

Interview with Dr. S. L. Curry

Date: June 26, 2001

Interviewed by Dr. Florine White

FW: Good morning. I'm Dr. Florine Jones White from Jarvis Christian College. I am here with the Reverend Dr. S. L. Curry, pastor of the New Zion Baptist Church, Winona, Texas. The date is June 26, 2001.

Good morning, Dr. Curry. It's good to see you again.

SLC: Good morning, Dr. White. Good to see you.

FW: Dr. Curry, before we begin our conversation about school desegregation or school integration, please tell us a little bit about yourself, and then a little about the history of this wonderful church here.

SLC: My name is Sylvester Lawrence Curry, Jr. Most people only know me by S.L., but I am the son of the late Sylvester Curry, Sr., and of Dorothy Mae Hill Curry of Big Sandy, Texas. I was born in Gladewater, Texas, grew up in Big Sandy, Texas. In fact, we grew up about seven miles north of Big Sandy in a community called Elem Springs. That is where I grew up, I went to church there, and there used to be a school there, and the year before I started first grade, the school moved to Big Sandy.

I started in the first grade at Big Sandy Excelsior Elementary School there in Big Sandy. I completed the eighth grade there and then went to Fouke-Hawkins High School, where I continued my high school education. Went there two years, and then the last two years of my high school experience, I integrated and went back to Big Sandy High School in Big Sandy.

Graduated from Big Sandy High and enrolled in Jarvis Christian College in September 1967. Graduated from there in July of '71. Worked for the federal government for some twelve and a half years. I married to the former Mary Ann Price, and we have three children: Debbie, who is 30, Shannon is 27, and Rodney is 24. Debbie and Rodney both attended and graduated from Jarvis Christian College, as well my wife. Our other son attended East Texas State [University] in Commerce.

After graduation from college, I worked for the federal government for twelve years, and during this time I was called in for the ministry in 1981. I accepted my calling, and I accepted the pastorage of this church in July 1982. This coming July I will have been pastor of the New Zion Baptist Church for 19 years.

This church has grown tremendously since we've been here. We came here, we had about 75 active members. We had about, maybe, 150 or 175 on the roll. Presently there are over 500 members, and we built two facilities. We built one in '85 and paid for it. We built the present facility that we're worshipping in now in 1999. The church has several numerous ministries, and the Lord is truly blessing us here.

This church is rich in history. The New Zion Baptist Church was founded in 1870, and it started under a brush arbor about a quarter of a mile north of where the church is, at the cemetery, the Kay Cemetery, and they made a brush arbor, and that is where they had their first service. That was in 1870.

There were four families that started this church: the Hart family, the Jones family, Moore family, and the Miller family. This church started, as I said, under a brush arbor, and then it finally was able to erect a building, I believe, in 1880, 1885, somewhere in there. They bought this property where we are today, and the Lord has certainly blessed this church. In fact, the first school for blacks in Winona was held at the New Zion Baptist Church, and so this church has a lot of colorful history, and I am just thankful to be pastor this church.

FW: Thank you, Dr. Curry. What a wonderful story. I hope it is written down somewhere?

SLC: Yes, it is.

FW: Now, about the topic under discussion, integration, desegregation. I want you to look back to the pre-integration period from 1955 until 1965 and speak to us from your perspective as a young student during that period.

SLC: From 1955 to 1965, these were during my early school years. In fact, I was in elementary school and then junior high. At that time, we only called it elementary. I can remember attending an all-black school, Excelsior Elementary School in Big Sandy. One of the things that we realized is that there was a difference in the schools, the white school versus the black school.

We were cognizant of this because there was a difference in facilities. The facilities that we went to school in, the facilities that the whites went to school in. Another noticeable thing was the playground equipment. At the white school, there were swings and slides, and all these type of things, and we didn't have anything for a while until the PTA finally raised enough money to get us a merry-go-round, and that is all we had to play on. That was this big deal that went round and round and round, and you'd get on it and you'd get sick to your stomach just riding, but that is all we had to play on.

