Burton, instilled in students that they were to take pride in the property of the school, to the fact that, I don't know, this might be a little strange, but his philosophy was, "Never let any clutter or debris be scattered about your campus, because you are going to be responsible yourself." Each student was taught to be responsible. So if any student saw litter or paper or anything on the campus, they knew that they were responsible for getting it up. It was nobody else's responsibility. If you saw it, then help take care of it.

But of course we did have excellent janitorial service there at the school, and there was a lot of pride put into cleanliness and everything being in proper order. Of course, the school was in good physical condition.

TC: Was the staff all black? Was it an all-black staff?

WH: Yes, we had an all-black staff, and of course as my remembrance now, we might have had one Caucasian teacher to come and teach at the school at one time, and I can't remember that person's name, but it was a fellow, and I guess it is because he applied and really received a position. I guess before then, probably nobody else had just really applied. No other persons applied, because during that day, you know, it was just common that only black applicants would apply for a school. But evidently he applied and got the job.

TC: How long did he stay?

WH: To my remembrance, he stayed for as long as I can remember, for about three or four or five years, because he seemingly, it didn't matter with him, in terms of being the only person of a Caucasian race to be in the school, so he just simply stayed with us. He seemed to enjoy being there.

TC: What was the student population at the colored high school.

WH: Okay. The population was small because this was a school that ran from first grade through the twelfth grade. So I would say that the population of the school at that time could have been about 300 or so at that time.

TC: To the parents in the community, the black parents, was education a top priority?

WH: Yes. This is an area where it was unusual in terms of parents. Now, parents were so cooperative with teachers. Now I can remember when I first started teaching, as a teacher it was our responsibility that you had to visit every child's home in your class. And of course, you had to write up and put that in the student's file, of the conditions, because the principal was dedicated in that he believed that teachers should know the students and that the parents should also be involved in the education of the child. So then you would visit with that child's parents, and, of course, they were so supportive, because anything that had to do with their benefit, in terms of their education, then the parents would really back teachers, and that was the wonderful thing it was in that day about teaching.

And of course, I can recall that at one point, I had one young man in my class, and I taught the third class, and the parent at the end of the school term perhaps thought that the student had not done as well as he could have done. So that was an unusual experience to have a parent come and

say, “Well, my child just did not do as well, and I know that he is not to the point where he should move on to the next grade,” and asked that I hold that student in the class for another year. And that was very unusual, because you don’t find parents very often — because when you want to do it on your own and talk with the parent, the parent won’t see that point.

But this was a mother who was concerned about her son, and she wanted him to have the best education that he could, and she didn’t think he moved along well enough for that year and that he should spend another year in third grade.

TC: At the colored high school, how did you all receive your textbooks. Were they hand-me-down books from the white school?

WH: Now, we received books that were in good condition. To my remembrance, now I don’t really recall where they were actually hand-me-downs. Now if they were hand-me-downs, they came to us in good condition. Now I don’t remember or recall whether they were actually perfectly new and never had been used, but they were in good condition, and I don’t know how we, because I often heard that those books were so hand-me-downs or so, but we did receive books that were in good condition.

TC: Describe the curriculum at the colored high school?

WH: The curriculum in that day and that time could be really thought of as good. And for this reason — we had most of the courses were courses that were actually needed for education. Included in the curriculum, we had those courses that would help students that were not, you know, top-level students, to go into other avenues of endeavor. Like we had shop for young men, agricultural courses, and all of those that would help direct a student. Because if the student was not qualified per se as college-level student to move on to college, but of course the curriculum there was encouraging in terms of those students who really wanted to attend college, because it was really planned that the students, most of them that could, would, you know, go on to college, really.

But they did have other courses that would help those that did not go to go into other mechanical kinds of work, should they, you know, choose to do so. But we were really in terms of encouraging students to continue into college.

TC: Were you aware of any differences in the curriculum at the colored high school as opposed to the curriculum at the white school?

WH: No, I was not aware of it, and it was simply because that I didn’t seek to find out what the curriculum was like at the other school.

But when we moved into integration, as far as I could tell, they too had some shop and some other things that students that did not plan to go into college would actually have, because they had all the other courses that, to my knowledge, that we had at the colored high school.

TC: Were there any type of standardized tests given at the colored high school?

WH: All right, that is a good question now. Yes, we did have, and I don’t recall which standardized test that we used, but we did use some of the standardized testing materials.

