

Interview with Ms. Sweetie Brown

Date: June 21, 2001

Interviewed by Dr. Florine White

FW: I am Dr. Florine Jones White from Jarvis Christian College, and I am here in the home of Ms. Sweetie M. Brown in Big Sandy, Texas. The date is June 21, 2001.

Ms. Brown, good afternoon, has consented to talk to us a little bit about school days in Big Sandy, Texas, beginning with the days of segregation and coming on to the present time. Ms. Brown, where were you born?

SB: Smith County.

FW: Smith County, Texas?

SB: Where I was telling you where the church was, right over there.

FW: That's fine. You attended school where?

SB: My first schooling was in Starville.

FW: That was off [Highway] 271?

SB: Yes. You know where this is?

FW: Yes. I used to live in Starville. So you attended all segregated schools. All the schools were segregated when you attended schools, right? They were all-black schools?

SB: Oh, yes. When I attended school, sure was.

FW: You have how many children?

SB: I am the mother of ten.

FW: Mother of ten children. Now, did all your children attend school here in Big Sandy?

SB: Didn't all of them go to school. I had Thomas, Eula May [phonetic], Justine, Johnny B., Alicia, and Annie. They all attended school.

FW: Here in Big Sandy. Segregated school?

SB: Well, yes. When they segregated school, that's when they went to Gilmer, from Big Sandy to Gilmer. Some of my kids was out of school.

FW: By the time they integrated?

SB: Yes.

FW: How was it? Did your children seem to enjoy the schools where you had all-black teachers?

SB: Oh, yes, it was lovely, really.

FW: It was lovely then?

SB: It was lovely.

FW: Lovely how?

SB: You know how children will do sometimes in school. Some of the kids might get cross in school. You know how children are. Children are just kids.

FW: Yes. What about integration? From whom did you hear that the schools were going to be combined, that the blacks and whites were going to go to school together? Where did you hear that, first hear it?

SB: Let's see. I was living out here on the Gladewater highway. And these two girls, they was the only two I had going to school at that time. All my other children was out of school.

FW: So you heard it—

SB: They were going to school down here in Big Sandy. Gilmer got a bus, and on that bus when they first started school, I think it was about seventy-five or eighty kids was going from Big Sandy to Gilmer.

FW: Black kids?

SB: Black kids. You know, bused going to Gilmer up there to Bruce High School. You know where Bruce was?

FW: Yes. The old black high school in Gilmer.

SB: That's right. Professor Newhouse and his wife and all were the schoolteachers up there. So we all knew Professor Newhouse well down here, and so the kids all started school up there. How long did they went up there? Well, they finished up there, my two girls finished up there.

FW: So you didn't have any children to attend the school once they were combined?

SB: Yes, I had one, Annie – Justine, Thomas, and Eula May was going to Gladewater. They come to Big Sandy on the bus, they catch it to go to Gladewater to high school down there.

FW: To Weldon?

SB: Weldon, that's right. And that is where two of my girls finished school down there. Justine got the valedictorian, about seventy-five students in her class. She was sixteen years old.

FW: Where is she now?

SB: Oh, she passed away.

FW: Did she?

SB: She married this Samuels boy. You know Johnny Samuels of Big Sandy?

FW: No, I don't remember him.

SB: You haven't heard tell of the Samuels?

FW: No.

SB: They lived right here on [unclear], too.

FW: I don't know very many people in Big Sandy anymore. I was away so long. What happened when blacks and whites started going to school together? Did your children like that arrangement, the ones who were in school?

SB: Well, they got on all right. They wouldn't tell me everything, you know.

FW: So far as you know, they did okay?

SB: They didn't come home, you know, telling me. Johnny went to school in Hawkins. That is where he finished high school there, in Hawkins. And the girls finished in Gilmer. And Alicia went to Prairie View College.

FW: Oh, she did?

SB: Yes, I got her books from where she went to Prairie View College, and she a Ph.D. degree.

FW: Did she? Wow, that's wonderful.

SB: She do all kind of work, and this one over here, too, different kind of work they do.

FW: The one with the Ph.D., did she finish Hawkins High School or Gladewater?

SB: Gilmer. When they were calling off the thing, they said, "They giving that girl everything!"

FW: So you had children being bused from Big Sandy to Gilmer to school, to black schools in Gilmer, and to Gladewater, to black schools?

SB: That's right.

FW: In the meantime, there was a white school system here in Big Sandy, was there not?

SB: Yes, it was.

FW: But the blacks were not allowed to attend until they were integrated.