Then finally we got a basketball goals, and it was only a dirt court, and then finally the asphalt. Now, you can imagine playing basketball on an asphalt court. But, you know, that was better than bouncing the ball in the dirt and the grass on the asphalt, even though it was pretty dangerous to play on. So there were some differences that we could notice.

FW: What, as a child, what did you think accounted for these differences? Why were things different?

SLC: I think hearing, you know, your parents talk about, you know, how there was a difference in color. People of color were not treated as well. I heard stories about how blacks had been treated and mistreated, how they had been lynched and a lot of other things, beaten and just really treated in an inhumane way.

And also we could hear reports, you know, on radio and television because we were just getting television in that era, in the time 1955, '56. We saw some of the struggles that were going on in other parts of the country. We were not experiencing what they were experiencing then in terms of the marches and all this, but we still, you know, were very conscious of the problems that blacks were having.

FW: How did the students get to the Excelsior School?

SLC: We got to school on a bus. We had to get up pretty early because we had to come all the way out of Elem Springs community on the bus, and then the bus driver also had to go and pick up students up at the county line, which is the county line between Upshur County and Wood County, and he would pick up those students, and then he would have to go down and pick up students at the Red Rock area. They are kind of west of Gladewater. So it was a pretty long trip, and so we had to leave home pretty early.

One of the things that I remember vividly is the fact that we had probably the worst buses that you could have. We didn't have a new bus. In fact, we were once told that you could not heat a school bus. Our buses never had heat on them, and they were always cold and a lot of times they would break down; you know, someone would have to come pick you up, break down on the road, and sometimes you would have to push the bus off to get it started. So that was a big difference. But that is how we got to school. We were bused there.

FW: What, if any, was your contact with white students of the same age group? Did you have any contact with white students of your age?

SLC: The only white students that I had contact with during that period were a couple of whites that came out to our church when we had a 19th of June picnic. They loved the barbecue. And their family would come out, and they would sit at the picnic with us all day. They had a little boy and little girl, and we played together. There was another young man whose mother did sewing, and sometimes we would go to that house with my mother and we would come in contact with him; but normally, we didn't come in contact with white students.

FW: During what period of time did you begin to hear the word "integration," and what did you think it meant?

SLC: Well, I guess I started being conscious of that word probably in the early sixties from the late fifties. It was just probably talk at that time. We really didn't visualize exactly how it would be, because when we actually integrated we were shocked; in fact, we didn't really like it because, you know, we were comfortable. We went out of our comfort zone. We wanted to stay at the black school, but they told us that we had to start going to the white school...

FW: Why did they tell you had to go?

SLC: Because of integration. They said integration, you know, has come into this area now and the federal government has mandated that you got to go to school together. We didn't want to at that time. This was 1965. But we had to.

In fact, I can remember vividly at Fouke-Hawkins High, that is where we went to high school, where the principal then, Mr. T.H. Burton, called us in the office, the students from Big Sandy, and we couldn't imagine why he wanted us all in the office. This was around the end of the school year, around April or the first of May. We went into his office, and I never will forget the look on his face and the look on our faces when he said, "Well, I have some news that I got to chat with you all. I hate to lose you all, but in the fall, you all have to go back to Big Sandy." I mean, we were just speechless. We said, "What?" And that is when he explained integration and all of this and the federal mandate that we integrate, and starting Big Sandy was one of the areas that they were going to be starting in.

Those other areas around would not integrate all at the same time, but Big Sandy started, and since that is our high school, that is where we were from, we had to go back. But we were

crushed. I mean, we cried. And we had to deal with that all summer, wondering “What is it going to be like being at this white school?”

FW: What was your greatest fear? Personally, what did you fear most?

