

Interview with Robert and Juanita Lowrance

Date: June 14, 2001

Interviewed by Tracy Caradine

TC: My name is Tracy Caradine, and today I will be interviewing Robert Lowrance. Today's date is Thursday, June 14, 2001.

I'll begin by asking you, Mr. Lowrance, to give me a little background information about yourself.

RL: I grew up in East Texas. I was born in Shelby County and attended Garrison High School and am a graduate of Stephen F. Austin State University in 1936. From there, I went to work in Longview as an assistant coach in high school, and it was there that I met a man who influenced my life's work. His name was Pete Shotwell, and he was the high school coach there. I worked for him two seasons, two years, and the second year, 1937, we were fortunate enough to win the state championship in football. At the same time, I was principal of an elementary school in Longview.

TC: Was this before integration?

RL: Yes, very much before integration. I worked at other schools prior to coming to Hawkins. I came here in 1948, as high school coach, and coached here for twenty-seven years. I was coach and social studies teacher.

TC: What year were the schools integrated here in Hawkins and you became coach of the integrated high school?

RL: I don't have that date in mind, but I do know a few facts that might be of interest. Tom Burton was principal of the colored school, and he was largely responsible for the smooth integration of the two schools. He was an intelligent man and had great skill in handling people. The fact that he worked diligently at that job and the fact that there were some outstanding athletes from the colored school who immediately fit into the athletic program helped integration. It helped both races accept one another.

TC: When you first moved to Hawkins, can you describe the community that you were living in?

RL: The communities were largely dependent upon oil, for their livelihood. Most of the people worked in the oil field here. The two schools were entirely separate and apart. People had a minimum of contact, shall I say. But integration largely wiped that out, I'm glad to say.

TC: The community that you made your home in, was it integrated, or was it for the most part?

RL: We had two communities, shall I say, the colored community and the white community.

TC: You stated that you were the coach at the all-white school and also the social studies teacher?

RL: Yes.

TC: With integration, how did your job as coach and as teacher change?

RL: There was very little change. The colored students were readily accepted. Many of them were excellent students and well-behaved, so really I suppose our community could be said to be integrated without any friction, shall I say. It seemed to me that the colored and the whites accepted it and went on about their business.

TC: What were some of the type of sports programs that you had, the different types of sports?

RL: I was the coach of football, basketball, and track. The colored athletes were involved in all sports, and basketball and track seemed to be favored. Very few of them had experience in football, but they adapted well to it.

TC: The sports programs, the football, the basketball, the track, and other sports that you had at the integrated high school, were they the same programs that you had at the white school?

RL: Yes.

TC: They did not change?

RL: They may have improved some.

TC: There were no specific sports dropped when integration came about? You kept the same programs?

RL: We kept the same thing that we had prior to integration.

TC: How did integration affect the whole atmosphere of the school, the entire atmosphere? Was there any tension?

RL: Looking back, I can't see that there was a great deal of change in the atmosphere of the school. The colored students were enthusiastic and readily participated in all phases of the school.

TC: Were the black students encouraged by everyone in the integrated school to participate in the sports program?

RL: Were they encouraged to?

TC: Right.

RL: Oh, sure.

TC: Did the addition of the black students on the sports teams, did it improve the performance of the overall team?

RL: It did, definitely.

TC: Did you all win any championships that you hadn't won in the past?

RL: In my tenure as coach here, we won the district championship eleven times. We won the regional championship five times, the track championship numerous times. Basketball, I believe we won it five times.

TC: So some of these wins happened before integration and some occurred?

RL: Some prior to integration and some after.

TC: Can you describe the relationship between the black athletes and the white athletes?

RL: It was very good. Mutual acceptance. I don't think either one had any prejudices as far as I could tell. We didn't call another names or make derogatory statements. I don't mean it was heaven, but, you know, athletes have a way of accepting one another without question.

TC: Now, sometimes sporting events require travel. How was lodging and travel arranged?

RL: We had no difficulty with that. The only difficulty I encountered, we went to track meets every spring, and on a couple of occasions in making arrangements for the noon meal for our athletes, the proprietor would ask, "Do you have any blacks?" And, of course, I did have, and I said, "Sure." He said, "We're not going to feed you." I said, "Well, I'm sorry about that." We'd go to another place in the same town, they readily accept us. So, you know, we run into narrow-minded people in every race, and we ran into that several times, but that was the only difficulty we had.

Of course, when we go to the state meet and we are fortunate enough to attend the state meet or win our way to it several times, there was no problem about housing in Austin. The team was accepted, no reference to color or nationality or anything like that.

