

## **Interview with Mr. Tonny Simmons**

Date: June 21, 2001

Interviewed by Dr. Florine White

**FW:** I am Dr. Florine White, Jarvis Christian College, and I have with me Mr. Tonny Simmons from Hawkins, Texas.

Mr. Simmons, you really are a find for us because we want to talk about the pre-integration period concerning the school systems in Hawkins, Texas, the initial integration period of the two school systems in Hawkins, Texas, and the post-integration period. You were fortunate enough to be a student in all three periods and a father during the post-integration period.

**[Starts over]** Today's date is June 21, 2001.

The purpose of today's interview, Mr. Simmons, is to talk to you about the school systems in Hawkins, Texas. I say systems because we are interested in the pre-integration period, the initial integration period, and the post-integration period, concerning the schools in Hawkins, Texas.

Mr. Simmons, as I understand it, you were a student during all three periods, roughly from 1955 until 1969, and you were a father during the post-integration period.

I need to ask you a few things about these periods from your perspective as a student. Tell me a little bit about your community and a little bit what life was like when there were two separate school systems in Hawkins, Texas, a black school system and a white school system.

**TS:** I lived out in the community, it was called the Sundale community, and we was bused to and from school every day, and that is how we got to and from school.

**FW:** Once you got there, what kind of school life did you have?

**TS:** Oh, it was great. We had all the classes like reading, writing, math, and play periods. It was nice.

**FW:** What about your teachers?

**TS:** The teachers was great. My first-grade teacher, Ms. Murdock, as far as I know, she is still living. She was a real nice teacher to me. That was my first-grade teacher, she was really, and that was nice.

**FW:** Did you know where the white school or schools were located?

**TS:** No, at that time I didn't. **[Laughter]**

**FW:** Were you aware that there were white children in Hawkins at that time?

**TS:** Oh, yes, but I didn't know where the school was, because at the time, I didn't have any transportation to get around other than go by bus, so I didn't go anywhere but to school and back home to work and in the fields or whatever, but that was all.

**FW:** Were you in the position to get any idea about the physical facilities that housed these two school systems?

**TS:** No, not until later years.

**FW:** What did you observe during later years concerning the physical facilities of these two school systems?

**TS:** I noticed that they had different activities that we didn't have, like football. The only thing we had was baseball and track, softball, but they had something that we didn't have, which was football. I would think that everything else that we had, they had that we had, other than football.

**FW:** During the early days we are talking about today, did you hear any talk about integration?

**TS:** No, not until '65, not until '65. No talk of integration back from '57 up. When I first started school, no talk of integration until '65.

**FW:** When you heard the talk in 1965, what did you think integration was all about?

**TS:** Well, all I know that they wanted us to go to another school and we didn't want to go, because we were comfortable where we were.

**FW:** Did not want to go?

**TS:** No, we didn't want to go. **[Laughter]**

**FW:** Did anybody explain to you why they wanted you to go to another school when you were obviously comfortable where you were?

**TS:** They told us that is what the federal government wanted us to do, that we was integrating and going to school with the white, and we had to do it, but they gave us an option the first year.

**FW:** What was that?

**TS:** The option was you could either transfer over to the white school or stay at the black school. So the first year, everybody but one person stayed at the black school.

**FW:** Who was this brave soul?

**TS:** His name was Timothy Prince. He was the only person that went over to the white school the first year, which was, I believe, in '65.

**FW:** Did he come back and bring any news?

**TS:** Yes, he said it was nice, he enjoyed it, everybody treated him fair, and he had a good time. So we was thinking about going, but then we had to say, well, no, we're not going. But in '66, we didn't have any choice.

**FW:** They said you would go? **[Laughter]**

**TS:** You would go. **[Laughter]**

**FW:** Let me ask you this about this notion of integration. What was your greatest fear?

**TS:** Well, I really didn't have any because I was always treated fairly, so I didn't have any fear with going to school with the whites because I had played with them during the summer, and we had a nice time, and they didn't seem like they was prejudiced, and we wasn't either. We didn't even know what prejudice was at that time, because we was all having fun. The only time you have prejudice is if you went to a place to eat. I know that we had to go in the back, and they went in the front, but that was the only thing that I noted about prejudice; you know, you say I am prejudiced, but the difference, and you know.