SLC: Probably just the unknown, I guess. I didn’t know how it was going to be. We were not afraid to be with the white people. We were not afraid that they were going to do something to us physically, that kind of thing, even though some of our parents were afraid of that, because they figured that they might try to go up there and take advantage of us because there were just a few of you, and you know there was a great number of them. But we were not really afraid of that. We just hated to leave our friends that we had been going to high school with all those years. But I guess this not knowing exactly how it was going to be.

FW: What was your thought of making the best of the situation? What was your greatest hope?

SLC: We knew that we could do well wherever we were. I guess our greatest hopes were that we would have a smooth transition into this and that we would be able to get along and that we would be able to continue learning, that the atmosphere would be of such that that would happen. I didn’t think of it at that time as saying, “Oh, now, I’ll have a great opportunity to really fulfill my dreams,” this kind of thing. I really never thought about it that way, you know.

FW: What was your idea of the white students and the intelligence aspect as opposed to black students. Had you been led to believe that white students were more intelligent than black students?

SLC: I don’t think I had been led to believe that, but let me give you a scenario: whenever sometimes the students would be cutting up in class and the teachers would get on us, and I remember the teachers telling us, “That is why white people don’t want to be around y’all. Because you don’t know how to act.” **[Laughter]**

They didn’t really believe that. But they used that to get us back in line, because we said, “Well, if we want to be with white people one day, we’re going to have to learn how to act.” **[Laughter]**

The first day that we went to Big Sandy High, I never will forget, at lunch time we were all in study hall. And we had always been taught that when the bell rings for lunch, put your books up, neatly put them under your desk, and march out and walk to the lunchroom.

We were just, you know, wanting to make sure we did everything just right because now we're with white people, and we know they how to act. **[Laughter]** And when the bell rang, you never heard such commotion, noise, books falling, desks knocking over. There were young men, literally, because we were upstairs, sliding down the stair banister all the way to lunch, just like “Vroom!” And the only people left in the library were three black young men and the librarian.

And I sat there, and I thought to myself, because, you know, we were putting our books away, and I sat there and I thought to myself, “We don’t know how to act.” **[Laughter]** I am like Paul Harvey: now we know the rest of the story.

That cleared up all that, you know, we were no different. You know, children are children.

FW: Now tell me about the black teachers. From your perspective, what kind of arrangements were made to ensure that the black teachers were also part of this integration movement?

SLC: I think in a lot of areas the black teachers really, as lack of words, got the shovel and the stick. A lot of them lost their jobs; specifically, here in Winona. A lot of them, and some teachers had to fight for their positions and went all the way to Washington and got reinstated, but most of them lost their positions. And Big Sandy was not quite as bad because integration took place kind of slowly.

We integrated the high school, and for several years, the elementary school was not integrated. So from that perspective, the black teachers were basically able, because there were no high school black teachers in Big Sandy. And I don't know what would have happened.

I think at Hawkins they had experienced some problems like that because basically your principals they gave them some kind of administrative title. And they lost their principalships in basically all the schools. And some of the teachers were displaced. Especially some of the older ones who had been there for some time. And so from a standpoint of that, the black teachers got a bad deal in integration, I think.

FW: Was there any kind of an apology or rationale involved in displacing these professionals, to your knowledge?

SLC: Not to my knowledge. I think that once it was called to their attention by someone filing a grievance or this kind of thing, I think they became conscious of it. I think they were always conscious of it, but at least they started trying to do something about it and not try to just displace all the black teachers, because we had a lot of great black teachers.

And I am thankful to God that I had, you know, as many years as I had with black teachers. The high school teachers that I had, you know, the black teachers, have made an indelible, positive impact on my life because when we went to Big Sandy, we didn't have any black teachers. That was the end of our contact with black teachers when we went to Big Sandy High because they were all white.

FW: Let's talk about Big Sandy High. Were the black students and the white students, to your knowledge, given any guidelines concerning the social parameters involved in this integration effort? I am talking about, did blacks and whites socialize? Did they, heaven forbid, date, or anything like that?

