

## **Interview with Reverend L.C. Bowie and Mrs. Varee Robinson**

Date: June 14, 2001

Interviewed by Tracy Caradine

**TC:** Today I will be interviewing Reverend Lindsay Bowie and Mrs. Varee Robinson. Today's date is Thursday, June 14, 2001.

I'll begin with you, Mrs. Robinson. Can you give us a little background about yourself and your life here in this community?

**VR:** Well, I was born and reared in Big Sandy, and I married. I moved away for a very short while. Of course, I finished high school in Big Sandy. I mean I finished grade school, I finished high school in Gladewater. I attended Texas College, and then came back and worked as an elementary teacher for three years. After I married, I moved away for a short while. I came back and I had three girls, and that is about it.

**TC:** So you moved away and then you came back to teach here in the community.

**VR:** Yes.

**TC:** In Big Sandy?

**VR:** Well, I taught in the community before I moved away. I taught three years, then I married, then I moved away.

**TC:** But you always came back home?

**VR:** Always came back home after a short while.

**TC:** And Reverend Bowie?

**LB:** I was born and reared in Big Sandy and the community around, and finished high school in Gladewater and attended—we didn't have a high school in our community, and I was here at Jarvis, going to high school, paying four dollars per month, and then we got all arranged and made arrangement with Gladewater, and so I finished high school in Gladewater.

After then, I returned to college, and didn't finish at that particular time because I was called in the ministry. And then I began to work for the Humble Oil and Refining Company, and which it was a very good job, paid good at that particular time.

After so many years, we married and begin to rear a family, and then returned back to school after I reared my family, and I received my degree from Texas College and also my master's degree from East Texas State University of Paris, Texas. Then I began to teach in Big Sandy, and I was the principal there for twenty-two years—yes, twenty-two years principal in Big Sandy. It was part before integration and part after integration. I retired in 1984.

**TC:** Mrs. Robinson, the community in which you lived, was it an all-black community as you were coming up?

**VR:** Well, no, but we associated mostly with blacks and I attended black church. I lived out north of Big Sandy, and where I lived, there were black and white, so we didn't have an all-black community or all-white community, but in school, until after I finished elementary school, high school, and went to college, then we all integrated into one community, so to speak.

**TC:** So basically your community, growing up, was always a mixed community?

**VR:** Yes, it was always a mixed community.

**TC:** [to Mr. Bowie] And was your community as well?

**LB:** Yes, about the same.

**TC:** Black and white.

**LB:** Black and white.

**TC:** Did you socialize with your neighbors, the white neighbors?

**LB:** No. Well, I guess, you know, meet on the fence row and sometimes stop by, something like that, you know, but just say going to spend an evening with so-and-so visiting, no, not anything like that.

**VR:** Well, I mostly came in contact with whites because I worked in their homes. This was between colleges.

**TC:** The all-black schools that both of you worked in prior to integration, can you describe the physical condition and the location of these schools?

**LB:** Well, I think that it was a good location to do a great job, but as the school and as teachers, the working condition, each teacher had to carry a load of two classes in a classroom. Mrs. Robinson taught two classes. I think at the time it was the fourth and the fifth grade. Is that right?

**VR:** Third and fourth grade.

**LB:** Yes. And other teachers, first and second grade, Mrs. Green had to take care of the first and second grade. And the seventh and the eighth grade, well, I had to take care of that as principal. Also I was the coach, I was the bus driver and all if ever needed, you know, sometimes the bus driver would be sick and something would happen he couldn't be there, I would have to take care of that.

And in this school, we did not have a telephone, or anything. Had an extension from my house to the school, and that is the way it was operated. And we did not have a janitor there in the school. I was janitor, and each teacher was responsible of taking care of their own room.

Those are just some of the things that happened back then. By the grace of God we were able to make it. One thing that I was proud of, after integration, Out of the kids from my school, when they begin to mix with the other kids, all except a few, but just about all of our kids from the black school was on the Honor Roll in the white school, and we were very proud over that, because for a kid leaving and been in a room there with two classes, and we feel real proud of ourselves.