**FW:** You did have white playmates when you were growing up?

**TS:** Yes, right. We played baseball, rode horses. Because we lived out in the country in the outside of town, and so I did have some white friends, out there.

**FW:** As a student, having gone through segregated schools and integration, do you think integration worked for you?

**TS:** Yes, it did, because I got a chance to do some things at the white school that I wasn't going to be able to do at the black school, and that was to learn how to associate with different people, you know, and to get along with everybody, and be as a team. That is one thing that our coaches instilled in us to work as a team, and with black and white working together, in order to win anything, you're going to have to do it together, because one person couldn't do it by himself, or the black person couldn't do it and the white person couldn't do it, so we had to work together as a team, and that is what they instilled in us. I didn't have any problem with it.

**FW:** Did you observe any of the black students or white students having problems adjusting to the integrated system?

**TS:** No, I guess we tried so hard to make it work, and we had counselors that we could go and talk to if you have problems.

**FW:** What was the race of the counselor?

**TS:** White. The counselor was white.

**FW:** What happened to the black teachers when the schools were integrated? Did the black teachers follow the black students over to the high school?

**TS:** Some of them did, and some of them didn't. If they did, they went to the white school as a lower administrator, like our principal, Mr. Burton. He was a principal at the school, but when they were integrated, he went over to the white school, but he was just an administrator. He wasn't the principal anymore, you know.

**FW:** What about the teachers? The classroom teachers?

**TS:** Some of those teachers followed us over also.

**FW:** As classroom teachers?

**TS:** As classroom teachers, yes.

**FW:** Did you get any sense of how the teachers adjusted to the new system?

**TS:** No, if they had any, the students didn't see the difference in it.

**FW:** As a student had you been told anything or given any indication that there were some differences between the intelligence level of the black student as opposed to the white student?

**TS:** Yes, before we integrated, I did, because some of the black teachers would tell us that, you know, that this year you have a chance to stay here, but next year you probably be forced to go over to the white school, and you are going to have to know what you are doing. You'll have to be "better" than what you are now in order to keep up. That is what they instilled in us, to get your grades and pay attention and do what you are told to do in class, and that way you can keep up.

**FW:** Were you surprised to find out that there were white students who were not as capable as black students academically? Was that a surprise to you?

**TS:** Yes, it was. When we first integrated, I just didn't know, you know, if I could make the grade and to keep up. But after I got into school and we went to classes together and classes got started, I find out that we were all on the same level, just about, in learning.

**FW:** I want to shift focus now for a few moments. As a father, your children didn't know anything but the new integrated system, right?

**TS:** Right.

**FW:** How did it work for them?

**TS:** It worked out great because my kids seemed to me that they had more white friends than they had black friends in school, especially when they had different activities. Some of the, I guess, black parents of school, children didn't participate. My kids always wanted to go and participate in everything that they could. Every time they have a different activity at their school or parties, or whatever, they were all there, and most of their friends were white kids, and they got along great.

**FW:** Pre-integration, were the black students, to your knowledge, told anything about the social parameters in this new environment? Did you get any indication that the white students were told anything about the social parameters? I am really interested in whether or not any parents or anybody told the students of one race not to associate or socialize with students of the other race?

**TS:** I don't know, because when we have activities at the school or at someone's home, most of the time very few blacks would show up, I guess because of transportation. See now, at the black school, we always had buses to take you to different programs. But when we integrated, if you didn't have your own car, you didn't go. Most of the time, the blacks didn't have no way to get around. So they didn't participate.

Now, see at the time, I had what you call a '57 Chevrolet, and I could go, and I'd go by and pick up some of my friends, and we would always go to different parties or to school activities, we would go together, and most of the guys. The young ladies couldn't go because the mothers wouldn't let them get out of the house. **[Laughter]** Most of the time it would be just be, you know, guys there.