SB: Until they were integrated.

FW: And once they were integrated, did you hear of any problems?

SB: I didn't try to find out. **[Laughter]** I didn't try to find out what these people was doing down here. I sent mine on.

FW: Well, so far as you know, integration has worked out pretty well?

SB: Well, as far as I know now. They're having troubles in these schools. You know how they do in school.

FW: Yes. What about the black teachers? What happened to them when the schools were integrated? Did they go to the white school with the children? The black teachers? What happened to Professor Newhouse, was it, in Gilmer? Did he transfer to a white school?

SB: Yes, they transferred to the white school, some of them.

FW: And seemed to do all right?

SB: Yes, I never did hear nothing about them up there.

FW: Did you hear anything about any conflict between the races?

SB: Well, sometime they'd be talking up there about, you know, what they that was wrong. I'd say, well, we all was trying to get an education. I wanted my children to go to learn, get an education, but I didn't have the opportunity to go to school like they did. I went, all right, but not—I had to walk to school, had to get to school at a certain time, had to get up and cook breakfast and get ready, the road full of kids, walk to school, three or four miles to school. Didn't fight, just played, going from school, and going to school. Had to be there at nine o'clock.

FW: During the time of segregation, were blacks taught to believe that we were inferior to whites? How did that work? We knew we were different.

SB: Different.

FW: Here in Big Sandy, how were blacks treated? Were they taught to believe or did they act as if they were inferior to the whites here?

SB: Well, they didn't say nothing to me about it now. I don't know what's true.

FW: You don't know what's true?

SB: No. I always taught my children, always try to be loving and kind to each other, your own flesh and blood. I said do unto other as you wish him to do to you. You don't want nobody to do you bad, so don't you do nobody else bad. I taught all my children that.

FW: And your children never had any problem?

SB: Well, they didn't come to me with any.

FW: When your children were up and in school, what did you do? You mentioned that you had a business here in Big Sandy.

SB: I had a business here.

FW: What was it?

SB: Alicia started school in Big Sandy. She was the first one who went to school here in Big Sandy. And the other little girl, she went over to the [unclear] school.

FW: What was the business you had here in Big Sandy?

SB: I was running the cafe down there.

FW: Home-cooked meals?

SB: Yes.

FW: Who were the customers, black and white, or was the cafe for blacks only?

SB: It was for anybody who wanted to come there.

FW: Did whites come?

SB: Sometimes some of them would come in there.

FW: Did they sit with the black customers when they came in, or did the whites get their food to go?

SB: They didn't come in, you know, to eat, you know. They'd come and sit at the table, and they'd get them a sandwich or something or other like that.

FW: To eat while they were there?

SB: Yes.

FW: What about the white food establishments in Big Sandy at that time? Were blacks allowed to go in and sit down and eat in the white establishments in Big Sandy? The white food establishments, were blacks allowed to go down and sit down and eat in the old days?

SB: No. In some places they'd go in there, but I didn't fool around going into no places.

FW: You didn't?

SB: No ma'am. I sure didn't. I didn't fool around going no places.

FW: You didn't?

SB: I just stayed my distance. I just was a house, you know.

FW: Aside from the cafe, did you work anywhere else outside the home?

SB: No, not until my husband had a stroke in '64, and we had just bought this place here. And so he was down for five years, you know, couldn't work, couldn't get out and work, you know.

FW: What kind of work did you do?

SB: In the field, anywhere I could get a job working, working the rows in the cotton field, berry field, just anywhere I could work. Work in homes for people. I had never been working in nobody home but my own home, but after then I went to work in these different people's homes around here.

FW: How much would they pay you a day to work in these homes, these private homes?

SB: Well, some of them started off at 50 cents an hour, 75 cents.

FW: Would they ever pay you in old clothes?

SB: No, I didn't take old clothes.

FW: You had to have the money.

SB: That's what I had to live off to feed my kids. Clothes couldn't buy no food for my kids. **[Laughter]**

FW: I know some people who were paid in old clothes, and it was kind of tragic.

SB: Yes, it was.

FW: It was. But you did work in the berry fields?

SB: Oh, yes, I picked berries and worked in—

FW: Where were the berry fields?

SB: That was around Mineola and around Lindale and around.

FW: What about sweet potatoes?

SB: Yes, worked in sweet potatoes. I did all kind of work.

FW: Did you?

SB: Oh, yes, ma'am. I used to work in the pulpwood yard.

FW: What did you do in the pulpwood yard? That's a new one on me.

SB: I used to cut pulpwood.