TC: When your players had to sleep over in a hotel for a track meet or games, any type of sporting event, when they had to pair up into roommates, was there any?

RL: Sometimes a black and a white would want a room together, and sometimes they wanted separate rooms. We didn't have any rule on that. Get you a roommate, here's your room assignment.

TC: You were a social studies teacher.

RL: Yes.

TC: Can you describe the school curriculum prior to integration?

RL: Can I describe it?

TC: What type of subjects were students supposed to take? What were some of the subjects?

RL: The subjects that I taught were Texas history, American History, and we had World History, but ordinarily I didn't teach the World History. Occasionally I taught economics, but my main subjects were American History and American Government.

TC: Did those subjects change with integration? Were the same subjects taught?

RL: No, there was no change in the curriculum. Just, "Here it is, students."

TC: Everybody had to learn it?

RL: Everybody. Now, I make it sound like it was heaven, but it wasn't necessarily. We had our little problems, and so forth, but nothing major.

TC: Today, administrators, teachers, and coaches throughout school districts interact with one another in an effort to solve common problems. Before integration, were you ever given the opportunity to interact with maybe the black cultures from the black high school?

RL: I was coaching when the first black football player was in the all-star game at the conclusion of coaching school. After that one, the gate was open, and a lot of black players took place in all-star games. As you know, many colored people are excellent athletes, Tiger Woods for example, you've heard of him. Looks like he's going to win another. **[Laughter]**

TC: Yes, he's good.

RL: But, you know, I find some things to admire—coaches are just more broad-minded than a lot of people?

TC: Is that what it is?

RL: Yes, that's it. **[Laughter]**

TC: Okay. I can agree with that. How were black parents in terms of their activity with the sports. Were they very supportive?

RL: They supported, but for the most part, they just turned their kids over to us, just said, "Here he is. Do the best you can with him." They certainly didn't interfere, and whatever link practice we wanted, we did it. They didn't question it. They, for the most part, saw that their kids were giving good effort, shall I say.

TC: So the black parents were supportive?

RL: Oh, yes.

TC: As opposed to the white parents, was the support any different from the white parents. Did they have other concerns?

RL: Both races supported the program, I am happy to say. When we played out of town football season, there was concern about if we had a fire, there wouldn't be anybody here to fight the fire. Everybody went to the game.

TC: Personally, did you welcome the idea of integration?

RL: Oh, with open arms, sure. It is going to be better for the colored people. It is going to help the whites see that another race has ability, athletic ability, and academic ability. Have to see that there is basically no difference in the races.

TC: Do you feel that your view was maybe the view of most of the people in the community?

RL: Well, naturally, there are some rednecks, you know what a redneck is, one who opposes any change, but for the most part, integration was readily accepted.

TC: The transition period from the white school to the integrated school. Was there any nervousness?

RL: Well, there was concern on the part of both races. You know, something new, we are naturally concerned, how is it going to work, and so forth, but as I said in the beginning, things went smoothly.

TC: As a coach, what were some of the things that you were worried about when you were told that integration was coming?

RL: Well, naturally I was concerned as to how the two races would meld into a team, how would they fit together. There is going to be some black athletes, there going to be some white athletes. Will we have teamwork or not? That was the concern.

TC: Do you feel that integration helped or harmed the quality of education for the black students?

RL: Well, that's a tough question, but the general feeling was that the quality of education would be improved because of the fact—it is kind of like it is in Mississippi—if you are black, take a back seat. And we had some of that in Texas. Don't give them as much money as you give whites. But with integration, the color line was wiped out. It was the total number of students. We didn't ask whether they was black or white. Is that true in Mississippi?

TC: Well, I can honestly say that I didn't have to experience anything like that?

RL: But you have heard of it?

TC: I've only read about it and heard from my family members, but I think it was pretty much the same, it was that way there.

RL: I like to think the quality of education is better.

TC: It did improve?

RL: Improved.

TC: For all?

RL: Well, I think so, really. We tried harder as teachers.

TC: Do you feel like anything was taken away from the whites in an effort to keep the blacks from enjoying maybe some of the luxuries that the white school enjoyed?

RL: I don't think so.

TC: Did everything pretty much remain the same?

RL: As far as I know, all students received equal opportunity and equal treatment. I don't think there was any preference shown.

TC: After integration, did the black and the white students socialize together, such as the spectators at sporting events and in the cafeteria and at proms?

RL: Well, Hawkins isn't much on social activity. **[Laughs]**Sometimes we would have a little party after a game or something; of course, all the students were invited. But this is the Bible belt, and for the most part, dancing was "Oh, no, you can't do that" regardless of race.