**TC:** Seeing as though each person had several jobs, not just being a teacher; well, you were a teacher but you had to carry the class load of two teachers, and as principal you had several jobs, as janitor, as bus driver, and various other jobs, as far as the pay goes, were you paid for doing those extra duties?

**LB:** No, no. That was what bothered me, and it always bothered me about teachers needing workbooks. We didn't even have all of the books that we needed, and we never did get new books. We always got used books at our school. Then we would issue the books out and look at the neighbors in the community, and where two or three would live close together, well, we would give them a math book where they could study together, and go study together in the evening and at night and weekend. And then we'd give some other child a history book and a health book and a geography. We scattered out so they could work together on those things.

And you know, and I talked to Mrs. Robinson, I said, "Now, we're teaching health, haven't even got any soap." We're teaching health, then we have a water bucket and then we all drinking out of the same cup, the same glass, and things like that. Those are some of the things. But by the grace of God we was able to survive.

**VR:** And all the supplies that we needed to use in our room, teachers paid for that out of their pockets.

**LB:** Come out of their pocket.

**TC:** So you had to use part of your own salary to buy supplies. What was the salary like? Did that make it harder on you as far as taking care of your family?

**LB:** Well, I tell you what. Now, before the Gilmer-Aiken plan, it was pretty tough. You received a salary, whatever, you didn't know what your salary probably would be. But after the Gilmer-Aiken, we had that in nineteen forty—

**VR:** 1947.

**LB:** '47, Gilmer-Aiken, and then you pretty well knew what it was going to be. But still you had to buy your workbooks and different things just for your students and for the upkeep of your room, that would come out of your salary. And, you know, if I had the power or anything, and all black teachers that worked back there and retired, I would asked them to do something about their retirement to make it reflect how they spent their own money trying to bring their students and make it comfortable for their students up to date. I would ask for an increase on their retirement.

**TC:** The starting salary for teachers when you began teaching in the public school system, do you remember what that salary was?

**VR:** I certainly don't, but it was very low. **(laugh)** I started teaching in '47, and that was the first year after the Gilmer-Aiken deal was passed that the salaries went up in Texas, but still I don't remember exactly how much it was.

**TC:** Do you think your salary was about the same as the salary that first-year white teachers were receiving?

**VR:** I don't believe it was.

**TC:** What about the salary for principals, for black principals, was it the same?

**LB:** No.

**TC:** It was not?

**LB:** No, no.

**TC:** Now, upon integration, what type of relationship did the black students have with the white teachers?

**VR:** Well, some did very well, and some did not. By me having children of my own, I knew exactly how they felt. The white teachers would look over them, would pass them and do work with someone else, skip over them in doing something or making special assignments, so they didn't have the same relations. They didn't have very good relationship as a whole.

**TC:** What type of relationship did the principal or did you have with the white teachers after integration?

**LB:** Well, it was good and it was bad, because the white teachers wanted all of the smart black kids in their room, and that is the only thing they was interested in, that real bright child. But if the child was slow, something like that, you know, they would want to bypass that child. I had trouble along the line, you know, because to send that kid out in the morning to play basketball and things like that, it just wasn't good for that slow student.

**VR:** I can remember one of the first grade teachers, she would place all of the black kids in the back and she would ignore those kids, and she would teach to the white kids. And they were just there. They didn't get any kind of attention.

**TC:** Reverend Bowie, when you had to reprimand a white teacher, did you encounter problems when you had to maybe write them up for not performing as they should? Did you encounter problems with that?

**LB:** Well, we would write it up and then we would talk to the superintendent about it, and he would agree, but, still, no results. I remember the superintendent saying to me one day that, "You know, we can't bother that teacher, because talking about her clout in the community and we'll fool around and get both of us fired" and things like that. And those was the remarks, and I could tell, you know, the reaction and where things was going and there's no need to keep running to you about these things, the situation.