SLC: Well, I don't know whether or not they were given any information, the white students, but we were certainly not given any information, not from the school or what not, as to what we could do, what we couldn't do. You know, you can't talk to white girls, you can't do this.

Now, one of the things they did prior to, and I think they may have known this was coming, they had stopped having proms, I think a year or so before we integrated. So there were no proms to go to, and we had no dances or anything like that.

We had some functions where we got together, but it was nothing like a dance, not socials like they have now in school, and no proms. But that kind of knocked out that whether you would have a black and a white going together to the prom together like they do now. But we were not set down and told, "You know, you can't do this and you can't do that."

But it is ironic how in socializing we socialized well together. We mixed well together in the class and what not. But it was amazing how at lunchtime, during the lunch periods, you know, we

all seemed to migrate; you know, the blacks would be in one area and the whites in another area. Nobody told us to do that, but that is just the way it is, you know.

But we played some games together, you know, at lunchtime, and that kind of thing, but most of the time we were basically together, and we participated in sports together and on football, and we were totally integrated in the locker rooms and the showers and this, that, and the other.

One incident that sticks out in my mind, and I never will forget it. This was integration in the schools, but this was not integration everywhere. This was not integration in the restaurants and the cafes and these kind of things. I never will forget one evening after football practice, Coach Brand was taking several of the boys home that lived out in the area where we lived. It was me and my cousin and a couple of white boys. And we decided it was hot, we were thirsty and we were hungry, and we decided to go to Bennett's cafe, right there in Big Sandy. He says, "Let's go in and get some hamburgers and something to eat. I'll pay for it." We said, "okay."

Now, we knew we had never gone in the front of Bennett's cafe before, but this was integration, so all this had changed. So we went in, we sat down. He came over, took our order, and went in the back, turned in the order. And we were sitting, there, and I was saying, "Oh, this integration is all right." And we heard somebody say, "There is a place in the back for you boys." Now, there were about four boys, four or five boys sitting there, but there was only two black boys. We immediately knew who he was talking about.

So we turned around and we looked, and we walked back to where he was pointing, there was a place in back, but it was in the back, it was in the kitchen area, where blacks had always been. I never will forget, we said, "No thank you." And we walked out, left our orders, and sat on the outside.

Now, the only thing that bothered me about the whole incident, I guess, to this day, is the fact that the coach who carried us in there, after he found out that we were not all able to eat together, they stayed in there. They ate their hamburgers and then they came out. We waited outside.

When we got into the car, he apologized to us and said, "Well, I'm sorry, I didn't know it was like this. We won't ever come here again." And he didn't ever carry us there again.

But this is the main point, after three months, this was in September when that happened, and at the end of the football season in November, the proprietor, he gave a banquet for all the football boys because we had won five games. The year before that, they hadn't won any, maybe one. And he wanted to show his appreciation of the team because they had won five games out of ten.

And he came to the school. I never will forget, "We are going to have a banquet for you football boys." He made a point to tell us, "And we are all going to eat together." And that broke down segregation in his cafe.

FW: What a wonderful story. Now, speaking of sports, one of the complaints I've heard over the years has to do with the related activity, and I have heard that young black girls have a hard time getting to be cheerleaders, even today, because of whatever the requirements are. Can you address black cheerleaders?

SLC: Right. There has always been a problem with that, and we didn't address that when we integrated because none of the black girls went out for the cheerleading team, or the drum majors and this kind of thing, when we were there in Big Sandy. Later on, some did, and some did make

it. But at that time, we had blacks on the football team, basketball team, we ran track, we did all of that, but we never had any of the girls were the cheerleaders the black girls.

But even now that is a problem. We had a problem like that here in Winona. In fact, we had to call TEA [Texas Education Agency] in on the situation, where they were trying to get rid of two black young ladies who were on the cheerleading team here in Winona.