**FW:** Speaking of activities away from the school or extracurricular activities at the school, were there any fights? Did groups of blacks get together, say, and whites with groups of whites?

**TS:** No, we didn't have any fights.

**FW:** What about before the schools were integrated? Did you have groups of blacks fighting each other in that old setting?

**TS:** No, no we didn't.

**FW:** Peaceful?

**TS:** Right, it was peaceful for me, right. But one thing about it, Mr. Burton didn't tolerate it, for one thing, and you knew that you got in trouble at the school and you go home you was in trouble again, so you didn't really have any problem with that. **[Laughter]** Everybody got along.

**FW:** Talk a little bit as a student and as a parent, talk a little bit about the actual or perceived qualifications of the black teachers as opposed to the qualifications of the white teachers.

**TS:** I really can't tell you too much about the qualification of them, because we had black teachers and we had white teachers.

**FW:** Was there an opinion that surfaced that perhaps the white teachers were better trained than the black teachers?

**TS:** If it was, it wasn't mentioned.

**FW:** Was there a note during the post-integration period as a parent, did you encounter other black parents who felt that black teachers should be teaching black children? Would be better if black teachers taught black children. **[Laughter]**

**TS:** No, the only problem we would have with that would be—no, I really didn't.

**FW:** You didn't?

**TS:** No, I can't say we did.

**FW:** What about pre-integration meetings? Were there community meetings with separate races or mixed race meetings in order to develop strategies and to prepare the community for integration?

**TS:** No, not that I am aware of. No.

**FW:** You did indicate that there were friendships that were formed across racial lines?

**TS:** Yes.

**FW:** Think back to pre-integration again for me. What about textbooks, were they new?

**TS:** No, we never had new textbooks. You could see the names in the front of the books where different people had had them. They were books that were handed down from, I guess—I thought they was from different classes, from when I got there, from different students. But what I was told that they was books that came from the white school that was passed over to the black school that we were using, and they would get new books and we would get the old books, that is what the administrator told us.

**FW:** What about the buses? Were your buses new?

**TS:** Some of them was new. The buses was new, yes.

**FW:** There were two separate bus systems, one that transported the white schools, and one that transported the black schools?

**TS:** Yes.

**FW:** Did you as a child, or as an adolescent, find anything strange about that?

**TS:** Well, no, because when I come up, I always knew that the blacks was on one side of town and the whites on the other side, so it just made sense to me that I knew we was different and they was treating us as such, so I just went along with the program and just did what I had to do.

**FW:** Were you given any inkling within your family and within your community that you were somehow inferior to whites?

**TS:** No.

**FW:** You were just different?

**TS:** Just different. I know that the white children was going to their school, and the blacks were going to their school. That is one reason when integration came up, didn't want to change, because I liked where I was. **[Laughter]**

**FW:** That's interesting. When you were informed about integration, you were told that the federal government required this?

**TS:** Right, yes.

**FW:** In addition to this being a requirement, did anybody mention any anticipated benefits for both groups under this new arrangement of integration? What was going to be aside from the fact that the federal government said that this was going to be, what were the anticipated benefits?

**TS:** The only thing they was telling us in school was that "You will probably have new textbooks, and you'll get the chance to participate in different programs that you wasn't having at the black school that you would get at the white school that you participated in, and it will probably give you a better opportunity to go to college, because you would have to make sure that you get your grades and be on the same grade level as a white student in order to go to college, and that was the only thing that our teachers was telling us, you know, that we had to do.

**FW:** What about dropouts?

**TS:** The dropout rates?

**FW:** Once you integrated?

**TS:** As far as I know, they were still in school. There wasn't too many dropouts.

**FW:** This is probably repeat of a question I have asked you before, but I will ask you again. Here now, is integration working?

**TS:** Yes, as far as I know it is.

**FW:** Do you hear any complaints from black parents attributing a lot of the problems that some of the black students are having in school, attributing these problems to integration?

**TS:** No, I really haven't. The only problem I have had with it or heard about is sometime the students will have problems and the parents get involved in it, and if they leave it alone, the students could work it out themselves. Most of the time, they do, because I know that if we had arguments at school or whatever, we always would work it out amongst ourselves, and before the day is gone, we are still friends.