Now, I was in elementary. The testing really came above the elementary grades, and of course, I don't know, because maybe I just didn't seek to find out what kind of testing was done. But there was some testing, though, I can remember. I can't recall which standardized tests were used at that time.

TC: Today teachers across the grades and throughout school districts interact with each other. Did you have, on any occasion, were you given the opportunity to interact with teachers from the white high school to maybe solve problems that you had in common?

WH: There was very little interaction. Now, we had county-wide interaction, but the interaction was mostly with the colored teachers, you see, but it didn't cross the lines in terms of, yes.

Of course, at that time, though, I was familiar with many of the teachers, because coming from a small place like Hawkins, you would get a chance to talk with them, or so, but it was more on a casual basis than shop talk with the teachers.

TC: What was the relationship between the black church and the black school? What type of relationship existed there?

WH: Okay. There was a good relationship there in that the churches were made up with the parents of those students that you taught in school. So then, of course, naturally the parents were still part of a concern, and in those churches, then, they would like the same kind of pattern going on in terms of real learning, in terms of Christian learning, like they would in the schools. And we had a good relationship of actually being able to, you know, if a student didn't show as much concern, the parent would get in, and there was, you know, that they would cooperate with you in really helping that child.

TC: So the church served as a support?

WH: As a support for the school, really, yes.

TC: Now, did you welcome the idea of integration? How did you feel about it?

WH: Well, really, I felt real good about it. Now I don't know whether it was because of where I lived and grew up. I'll have to go back to that again.

I grew up at Little Sandy Hunting and Fishing Club. Now really, those children from Dallas that came down with the parents of Little Sandy Hunting and Fishing Club, then that was my exposure at that time. Even though, you know, it's difficult for a child— well, I don't think it is really difficult, because it wasn't that difficult for me, but the first children that I knew about, to play with, or so, were Caucasian children. So I would naturally notice the difference. Here where I grew up, and because we lived there on the place. And of course, being only Caucasian children that I had to play with during my earlier years, but then yet I would play with them, and then when I would move out into the community of the school and all of that, then I would be back into the segregation.

So you see, that just carried the cross back from one point to another in terms of integration, so it didn't bother me that much, because I guess I was flexible enough to fit in with the groups of wherever I was placed.

TC: How did you first hear about integration? How were you first informed that integration was going to take place?

WH: All right, into my remembrance of that, we knew that when they started with moving from Southside High School. See, because I started with this Hawkins Colored High School. Then we went to the Fouke-Hawkins because of the merger of the two schools, Fouke and Hawkins. Then, of course, we moved to the other side of the place where our original school was to what we had known as Southside High School.

Well, it didn't take much to figure out that this is what they are doing, that they are getting ready for integration you know, because of the Southside. So we moved into a building that is a part of the original campus of the Hawkins High School, and we were placed there as Southside High School, all right. But we knew that that was the move that they were getting ready for, that they were going to probably later on, and they did, build this whole building and use that building as a part of the complex for the whole Hawkins High School.

TC: You mentioned that there was a merger with Hawkins and Fouke. What brought that merger on?

WH: All right, now I can suspect that the merger was brought on because the district grew with busing and also that there was probably no more funding that they were going to do for these Rosenwall [phonetic] schools. Because Fouke was a Rosenwall school that was built, and that was a type of funding agency that would help districts have schools in their district because there was not enough busing going on, and so after they had busing and the funding was low, then it was just natural that those students would have to be transferred someplace else.

TC: Were there any type of formal meetings to prepare the community for integration?

WH: Yes, and that was done a lot, in part, through the parent-teacher association groups, because in both of the schools, that was a strong supporting body for the Hawkins Colored High School, for the Fouke-Hawkins School, and then as we moved into integration, the parent-teacher group has always been strong here in Hawkins.

TC: What were some of the main discussions that took place at those meetings?

WH: Most of the meetings was one of concern that community people should think of the main interest in terms of students and that they should work together to make it a strong kind of transition for students and all, and then the main discussion was that of getting along with each other and also supporting each other in the endeavor to make it a smooth transition.

TC: How were receptive were the blacks and the whites to this message?

WH: They were really truly receptive of it, because they really pulled in and worked together, you know, for the most part. And so the transition was actually, you know, real smooth, and I can see it from the point of the elementary school, because at this time, both elementary schools were on different campuses and not in the place where they are now. And of course, the principal, who was Mr. T. L. Green, I can note that he was a wonderful person to work with in terms of the elementary school in helping to make that transition real well for teachers. And I do recall him fondly that he was really a real, real, strong force in helping to bridge that gap between teachers from the Hawkins black school and elementary and then the white elementary school.