TC: So the socializing time was basically done where? Where did they socialize?

RL: Well, there wasn't much socializing as such.

JL: After games, didn't they go to the Methodist Church?

RL: They went to the Methodist Church and the rec hall. They would go and have refreshments and talk over the game, and things like that.

TC: When they did that, go to the other places after the game, did the blacks split up and go to wherever they wanted to go to, and the white—just by choice—was that something that you noticed?

RL: No.

TC: Did they still remain together?

RL: They were together, largely together. It was open to all. It didn't say, "No, you're the wrong color, you can't come. It didn't do that."

TC: After integration, did you notice any selective segregation? You know, sometimes, we know that, "Sure, I am black and I can eat at the table with the white students," and there is no problem. But sometimes we tend to gravitate towards and gather in our own groups just on our own.

RL: I think that is true that they kind of grouped a lot of the time, but with time, that largely disappeared. But at first, they kind of segregated themselves, shall I say, in the cafeteria anyway. But of course, there are no rules about that—"You black, you eat at this table," or "you white, you eat at this one." Nothing like that. It was just a matter of choice.

TC: What do you consider the greatest accomplishment of integration? What was the best thing that came out of integration?

RL: Acceptance of the two races. The blacks accepting the whites, and the whites accepting the blacks as people, as worthwhile people, and finally admitting that there is intelligence in both races and there is idiots in both races.

TC: Thank you, Mr. Lowrance. I appreciate you taking the time to sit and talk.

RL: It is a pleasure. You are an intelligent woman.

TC: Thank you.

TC: I am continuing my interview with Mrs. Lowrance, and today's date is Thursday, June 14, 2001.

Mrs. Lowrance, I understand that you were a grade school teacher at the all-white grade school, as well as at the integrated grade school?

JL: Yes.

TC: When you first began your teaching career, did you start here in Hawkins?

JL: I taught one year in Big Sandy, and then I came to Hawkins.

TC: As a first-year teacher, do you remember what your starting salary was?

JL: Well, I don't remember the salary. I remember my take-home pay, and I had worked so hard to get my degree, and my take-home pay was two hundred dollars, and I said, "You mean I have worked this hard for two hundred dollars?"

TC: Per month?

JL: Per month.

TC: Do you think what you were bringing home every month, was it the same for the black teachers?

JL: I really don't know. I should have known, but I didn't know.

TC: The textbooks that you used at the all-white grade school: were they brand-new?

JL: No, some years we had new books, and some years we didn't?

TC: But you were the first to receive those books? They were not handed down from other schools when you did get?

JL: When we got new books, they were new to us. But we kept our same books, you know, sometimes for several years.

TC: Were you ever told that your old textbooks would be passed on to the black grade school?

JL: I don't believe they were in Hawkins. I was a secretary to the superintendent in Longview, and I know they did that. It was not fair, but they did. They passed down things to the black schools that they were tired of in the white schools. But I don't believe we did that. I don't believe Mr. Burton would have allowed it.

TC: When they passed things on, maybe at the school in Longview, was there any type of preparation done to get those materials ready for the students at the black school, or were they just passed on as-is?

JL: I don't know, being the secretary, all I know —

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JL: —they bought new things, they bought them for the white schools, they didn't buy them for the black schools.

TC: Do you remember if there was a standardized test given in the grade school?

JL: Yes, we always had one. But I don't know whether the black students did before they came to our school. When they did, of course, they took the same ones we all took.

TC: Today, teachers communicate across the grades and throughout school districts. Prior to integration, did you have the opportunity to interact with the black teachers at the black grade school?

JL: No, I did not.

TC: Were you given the opportunity and did not take it?

JL: I don't believe I was ever asked to, or I believe I would have.

TC: After the school was integrated, how active were the black parents in the PTA?

JL: I could not have asked for any better. I had some excellent parents. I had Dr. Holmes, I had Mr. Rutherford, I had Mrs. Clara Kay, all the parents. And you know, by those parents, that I had a good group of parents. I had the Simmons, Mr. Simmons who drove our bus. I had some excellent parents.

Toward the end of my tenure as a teacher, I had some parents, no I didn't have parents, I had students who had learned the word "sue," and they would threaten me, you know, that they were going to tell their mother and their mother was going to sue me if I did such and such, but that was toward the end of my teaching. It wasn't when we first integrated at all. We didn't have any of that then.

