

Interview with Mr. Odis Hammock

Date: June 26, 2001

Interviewed by Dr. Florine White and Tracy Caradine

FW: Good afternoon. I am Dr. Florine White from Jarvis Christian College. This is Mr. Odis Hammock, and we are in his home in Big Sandy, Texas. The date is June 26, 2001. Mr. Hammock, thank you for having us in your home.

OH: Glad to have you.

FW: We wanted to talk to you during this project because you have a unique perspective we want you to share with us. But before we get into the school systems here in Big Sandy during the period of the study, please tell us something about yourself, about your education, and a little bit about Big Sandy, Texas.

OH: I grew up here in Big Sandy. In fact, I was born right on this corner seventy-nine years ago. My parents lived here. My father worked for the Texas-Pacific Railway Company pumping water for steam locomotives. I went to school several years.

Then we moved away once or twice following the job to Fort Worth and another place, and then I came back and finished high school back here. Started college five days after I got out of high school at East Texas State Teachers College.

FW: Where is that?

OH: At Commerce, and finished my bachelor's degree, and then started on my master's.

During that time, World War II started, and our high school principal resigned, so I came back to finish the year, thinking that I would go into the service at the end of that year. But due to health reasons, I didn't, and so I taught here for forty-six years following that. Taught all the math and science to begin with in Big Sandy High School, and also served as principal. For the first two years, I served as elementary principal, and then when the high school principal quit, I started serving there.

FW: Something about the town?

OH: The town. I remember as a child we had several things going around here. We had about three gins, two banks, two drug stores, doctors' offices over the drugstores, several general merchandise stores. Each store would have hardware, dry goods, and groceries. In fact, Highway 80 didn't come through, as it is now, until about 1934. Before that, Highway 80 was Grove Street, which passes on the north side of my house here.

We had a big cotton yard down near where the post office is now. We'd play on those bales of cotton in the fall, and in the spring we'd play baseball down there.

FW: Tell us a little bit what it was like when you had two separate school systems here in Big Sandy.

OH: When we had two separate schools, one was Excelsior, which I believe it was Lyle Street that it was on, and then our high school was near—well, within a block of where the high school is presently.

Prior to integration, we tried to upgrade our school on Lyle Street, and had a new building built and got new furniture and made several improvements. But then I believe it was about 1965, roughly, when integration came, I'm not sure, here in Big Sandy.

FW: Where was the white elementary school located?

OH: At the high school. It was all together.

FW: Were there any obvious differences in the physical facilities of the two-school plan?

OH: Well, the high school near where it presently is was a brick two-story building, and the one on Lyle Street had brick up, I believe, to the windows, and then from there up it was some other type of material.

FW: What about, as an administrator, did you have any knowledge about school supplies and equipment and the distribution within each system? Did the two elementary schools have the same general type of equipment or supplies, to your knowledge?

OH: Probably the high school here had more laboratory equipment. We had a homemaking lab, so we had a few things that were not at the other school.

FW: You mentioned earlier that the black high school students attended Hawkins.

OH: That's right. Just prior to integration, the high school students—at one time, we taught them all down here at Big Sandy, but later, when we had fewer students, I think it got down to about twenty or twenty-five. We contracted with [Fouke -]Hawkins High School to teach them. When we started integration, we took the high school first, probably because of saving money, more than likely. But it worked very well, and they were a good group of students. Integration went very smoothly in the beginning.

FW: As an administrator, I'm sure you were notified early on about this notion of integration. How did you receive word that integration was to occur and when it was supposed to happen?

OH: Well, as far as I know, we just set a date for it to begin, and we didn't make any extra provisions. I mean, we had enough space at the time to take in the twenty students in with the other students.

FW: Did you make any special preparation with your staff?

OH: I think that we had some conferences, you know, with the teachers and explained the situation.

FW: Since there was no black high school at Big Sandy at that time, you did not have to worry about what to do with black teachers, did you?

OH: That's right. We kept all of our teachers.

FW: All of your white teachers?

OH: All the white and all the black.

FW: How did the blacks get integrated into the system? Initially, the high school was integrated, right?

OH: Yes.

FW: And there were no black teachers there then?

OH: Not at the beginning.

FW: Okay. But when you integrated the elementary school, you kept all of your black teachers?

OH: Yes.

FW: In like positions?

OH: And then we hired other teachers in the high school. I don't know what year that he came, but we had a black band director for around twenty years here. Of course, presently they have a black high school principal.

FW: Yes. How many principals do you have in the Big Sandy system now? Three?

OH: We have three presently.

FW: And the high school principal is black?

OH: That's correct.

FW: He's been there many years, hasn't he?

OH: Yes, we hired him while I was working there as an assistant coach. Then he went to other places, Gladewater and Pittsburg [Texas] and other places and came back here.

FW: Your tenure in this Big Sandy School system was from 19—?

OH: 1942 to 1988.

FW: Upon hearing about integration, what were your greatest hopes?

OH: That it would work well and that the students would get along, and that we would not have any problems.

FW: What were your reservations or fears?

OH: I really didn't know what to expect, but I was pleasantly surprised that it worked well.

FW: Did you have any notion—personally, I hesitate to ask this, but I'll ask it—did you have any notion personally about the intelligence level of the black students? What were your expectations for the black students' ability to compete?

OH: Well, I really didn't think much about it until we got them into our classes and actually, through tests and through daily studies, found out what they could do.