FW: Still going on?

SLC: Oh, yes. This was back in the eighties, and we had to get together as a community, you know, to get behind that. Even now they still have a problem, because I think this year at Winona, they maybe had one black cheerleader, and in junior high they didn't have any, so that is still a problem. I think that is an area that certainly there is still some segregation.

FW: Personal question, if you don't mind. During your high school years, did you form any friendships across racial lines? Can you remember any great friends?

SLC: Yes, and it was amazing how we did that. To this day, I have some very good friends, that I count as my friends, that we met while going to Big Sandy High.

One of the persons who stands out in my mind is Patsy Maughey. Boy, she was "Smiley" when we went to school. She was very active here in this area in leading the concerned citizens here, and when I moved here, I joined right in with her because we were friends from high school. I think about the Mooneys, Kathy and David Mooney, and Penny Hunnicut, and Elmore Parson. In fact, I performed their marriage about a year or so ago.

We had a good relationship. All of the people in our class, we never had any problems to the point where, you know, we didn't like them or they didn't like us. We had very good relationships. And like I said, I can call several of them my friends even today.

FW: That is wonderful. Looking back now, did integration help or hinder you as a student?

SLC: I think there were positives and negatives.

FW: Share some of them?

SLC: I think that it helped us in one regard because we probably got exposed to more things in terms of availability of things. At the high school, we were exposed to things that we probably didn't have at the black high school. We were able to take bookkeeping and shorthand, the girls typing, and all that, even though we did have typing at Hawkins.

I think from that standpoint, because there were more things available to us. I think we lost something in terms of probably some of the values we had as people of color. I think there were certain kinds of dignity that we had, especially at various ceremonies, like graduations, that was a real occasion where you were really on your best behavior and everything. Well, we kind of lost some of that when we went to the white school. I think overall, you know, I think we gained some things and we lost some in integration.

FW: Maybe this is redundant, but I will ask it anyway. Was integration a good idea?

SLC: Maybe it was good if that was the only way we were going to acquire equality in terms of having the better facilities and all this. The schools were separate, you know, but not equal. Because we didn't have the equipment, we didn't have the books. We had books that were torn up, you know. At the beginning of school, we got books that were torn up, pages out of them. Sometimes, you know, backs off of the book. So the facilities, we didn't have the facilities. So I think from that standpoint it was probably good.

But I think if we had been given, you know, the resources that they had been given, and our teachers would have had those resources to work with, I don't think it would have been a bad thing, you know, not to have integration. I am not against integration, but I think that is why it was probably good, because that is the only way you were going to get to be equal.

FW: Still looking back now, do you feel any concerns, or do you hear any concerns about the fact that some of the great named black schools went away during integration? Carver High School, Dunbar High School. Do you still hear some concerns about that?

SLC: Oh Yes, I think that, you know, it was sad that they had, you know, to go out of existence. And most of the time, you know, even if there was a nice black high school, they would soon build a new one, like they didn't want to go to—. Like Southside, Fouke-Hawkins had a nice high school. Because one of the things different with Hawkins is that they had money, oil money, and there were black schools, they had new buses when we had never seen a new bus. Hawkins, they sent a new bus down there and picked us up, and they had money so they were different. That was not the norm. **[Laughter]**

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

FW: ... still miss some of the old days.

SLC: Yes, we missed the Fouke-Hawkins and Winona Industrial High.

FW: Colored High?

SLC: Yes.

FW: Do you think that schools will be segregated again in your lifetime?

SLC: I don't think so.

FW: You don't think so?

SLC: No, I don't think so.

FW: Pre-segregation, were there any organized meetings that you were aware of where people were attempting to prepare both communities for this movement?

SLC: I don't know of any. I know that there were some demonstrations, that I was aware of, where they had sit-ins.

FW: In this area?