TC: After integration took place, were the black teachers given the option to move to the now-integrated school?

WH: Yes. Now, they were given that option, and you could really just move in, and they tried to do, you know, a wonderful thing in trying to like it. They had two third-grade teachers.

Now the only thing that might have gone, is, actually now, they were going to let the teachers that were in their school, you know, have that spot, but they did a good job in terms of trying to, you know, blend the persons in, and by like that.

For instance, as I went to the elementary school. Now I did have a position. It wasn't as third-grade teacher. But the third-grade teachers there took the main lead, but they did try to work us in. I think at one point I might have taught some language arts. But I would go into the class room for, you know, to teach the language arts, but I was not as third-grade teacher. But that was one of those things that they did.

And of course, I didn't stay that long to really see what they did the next year. That was for the first year. And I am sure they did that to try to see how they had better work this. But they did, you know, move us right in, in terms of the option to going in.

I was only there for one year of that. Now what happened after, I don't know how they, you know, blended in. But that was a beginning, and naturally they had to begin someplace, so that was the way they did it.

TC: So where did you go the second year?

WB: The second year I was invited by the president then of Jarvis Christian College, which was Dr. J. O. Perpener so again my teaching career brought me to a new place by invitation. So both times I was invited to teach at our high school that I graduated from, and then, of course, to teach at the college level by Dr. J. O. Perpener.

So I decided to make the move. And, of course, my husband at that time was also an administrator there at Jarvis. So I was displaced. **[Laughter]**

TC: Going back to the year that you taught at the integrated high school, did you notice any problems that other black teachers were having with the transition? I know that you said the transition was smooth to you.

WB: Yes.

TC: It worked for you.

WB: Yes.

TC: Were there any of the other black teachers having problems?

WB: To my knowledge of this elementary group, I don't know of others really having problems. Now, they could have. Because, see, there was just a small number of us for the elementary school that moved over to the elementary. Because the elementary was on a separate campus from the other middle school and high school, then I don't know of any other problems, real problems, that the teachers had in that movement or transition.

TC: Were you there long enough to go through a teacher evaluation at the integrated school?

WB: If evaluation was done, then it was done in a manner that was not a formal kind of setting or so for evaluation. I am sure I must have been evaluated in some way by some persons.

Now, because I grew up here, and, of course, the principal and everybody knew me real well, you know, I knew of no formal evaluation.

TC: In general, how were you treated by your fellow white teachers?

WB: In general, they were friendly, very friendly. And again, that might have been because most of them knew me already in terms of growing up here and all. And they were friendly, and we got along well, and we associated with each other in all of the activities that we did. So really, it was just very, very smooth.

TC: Did you socialize with them outside of work?

WB: No, there were not many opportunities to socialize out of work. They were friendly in that sometimes they would have different functions maybe at home or so, and, you know, I was invited, and other teachers were invited at that point. But it was on more of an individual basis, you know, like if maybe somebody had a birthday and they might invite you personally and that kind of thing.

TC: After integration, how were students placed in the different classrooms. Were the classes equally mixed as far as racially? Were there more black students in the black teachers' class, or were there more white students in the white teachers' class? How did they decide how many? Or did they try to make it even, the same number of blacks and the same number of whites in both white teachers' and black teachers' classrooms?

WH: Now I can only speak for the elementary school. Because they maintained the grades, you know, like a third-grade teacher or a first-grade teacher, well, then they were equally distributed, because if students were in the first grade, then all of the first-grade students were placed in that grade, in that one class.

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Hall: I can't speak for middle school and high school. I don't know if they were evenly distributed. In looking at the yearbooks, or so, though, too, for most of the school system, seemingly they were almost equally distributed. Because in looking through the Hawk, the annual that I have; that was the first year of integration, and this was the yearbook of the year that I was in the system of the elementary school. And of course, looking at this through the high school, though, and the different grades, though, then they must have been sort of evenly distributed. Because you have the pictures of all the students, and you can see that there were—and all of those students that I remember names of—because when you are in such a small system as this, you know all of the students from first grade through twelfth grade, you know who the students are. And if you look in the annual, you can see that those pictures, you know, black students and Caucasian students, were all mixed in.

TC: How did the white teachers approach the black students because they were not used to having black students in their classrooms. The first year of integration, what type of relationship existed there between the white teachers and the black students?