FW: Were there any apprehensions, say, on the part of the school or on the part of some of the white parents, about any possible social relationship that might be formed as a result of this integration?

OH: There was not a parent that talked with me about that situation.

FW: Talking about black and white now, which group benefited from integration?

OH: I felt that both blacks and whites probably benefited from it.

FW: In what ways?

OH: In that there is better understanding between them, and when they become friends, they can work together better.

FW: Let me go back a moment. Problems? I think you indicated that there were very few problems encountered.

OH: We had very few, very few.

FW: What about black teachers? Was there any reservations about accepting black teachers into the integrated system once there was a need to absorb teachers into the system?

OH: No, I think there was an idea of trying to work and get a better percentage of black teachers into our school system. After one principal retired, we hired Dr. Bowie for our elementary principal.

FW: When was that?

OH: I really don't remember.

FW: A long time ago?

OH: I would think about in the seventies, maybe '75. I'm not sure. It could have been earlier.

FW: Looking back for a moment, what did integration do for your career as an administrator?

OH: I really don't know that it made a great deal of difference.

FW: Still looking back, has integration worked for Big Sandy independent school district, as far as you are concerned?

OH: As far as I am concerned, it worked as smoothly as possible.

FW: Have you been in a position to hear any complaints about integrated schools and the idea of re-segregating schools into so-called "community schools"? Do you think that idea is alive and well, to re-segregate schools?

OH: I haven't heard any of that. Now I know that now there seems to be more private schools, and I don't think that's good, because when you take the students from—private schools will not take all students, and public schools do. So I've never been especially for that.

FW: Were there any organized protests of any kind here in Big Sandy relating to either school integration or integrating the public facilities like restaurants and things like that?

OH: Not that I know of.

FW: I think you have answered this, and I am forgetful. Were there any meetings, interracial group meetings, to strategize concerning integration or segregated meetings on either side to try to prepare for smooth transition when integration came about?

OH: I don't think there were any, except maybe the school administrators' and teachers' meetings. Otherwise, I believe it worked out well.

FW: Today from what you hear and what you see in the culture, is integration working?

OH: I believe that it is. I think, you know, we may always have some problems, but we'll have some problems if we're segregated.

FW: Yes indeed. Generally, do the races appear to be getting along better today than they did in the sixties, or worse? What's your feel for that, how the races are getting along?

OH: I feel that there is a gradual improvement. I don't think there's been any abrupt change, but I think gradually they are improving.

FW: Did you observe any disadvantages as a result of integrating the school system?

OH: Not that I can think of.

FW: Which group gained the most from integration, blacks or whites?

OH: That I don't know, but I think both maybe gained something. I think maybe our students improved some overall.

FW: Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you want to share with us that maybe can lend some insight, understanding into something that is so important that happened quite a while ago?

OH: I can't recall anything right now, but as I get older, there are many things I forget about. **[Laughter]** But as far as I know, there isn't.

FW: Well, I take it that if the situation came up today to integrate or not to integrate, you would say "Let's integrate."

OH: I would say integrate. With that first group, we had several students like Dr. Sylvester Curry and others that helped us. I mean, they would work with the students and made it much easier to us.

FW: That's good. Ms. Caradine, do you have any questions?

TC: How did the white students get along with the first group of black students that came over with the first year of integration?

OH: The only thing that I noticed right at first, I mean, even though we were all together, we seemed to be kind of segregated at first. Then as they become closer friends and all, they had friends both black and white. But right at first, each group would kind of stay to themselves. That is one thing that I noticed.

TC: Was there anything you noticed in particular about the black students regarding the education that they received at the black school? Did they seem to be more studious?

OH: They were studious, the ones we had. Now, there might have been more dropouts back then, and we might have had the better students, but the students that we got were good students to begin with.

FW: I need to ask you something. It has been brought up over and over about used textbooks and used buses and that sort of thing. Were you in a position to make any of these decisions about the dispersment of equipment or anything like that?

OH: No, at that time really I had the white high school here, and the principal at Excelsior and the superintendent I think had more to do with that. But as far as textbooks, I was textbook custodian for the high school up here all the time that I worked, and we got the same books for both groups.

FW: I can't tell you how much we appreciate us to come and to hear some of the things that you've observed firsthand.

TC: I understand that the year prior to integration, that they cut out having a prom at the white high school. Did that have anything to do with the coming of integration?

OH: I'm not sure. That is one thing and I hadn't thought about that. I'm not whether it was prom or senior trip, but one was stopped, afraid, you know, some problem might exist.

TC: And in an effort to keep that problem from ever occurring, they just cut it out?

OH: That's right.

FW: When did the prom start back up?

OH: Well, back then, we usually just had kind of a banquet at school. Sometimes we would have it in the study hall, sometimes in the gym, and in the hall one time, I remember, and it wasn't really a prom like they go to now. Usually it is just a meal and a dress-up and go. But I don't know if we cut that. We might have, I'm not sure. But I do know that the senior trip was stopped.

TC: Were any other activities halted because of integration?

OH: That is the only one that I can recall.

FW: Did the problem with a limited number of black cheerleaders come up while you were a principal?

OH: At some time, I believe there was something, I'm not positive. At some time, though, I think there was a question about that.

TC: Were the black parents active in the PTA after integration? Was there much parent participation there?

OH: Not right at first, but it grew as we went along.

TC: Why do you think that was so?

OH: I feel like it was just because we had been separate, and they were just kind of following tradition there, or something. But later on they joined in and we had good participation.

[End of interview]