The trouble I had that I can remember the first year we integrated is the curiosity of both races. I could not teach for the ones in the front looking back at the back. I changed my chairs around. Irregardless, the blacks wanted to see what the whites were doing, the whites wanted to see what the blacks were doing, it was curiosity, you know. [laughs] Then on the playground, they just all mixed and played and had a good time together. But if you answered a question, they wanted to be sure that they saw it, whichever way it was. I had a time with my chair arrangement that year, the first year.

TC: Do you think there was curiosity on the part of the faculty as well, the black teachers and the white teachers?

JL: Probably, probably.

TC: What was the relationship like that first year between the black teachers and the white teachers?

JL: Well, one thing they did, and I don't know why, because I wasn't in the upper channels of knowing why, but they didn't want the black teachers to have a home room, and so they were not given a home room. So for two periods during the day, I moved out, and they came into my room and taught some of the minor subjects because they thought, I guess, the ones in charge, it would go smoother that way. But that was the most unfair thing that I saw.

TC: Was there any resentment on the part of black teachers for that?

JL: If they did, they didn't communicate it to me, you know. But it was bad, because, you know, they didn't have a room, and they had to cart their things around and come into my room to teach, and, I said, "My room?" I felt bad, it was my room, you know. They didn't really have a room. Now we changed that, you know, but the first year, that was the way they handled it. And they were just as good. They had been teaching just like I had.

TC: What type of relationship did the principal have with the black teachers? I understand the principal was white, correct?

JL: Yes.

TC: What type of relationship did he have with those black teachers?

JL: As far as I know, he had a good relationship. He was a very congenial-type person, and I don't think he would have communicated any bad feeling with anybody, because he was not known to be that way. But I guess we sort of kept our distance from each other that first year—you know, just trying to understand each other maybe.

TC: When the class rolls were prepared for the year, were the students racially mixed and given to each teacher?

JL: No, we did the way we had always done. I taught fourth grade, and we had two fourth grades. We never knew who are students were. We just put all the names in a hat, and you draw and I draw and we did the same way that year. And so we didn't try to say, "You would have such a person and I would have such a person." We just did as fair as we could that way.

TC: Did you ever have a chance to witness where a white teacher maybe taught more toward the white students in the class rather than the blacks? Was it rather than addressing the whole group?

JL: I couldn't see what the other teachers were doing, but personally, I worked hard to teach the blacks, because I was so afraid I wouldn't be fair. I think I really leaned more that way so that I wouldn't feel like I might not be fair. I soon learned on multiplication tables that they could learn real easily with rhythm. So I taught multiplication tables by chanting, like, you know, like you do cheerleaders or like that.

One of the things I remember, our school then didn't have air conditioning and I had the windows down. I was teaching this chant, and like "seven times seven is forty-nine," and I was just going, you know, and looked up, and there was an electrician outside my window working on. I was so embarrassed to think that he was seeing me do that, you know! But they can learn that way. They have rhythm, I believe they had more rhythm than the white students. **[Laughter]**

TC: Possibly. Did you socialize with any of the black teachers outside of school?

JL: I don't remember not going anyplace because they were there, and I don't remember—no, I'd say I didn't.

But we had a son who was an athlete, and we had boys over for things after—you know, certain things, we'd have some of the boys, and they'd be black and white. I have good friends now. Some of them I've mentioned that were my parents at that time. I got acquainted with them.

No, I don't remember that I was ever invited to anything.

TC: It was just something that they encouraged?

JL: I don't think they invited.

TC: Now, the same question that I asked Mr. Lowrance: what do you think were the greatest accomplishments of integration.

JL: I heard his answer, and I think we have really been more accepting of people as a whole, and I don't think we think of race the way we used to, maybe, and I think that has been good. I hope that I didn't teach a child who thought that I did not like him because of his color. I would hate to think that I did. So I believe because we did that that we have more of the Christian spirit among people that we should have had all the time.

TC: Do you think that integration brought the town together, the people in the town together as a whole, black and white? Do you think that was a result of integration?

JL: Well, it should have. But, you know, when you teach school, you are sort of away from the community. You don't really know the community. I know there were people that were a lot—they couldn't accept it as well as we did at school, because we were teaching the children and we were with the parents, and we were with them, and they didn't have to, you know, I mean they weren't with them, and so I think it took them longer. I am just saying that for my personal feeling, and I really don't know, because, you know, when you teach, you are just so busy with that, you don't know really what is going on with some other people.

TC: Mrs. Lowrance, I thank you for talking with me.

JL: I hope it has made sense.

TC: Believe me, it did, and I thank you very much.

JL: I appreciate being asked.

[End of interview]