SLC: In this area. [unclear] was one fine example. I knowed [sic] people who had the sit-ins, and I don't think they integrated Petty's [Café, Hawkins] until probably '65 or '66, so you know, but I know young men that had go in there and not be served and stuff.

But as far as coming together in community meetings, trying to prepare people for this, you know, we didn't do it. In Big Sandy, when we integrated, you didn't have anybody come together. Maybe like this community, black communities and white communities, come together at the school or something, and somebody had talked to us, but that didn't happen. But maybe at Big Sandy it didn't need to happen because, like I said, things went probably as smooth or smoother than a lot of places.

FW: Presently, from your perspective, the races appear to be getting along today in the schools?

SLC: I don't know, because I believe some of the children in school are having more problems now than perhaps we had. And maybe it is because you are seeing more of the interracial dating and courtship and that kind of thing, and even marriage and all this.

But like I said, when I was in school, the two years I was in high school, basically I did not see a black and white going together. In fact, we talked and all that, but shortly after that, you know, about the next year or so and during my younger brother's time, you know, they did date the white girls, black boys and white girls, and it is even like that today. And probably it is more of the black boy and the white girl, more so than the white boy and the black girl.

FW: Okay, one last question. At the risk of sounding redundant: who gained more from integration, blacks or whites as a group?

SLC: That is a very good question. Who gained the most? I really don't know. I think we both gained something, but they may have gained a little more than we did. I think it may tip a little bit more to them. Because, like I say, we lost a lot of things. You know, starting with the teachers, you know, all these type things. Even during integration, even though we were integrated, there was still segregation, well—racism—as there is today. And we have been integrated for years, but there is still racism.

FW: Is this notion of community schools really a guise to resegregate schools?

SLC: The community schools?

FW: Yes, community schools, children be allowed to attend schools in their community.

SLC: Yes, I think so, and I think that is why a lot of people fought busing. We've always been bused. I used to get into some heated debates in the office where I work when different ones were talking about they didn't believe in busing—why should my child have to get up at this time of the morning and go there when there is a school right here. I said, "Well, I don't have any problem with that, because I had to get up at 5:30 or 6:00 o'clock to be ready to catch the bus and for an hour or so drive." So I've always been busing.

When we were being bused, busing was all right. So why does it so bad now, you know. Because if we hadn't been bused, we wouldn't have been able to go any higher than eighth grade. So I don't have a problem with busing.

Most people have a problem with things that affect them. You know, as long as it is not affecting them, they don't have a problem with it. But once it starts affecting them, then they have a problem.

FW: Dr. Curry, you've got an idea of what we are trying to do here, is there anything you want to add to our discussion at this juncture?

SLC: I would like to say that I think this is a good project, and I am glad that we are getting a cross-section of interviews. There probably could have been probably more interviews with more students who actually went through it, you know. I certainly think it would have been good if you have had, I know you have some, I think, some white teachers, but some of the white students, to see their perspective. But because this was just one student's perspective, I was one student. And there were some who went through integration, you know, all their school life, and then all their high school. I only experienced two years of it. But I guess because I came in on the front end of it, that is probably why it is more significant, and the things that we had to experience and the things that we had to go through.

But I think, you know, forums like this, documentaries like this, are helpful, because it helps us to see some things. Because a lot of people still don't see a lot of things or know a lot of things that happened, and some people may think it was worse than it actually was or it was much better than it was. So I think this is a very helpful documentary, and I am just glad to have been a part of it.

FW: Well, you have been very kind and very gracious, and we appreciate you. It is good to see you again.

SLC: Good to see you.

FW: Thank you. [Tape recorder turned off.]

SLC: In that slavery and all that was as not as bad as people make it out to be. Because, you know, he says, most black people were treated pretty good, you know, and they really didn't have a problem. I think a lot of this you see, you know, is not as bad as that. And we didn't realize that it was so much worse than what it was. And a lot of times it took pictures like this to help us to see exactly how it was. But that is one of the things that we disagree with him because he tried to glaze over slavery and that kind of thing, and segregation.