**FW:** Generally, do the races appear to be getting along today within the school system here in Hawkins?

**TS:** Yes.

**FW:** Have you heard any talk among black activists of going back to a segregated system for blacks?

**TS:** No.

**FW:** You have not heard that?

**TS:** No.

**FW:** Can you think of any disadvantages of the integrated school system as it exists today? Any disadvantage?

**TS:** None that I could think of, right now, because it helped me because there was a lot of things that I know that there was a lot of things I know that at the black school I wasn't going to be able to do, but at the white school, I was able to do.

**FW:** Who gained more from integration, blacks or whites?

**TS:** I think blacks did.

**FW:** You did? And you have alluded to some of those gains, more opportunity, more experiences?

**TS:** Yes, because I probably wouldn't have any white friends, or, I got a chance to play ball or whatever and meet a lot of people, and I probably would never been able to meet if I was at the black school.

**FW:** Who lost anything on integration?

**TS:** Nobody, I don't think.

**FW:** Am I to understand that you do not foresee any going back to segregated school during your lifetime?

**TS:** I don't see no advantage to going back.

**FW:** One more question. What is the name of the colored high school?

**TS:** Fouke-Hawkins High School. When I was in school, it was from '57 to '66, it was Fouke-Hawkins High School. In '66, they built a new school, which was called Southside. I stayed at Southside, I believe one year or two, then went to the Hawkins High School, which was the white school. So I was in three different schools.

**FW:** The reason I ask that is that I know that in some communities blacks are very, very dissatisfied in that they lost their great-name schools, Booker T. Washington High School, and I am just using Booker T. Washington, but anyway, integration meant that the great black educators whose names were affixed to schools, that they schools would be abandoned. To integrate meant to abandon the black schools and the black historical names and to go on to the white school.

Sometimes there is dissatisfaction expressed because of this bit of history, our history being lost. But I take it that this was not the case here in Hawkins?

**TS:** It probably was, but I guess that at the time that I was coming through, it wasn't to me, because getting a good education was the most important thing for me to try to do and get so I could move ahead. As far as names of schools or whatever, you know, I didn't think about it at the time, I guess. I guess it was mentioned because we still have reunions for the Fouke-Hawkins High School, and all of that comes up with not losing that part of our heritage.

**FW:** Do they still have reunions?

**TS:** Yes, for the Fouke-Hawkins High School reunions.

**FW:** Are these reunions very well attended?

**TS:** Yes.

**FW:** Bit of nostalgia?

**TS:** [Laughter] Yes.

**FW:** Was it necessary to lose the black schools in almost all situations? I wonder what would have been wrong with abandoning a white school and having a black school remaining?

**TS:** I guess they thought the white schools in better condition because they always had new buildings, and we had buildings that was run-down. So I guess it is best to go to a new building than to stay in that old building; except for Hawkins School. When we first integrated, I went

over to the white school, which was Hawkins High School, but they eventually moved to the Southside school which was a new building, and they still called it Hawkins High School. It wasn't called Hawkins Southside any more because that was a black school, so they just called it Hawkins High School.

**FW:** What insights can you give us about this period in our history in this country about integration and segregation, since you have experienced both? What stands out in your mind about it, and what lesson can we learn from it, this integration of schools?

**TS:** The only thing that stands out in my mind is working together with each other and trying to get along. I always made friends with whoever I was in school with or whoever I worked with, black or white. When I finished school, I went to work at a lumber company, and then from there as a deputy sheriff. I went to Kilgore Junior College to get criminal justice to be a deputy sheriff, and I worked with all type of peoples during the integration period.

That was part of the integration deal there because they had to integrate the sheriff's department and get a black sheriff, because I was the first black sheriff in Wood County at that time. That was part of, like I say, getting a good education and going on to try to be something.

**FW:** If I can be presumptuous, Mr. Simmons, I must say that you are a wonderful representative of a system that changed and apparently is working very well. And I really, really thank you for your time.

**[End of interview]**