**TC:** Well, how, in general, were your concerns about issues happening in your integrated school? How concerned were members of the school board and the superintendent about those issues?

**LB:** Well, we had some good school board members, some that was very good, and some that really did care about those different things, simply because – I had reported that Mrs. Robinson had forty-five or forty-seven students.

**VR:** Forty-seven. One year it even got up to fifty.

**LB:** And he didn't do anything about it, the superintendent. And privately, I spoke to Mr. Matt Dunn [phonetic] about it, and that very day, I spoke to him about it one evening, the next day it was a change in her classroom.

**TC:** Do you think the change came as a result of speaking to him outside of his office?

**LB:** Yes.

**TC:** Why do you think that something was done as a result of speaking to him outside of his office?

**LB:** Simply because he didn't know anything about it. He was a trustee, and he was a very interested in the student and was very interested in the teacher. And he said, "Well she can't do a good job."

**TC:** If it had been a white teacher with fifty students in her class—

**LB:** No, not at all.

**TC:** It never would have happened from the start?

**LB:** It never would have happened. That's right.

**TC:** Now, going back to the textbooks that you all received before integration at that high school.

**LB:** Textbooks?

**TC:** Yes, sir.

**LB:** We never did receive enough. We never did receive any new textbooks. All of the textbooks was old and all of the textbooks was used textbooks. Is that right?

**VR:** That's right.

**TC:** The old ones that you received, how old were they?

**LB:** Obsolete.

**VR:** And as far as library books were concerned, we didn't have any library books for the kids to handle.

**LB:** No workbook and no teacher's aide, period. Let me see. You never did have—it will come, but I can't recall it now, but they never did have a teacher's guide or anything like that.

**VR:** No.

**TC:** Prior to integration, how active were the black parents in the PTA?

**LB:** They was very active.

**VR:** Very active.

**LB:** Very active, you know, to do what they could do. Understand, you know, that it was tough times, and they would do what they possibly could do. And just like this telephone, your mother and your daddy, and they would take and raise money and to pay the extension of the telephone bill and other little things that we needed and could raise and help buy students' workbooks and different things like that in the community.

**VR:** And the PTA purchased a piano we had. They purchased the first overhead projector, things that we needed, audiovisual aids that we needed, the PTA purchased those for us.

**TC:** Did the involvement of the black parents in the PTA change after integration?

**LB:** Well, yes, because, you know, we wanted a PTA, but the white did not want PTA and didn't have it. What was that—

**VR:** They had what they called PTO, I think.

**LB:** Yes.

**VR:** One year they finally just did away with the PTA completely, so we end up as the officers of the PTA, Mr. Bowie and I did. In other words, they just didn't want to work with us, for the most part. We didn't have much cooperation until — Ambassador had an elementary school out there, they had a school on their campus, Ambassador College. And when the state came in on them and they had to close the elementary school down, then that caused them to move into Big Sandy Elementary School. Then after a couple of years we had cooperation from some of those parents out there, but they still didn't want to acknowledge us. They wanted to—well, I'm going to say it—they thought they were better than the Big Sandy people, and they didn't want to work with us too much.

**TC:** How involved was the black church in the integrated school?

**LB:** At that particular time, we didn't have one at that particular time. I was the coach and everything, you know, in the black school before integration, but when we integrated, we didn't have a black coach or anything. Yes. And the first black coach we had, who was the first black coach? We didn't have one, did we?

**VR:** It was several years afterward.

**LB:** It was several years.

**VR:** Because I can remember the kids going to play basketball, playing in tournaments on Saturdays, some of the kids were trying to play basketball, and one of the coaches there from the college, visiting college, he asked my daughter, he said, "Have you all ever seen a basketball?" So they didn't really know what they were doing, but we exposed them the best we could.