But other than that, they were all pretty fair with us in terms of our work, and this, that and the other. I think in the football field they were not able to do a lot of things. When some of us probably should have been starters, we couldn't start because, you know, we were just coming in, and they couldn't bench all of their boys and put us in, so we kind of understood that, and we had to fight for position. We knew we were clearly better than the white person that we were competing against.

But I think during those times, you know, there was just integration, so they were afraid to just give the whole back field to the blacks because we were the best running backs, but they couldn't do that. They put one of us in there.

Overall, I think the teachers were fairly fair. We couldn't pick up a sense of difference that they were making us. You can rest assured we were very, very sensitive to things like that. We were a group that would really let them know if they had done that. So they did a pretty good job.

FW: Were the black students recognized for high academic achievement after integration in the school?

SLC: The only thing that we had when we were there is, you know, is the “A” and “B” honor roll, that kind of thing, and were able to make the “A” honor roll, “B” honor roll; course, in our class, the white were the valedictorians and salutatorians, of course, but one of the things we had in our favor was that we had far more credits, high school credits, than they had. Because they only had to have had eighteen, well in Hawkins we had to have twenty-one. So we had more credits than they had, so we didn’t have to take as many classes.

But, yes, we were recognized when we did, you know, what we were supposed to do, but it was later on before you started seeing the valedictorians and the salutatorians.

But as I said, it was very, very subtle, if they did do it. It was not open, it was not blatant, and I think that is why things went as smooth as they did, because it looked like the people tried to, seemed to have been fair with us.

FW: But there weren’t as many scholarships and things of that nature available to compete for then, was it?

SLC: No, no. I didn’t know even in our high school which graduated with only — there was only like thirty-two of us, or thirty-six or thirty-five, and there was just three of us blacks. In fact, the first class that graduated under integration was two: Billy Johnson and Gloria Boyd. They were the first two blacks, and then we were in the second class.

I never would forget, we would line on the outside of the auditorium down the walkway. Then the people would come by and shake our hands. I never will forget—I can’t think of the guy’s name now, but he was a Pool. Well, his grandfather, a little grandfather, an old man like he was probably about in his eighties. I remember he came down through the line, and we were all standing there together, you know, he had come past several till he got to us. So he says, “Here are these old colored boys!” **[Laughter]** He said, “Colored boys, how are you all doing? Congratulations!”

I look back at all that, and it was just the times. The principal, did you interview the principal?

FW: Hammock?

SLC: Yes, well, tell him I said hello. Odis Hammock, that was my high school principal there, and he taught us geometry and all that. But he was pretty fair.

FW: Did anyone suggest or was there any indication that there was a view that the white teachers were better qualified than the black teachers?

SLC: No I couldn’t pick that up there, because, like I said, we had nobody to compare to, all that was there was white. And we didn’t think, that, because, you know, there were things that we knew when we went there, and the only place we had picked it up was from black teachers, so we were not behind, as far as I could see, in the subjects that I was good in.

There were some subjects that I just wasn’t that good in whether I was at a white school or a black school, and there were some subjects that I was good in. And bookkeeping and all these subjects, and things like that. So we had a pretty good foundation, you know. Ms. Gladys

Mabrey. Did you know her? She was my high school English teacher. She had prepared us. She was real good. A lot of the other teachers were. They would tell us a lot of things, like how to dress, how to respect ourselves. We always had our shoes shined and our jeans ironed and creased. We didn't go around like [unclear].

But this is what we had been taught, and we lost a lot of that. I think that is why you see the dress code appear, I think, under integration [unclear] **[Laughter]**. We were just taught not to do that. Prof. Anderson taught us, "Son, shine your shoes." Like today, you can see me in my shoes.

So you don't think that much of it, but these were things that would go with you through your life.