FW: Okay. All right. I asked and you answered. All right.**[Laughter]**

SB: [unclear] in the shed somewhere.

FW: What do you do to keep yourself busy now?

SB: What do I do?

FW: Yes.

SB: I just thank the Lord each day He lets me live, to work in my house and work in my flowers if I feel like it.

FW: You have some pretty flowers.

SB: No, not now.

FW: Not now?

SB: All my rosebushes and everything. I ain't able to work, you know, in flowers like I used to.

FW: Do you get out and about in Big Sandy very often? They've got a new bank up there.

SB: Oh, I go to the bank every time I get my little check.[**Laughter**]

FW: Do you? [**Laughter**] That is wonderful. What about Jarvis? Do you ever come to Jarvis?

SB: Sometimes. I used to go up through there pretty often when my husband was living. I don't bother peoples about a ride, you know, going nowhere.

FW: Did you ever drive a car?

SB: I drove a little bit when I used to work over there at F____ for this farmer, but my husband would be with me. We had but one car, and so the kids, they was learning to drive. We'd let the girls have the car to drive, and he'd carry me to work, and then he'd come back and pick me up.

FW: Are you pretty, at this point, you might as well be, I guess, but are you pretty satisfied with the quality of life you had here in Big Sandy and the friendships you formed?

SB: Oh yes, and I don't bother nobody. I didn't have no dispute with people or anything. I don't believe in such as that, honey.

FW: Do you ever go back to Starville?

SB: I used to go pretty often when my husband was living. I just go sometime now around the old home place, Water's Bluff [phonetic].

FW: Yes, Water's Bluff.

SB: But I can count every place in Starville, where I used to go over. What I think about over there, you know, the little salon and around.

FW: And Jackson was up that road a piece, right?

SB: Yes.

FW: Do you know Dr. Johnson out at the college, John F. Johnson? He's from Jackson. Dr. John F. Johnson, do you know him?

SB: No, so many Johnsons.

FW: Well, he was a little boy running around in Jackson and then later in Starville.

SB: Oh, he was?

FW: Yes, he's a very fine guy.

SB: My grandfather came from Norfolk, Virginia, in 1800 on a ferry. They settled in Oklahoma. I don't know how long he stayed there, but he stayed there a long time, and then he come to Texas over at Starville. That's where he settled at back in 1800. I know nothing about it, until the 1900s.

FW: Is that right? Well, I want you to know that we really appreciate you having us in your home and sharing some of your wonderful experiences with us.

SB: And my grandfather lived to ninety-eight.

FW: Did he now?

SB: Yes, on my daddy's side and on my mother's side, my great-grandfather, they say he was 125. He was a Price. I was related to some of them Prices up there.

FW: You know there are two sets of Prices, one over across the river in the nation on the other end, and then the Prices in Hawkins.

SB: In Hawkins? Them the Price, [unclear] Price.

FW: The ones with the money? Yes, that bunch. **[Laughter]** I know who you're talking about.

SB: Uncle Price and [unclear].

FW: Yes, I remember Price and Archie, and Mabel.

SB: Oh cousin Mabel, I just loved cousin Mabel.

FW: She went to California.

SB: Oh, yes, I know.

FW: But she was old when she went out there.

SB: Oh, she sure was. She used to run a cafe here in Big Sandy, too.

FW: Did she? I know they ran that cafe over across the river.

SB: She run one here in Big Sandy.

FW: Did she? And Sam?

SB: And Sam Price and cousin Lou run the cafe in Tyler.

FW: Is that right? I didn't realize they had these eating establishments around. But I used to go over to Sam Price's. You know Sam had the hotel.

SB: My grandmother's daddy was named Rice, my grandmother's daddy's name, my mother's mother.

FW: Do you guys have family reunions anymore? There are so many wonderful names you're mentioning, old families.

SB: Well, we used to have our family reunion down till all my sisters and brothers and Daddy all passed away. There's three of us living now.

FW: Is that right?

SB: I have a sister in Sacramento and a brother in California.

FW: Oh, my goodness.

SB: Both of them sick.

FW: Are they? They're not able to travel?

SB: No.

FW: Do you live alone now?

SB: Well, with the Lord. I live alone, but the Lord with me.

FW: Yes, of course.

SB: Yes. I am thankful and I just pray for peoples to give service to God. Give some service. Young peoples, I'm telling you, they need to give some of this service to the Lord.

FW: We've made some mistakes. Again, I thank you for your time. You are a gracious lady. And continued good health.

SB: Thank you.

[End of interview]