**LB:** Yes, and then — that reminded me— on Saturdays, we would have a basketball tournament. We'd invite Gilmer and Ore City and different schools to come in to play, and we would start out in the morning playing till nine in the morning and probably twelve at night on Saturday night. And that money that we raised was going for the benefit of the students, of the kids, to get workbooks and different things.

And then we had in our school, clothes. We would ask the parents if they had some clothes that wasn't in use at home, would they bring them to the school so we could give them to students. We asked anybody around in the community, white or black, and they would just bring them to the school. So we would put things in the book room that we could give them to other students that could wear them. That's the way we operated. I just hated I didn't have an outline to go by.

**TC:** The transition from when integration occurred, how was that transition for each of you? Was it a time of nervousness or anxiousness, or did you just not know what to expect with this new integrated school?

**LB:** Well, I tell you what. The only thing that we talked about when we prayed about it, "When we do integrate, we want to do a good job. We want to prove. We know we can. All we want is a chance to do and to have a good working relationship, and we can do the job." And that's what happened.

**VR:** When we moved up there, of course, I had to take the reading class, I was the remedial reading teacher. What was depressing to me was that I was in a room above the auditorium, where you look out over the auditorium, and this door was closed all day long, and it was very depressing, but I worked with it the best I could, as long as I could, but you can imagine I shed a lot of tears up there all by myself during the day.

But they didn't feel that we were able to teach a class. Then the school board decided to sent some of the students back across the track to our school, because we had a nice school building that we came out of, and they put kindergarten through third grade down there. So then one teacher who had always been a fifth-grade teacher, she wanted to get down because she wanted to be in charge of everything, even though she didn't have a master's.

So that year I was asked to take the fifth grade. That summer I had to work very hard before school started to get the fifth-grade room ready for fifth grade, and I had to do a lot of changing, had to do a lot of cleaning out for this woman who had been in there for about fifteen or twenty years. All of her junk and trash had to be thrown out.

Before that, though, they decided that they had to give me a classroom because they looked at my qualifications, because I had received a master's degree, and then I was receiving all the government money. That way I think they decided they wouldn't be able to hire somebody else as a teacher to receive this money because all of it would have to go to me because of my salary. So that's when they decided to give me that fifth-grade classroom.

**TC:** My final question to both of you is, how do you think integration helped and harmed the black student, the education that black students were receiving?

**VR:** I really think it helped. I had talked with a lot of parents before we integrated. A lot of parents were against it, but I thought it was a big help to the black kids, the black community, because of the things that we would receive, what our kids could get if they integrated that they could not get if they were not integrated. We were cheated out of scholarships, but, nevertheless, we had several kids who were able to go to college, and they were able to stand up against any other group of kids from any other place.

**TC:** How do you feel that integration helped or harmed—

**[Begin Tape 1, Side B]**

**LB:** ...exposed. We didn't have a band. They didn't know anything about a band, but we had a band when we integrated, and the kids had a chance to express themselves on that. And then we had football, and then we had basketball and we had a full-time coach to do that, and they was able to guide them and everything, and so it just helped along that line.

And so many other things, and those that wanted to, you had study period. There in the black school, we didn't have a study period because we were busy going. And the kids, if they had a study period where they could study a lesson and group-study and association and whatnot, these kids, and it helped the kids along that line. I think it helped. Those that desired, those that wanted to do, it really helped.

But those that didn't want to do anything, that's where it comes in. In the black school down there, I had a fan belt that I always used for disciplining those kids that disrespect the teacher or didn't want to get their lesson. Well, I would bring them to my office and I would use this fan belt on them. But up in this other school, you couldn't do it. You couldn't do it. So then that's when they begin to get away, and some of our kids began to act some—how would you fix that without calling it like it should be? **(laugh)** But I hope you understand.

**TC:** Yes, sir.

I thank both of you for interviewing with me today.

**LB:** God bless you.

**VR:** Happy to do it.

**[End of interview]**