But I'll tell you one thing, and I failed to put this in. I think that many things that prepared us, for me, and I think the people of Big Sandy, that the blacks would be prepared for integration was our parental integration. All of us came out of two-parent homes, a woman and a daddy, you know, and grandpa, and grandma. They had instilled in us some things, some principles, and we knew that they were going to support us. I knew my daddy was going to support.

This is off the counter, but ...

FW: It's not.

SLC: It's not? It's still on? **[Laughter]**

FW: He turned it back on, but please go on.

SLC: I am not going to call this man's name, but anyway, my dad, he drove us, and then he went to his job. But he was at the black school, at the elementary school. And I was on one of these little old programs where students could work a few hours after or between classes, or if they didn't have any class, they could work an hour, or something like that, and I made a little extra money. And I remember I was working and I had to get some rags out of the little janitor's closet, and I'd go and dust the blackboard and wash the blackboard.

Well, it was between classes. I didn't have time to clean the rags up before my next class, so I just put them in there, and I said, "I'll be back soon as my class is out and I'll wash the rags out and hang them and dry them and all that." And so there was this white janitor there. He just said, "No, you just come here and mess up and don't ever clean up anything. You try to be smart!" I said, "No, I told you I have class. I have to go to class. I'll be back!" So he went on and on.

Well, somebody told my dad. See, I didn't tell him. So my daddy dropped us off up at the high school, and he would go back down to the elementary school. He parked the bus that day, he got off, and he went in there to this little man. I felt sorry for the little man, because my daddy was 235 pounds, about 5'11", and he went in there, and he said, "Now, I hear that you told my son to get out of the janitor room," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and all that. He says, "Now I want you to know that if you ever have any problem with my boy, you deal with me 'Cause we are adults. And I don't like it, and I don't want you to do that anymore."

He said, "Well, you mad."

He said, "Yeah, I'm mad. I don't want that to ever happen again."

And that man was so nice to me after that. We never had any more problems. But like I said, you know, he would stand up for us if he knew we were right. We knew we had that parental support. You know, they are going to teach us to do the right thing. If you're out of line, no they are not going to come to your rescue. But if you are doing right, I'm going to be with you 100 percent. My dad was like that. He loved us.

So I think that helped us through integration. We knew that we had to go out there and do the right thing. We weren't going to go down there and get out of line, talk back to the teachers. We had been taught not to do that. We respected all. But whenever we were not treated right, you know, then we would certainly let our parents know about it, and they would have taken care of it, but we come from that strong rural background that I think helped us through this. We knew who we were. We were proud of who we were. We were not ashamed of who we were. And we felt that we were as good as anybody, and that is what we had been taught. We so we had that type of attitude. And like I said, it worked out, it worked out.

FW: I know that prior to integration, the black church played an important role in the education of blacks. Did that relationship change after integration, once the school was the integrated, did the black church still have an active role in the process of educating the children?

SLC: I think it continued to play a role, but probably not as it had in the past. As I said, if you go back to the history of this church, this was the first school, it was where they had to have it, at the church. So there were some things that the church did supplement that we don't do now. For instance, now you have this after-school tutorial and all that kind of stuff.

And I know we had a tutorial program here for several years, but then now they do them in schools, so there is no use for us duplicating it, you know. But I think that was still good, because we could still instill in the children some things that they don't get at school. But at the church, you were always mixing the academics with doing right and with God and teaching from the word of God, and I think that was so helpful. So I think that is what probably helped a lot of the schools.

And before integration, you didn't have the discipline problem. That breakdown came in integration because of the fact that they didn't want the black teachers whipping the white students. I think that is one reason they got to the point of no corporal punishment in schools, this kind of thing. But they did it when we were going to school, but I think a lot of that stuff was cut out because of integration, and I think that is when society started to break down, because we don't have the discipline in the school that you do. That is where teachers have a problem.

FW: Thank you, Dr. Curry.

SLC: Okay.

[End of interview]