WH: Okay, in elementary school the teachers had no problems. I believe it was because of the good carryover that had been instilled in students, you know, from the colored school going into, that they had no problems with them.

Now, I don't know how it is today, because I hear different stories, you know, of what happened. But in those earlier years, I know there were very few problems because they approached them just as, you know, like any other student. And again too, I can tell from like our elementary school principal, Mr. T.L. Green, and of course, he was a strict disciplinarian. He was really a fair person.

TC: Do you think they gave the same amount of attention to the black students as they did white students, the white teachers?

WH: Yes, in the elementary school, again speaking, yes. There was attention given to them.

TC: After integration, were black students recognized for high academic achievement, even in the elementary?

WH: Again, one year is a short time to really make a fair assessment of that. But as far as I know, those students that were good students—I'll have to especially say that Hawkins had an unusual kind of thing about education, and that was even, you know, when it was separate, that we had strong instructors that really gave us good basic training. And when I say "us", because, see, I came from the system of that too, so I am speaking in terms of being a student and also a teacher.

TC: As a black teacher in an integrated school, the elementary part that you taught in, did you find it difficult to gain the respect of the white students?

WH: No, again, Mr. Green insisted—I guess they were really together on that, and I can't speak for the other campuses, but I just recently talked to a teacher who was in the middle school. Of course, they had a principal, I can understand from that person that I spoke with, was just equally as good about really being sure that the respect was given.

TC: Do you feel that integration help or did it harm the quality of education for black students?

WH: I would say that it would depend on the student, and actually if that student is a serious student, I don't believe the quality of the education was really hindered. That is from the standpoint of a short period, though, that I was there. I can't, you know.

TC: What do you think black teachers lost as a result of integration, or did they lose anything?

WH: Well, if they really lost anything, I really can't say what it might have been. It could have been that they lost something. I don't see that, though, myself.

TC: What did they gain?

WH: To me they gained experience of dealing with students from different racial points of view, and to me that would be a strong point, because, you know, after you would have a chance to actually deal with students from a different background level, there should be some gain in that.

TC: After integration, how did the community change, or was there a change in the community. Did the community draw closer together, the blacks and the whites, or did it affect the community at all?

WH: I can think of many instances where it drew the community together in a sense. To give a few examples, they are conducting vacation bible schools. At this time, the church in town was the First Baptist Church, but they have invited all of the students, you know, to come into that vacation bible school.

Now there was, at one point that I know about, that you didn't dare cross the line and go over to First Baptist. **[Laughter]** But now all of the students are going over to First Baptist. Now, that is a strong point.

In terms of, you know, just like it was said, it used to be that the churches carried the most segregated crowds around, and all. Well that has changed in Hawkins, that is no longer, because we know that we have women's groups meeting, and of course they are going into the different churches, often in our black churches we have white groups coming in to do things or so. That has been one point where it has drawn the community together.

We do have now a ministerial alliance where all of the pastors from all of the churches meet together to talk about issues and things like that. So in a sense, it has done some good.

TC: Did the black parents continue to be active in the PTA after integration?

WH: I'm not sure. I know at the beginning, because I even stayed as part of the Parent-Teachers Association after I even went to teach at Jarvis for a while and held an office in the Parent-Teachers, so I can say that for the first few years or so, I am not sure how it is doing now.

TC: But those first few years, they continued to be active?

WH: Yes, active.

TC: What do you consider the greatest accomplishment of integration, overall, for this area?

WH: For this area, the greatest accomplishment that I can see for integration is that persons learned that people are really people wherever you find them and that really, many of the myths and the things that we had about the different races is not true. Of course, you know, just because it is different, none is inferior or superior.

TC: Ms. Hall, I thank you. And I've enjoyed it.

WH: Okay. I've enjoyed doing it a little more so than I thought. **[Laughter]**

TC: As you know, I am getting that from most people, "Oh, it was painless." And it really is. I mean, once people start talking, and of course, like I said "This is all new to me, so I'm really interested in what you are saying." And again with you, as I have found with all my interviewees,

Hawkins was a unique area. They had no problems. No violence, no animosity between the races, nothing. It was a smooth transition.

WH: I think it was because the persons were willing to work with each other.

TC: Like I said, since I am from Mississippi, I expected more hostility and I'm just not getting it. But I have been told now, twenty miles down the road in Gilmer and different other little towns that it was a totally different story. Interesting.

[End of interview]