

Interview with Mrs. Clara Henry-Kay

Date: June 28, 2001

Interviewed by Tracy Caradine

TC: My name is Tracy Caradine, Director of Library Services at Jarvis Christian College. Today I am interviewing Mrs. Clara Kay, and today's date is Thursday, June 28, 2001.

Ms. Kay, before we begin our conversation, would you just tell us a little bit about yourself, where are you from, and some things that you have done here in the community?

CHK: First of all, I would like to clarify my name a little bit. My name is Clara Kay, but my maiden name is the name that I am most comfortable with, and that is Henry, because I am very proud of my name.

I am a Hawkins person. I was born, raised, high-school educated here in Hawkins. This is my home. I attended elementary school all the way through high school in Hawkins, and I graduated from Hawkins Colored High School in 1957. After I graduated from high school, I attended Grambling College, not Grambling University, but Grambling College.

My elementary days were wonderful. I couldn't wait for the day that I started to school. I always wanted to follow my brothers and sisters to school.

In my family, there were eight children. We have one sister now who is deceased, I will talk about her later on, because she was a joy to us. There were five girls and three boys. We have a loving mother who is ninety years old right now. I help to care for her in our home. Our dad is deceased, and he was a joy. He was really a joy. He was a Jarvis student also, as well as my mother.

My mom and dad both attended Jarvis. My mother worked in the laundry here at Jarvis. My dad worked, as well as played, on the Jarvis' baseball team. My daddy was a good baseball player. In his day, if he possibly could have, he would have been a professional, I know that he would have. He loved Jarvis also. My mother and daddy met at Jarvis and married.

We lived just right up the road—home is just right up the road from Jarvis. They both worked, and they worked to educate us. My dad worked for Humble Oil Company, which is now Exxon, but at that time he was a janitor and was a good janitor. I tell you, that man was really something else. I could talk about him all day long.

My mother worked domestically for white families in the community. Later on she and my dad built the Chatterbox Cafe. That Chatterbox Cafe fed a lot of students and faculty members and workers, as well as presidents at Jarvis and it's located right on Highway 80. It is just a shell right now, but it has fed many students, on credit, some of which went off still owing them, but they didn't care, because they felt like they were doing a service to the students at Jarvis.

Basically, other than the fact that I am very fortunate to have been reared in Hawkins, because all of my athletic skills and the things that later on proved to be my profession were drawn from Hawkins.

I started off playing tennis when I was nine years old, under a wonderful man who was my coach, my mentor, my principal, and later on my boss, Mr. T. H. Burton. He was very instrumental in

my life. I am the only one, again, out of a family of eight children, who went off to college. That was because I received a scholarship. Of course, my mother and dad, not being financially able to pay for my schooling, it was wonderful for me to be able to go off to college and use that scholarship money to pursue my education.

He taught me everything I know, and those other little itty-bitty pieces of coaching skills that I learned later on in life. He taught me character as well as to learn to persevere amidst trials, tribulations, or whatever else came into one's life. He was a wonderful coach and a wonderful mentor.

I am proud to say that I played with some of the best tennis players. When I say that, I have to stop at a point, because after Arthur Ashe, then my tennis career, professionally, stopped. Arthur Ashe and I did play together. I even played with Althea Gibson. She was able to come here to our little town of Hawkins and, as a child, I can say that I played with Althea Gibson. I was able to go to different states and play tennis because of Mr. Burton and because of the things that he taught us.

I am not the only one, believe me, out of this little community, who was able to play and pursue their careers in athletics, by no means, but I had other players, other schoolmates, who played with me, but we went to places such as North Carolina, South Carolina, New York, Florida, many other states, and that is wonderful to say, because during those times—and remember, I graduated in 1957 from high school—because of Mr. Burton we were able to go to places and play tennis and to further our tennis abilities despite being black students, and this was wonderful. Mr. Burton was a super-fantastic man.

Our parents did a lot of things, along with Mr. Burton, in order to get funds available for us to be able to go, but so many of the funds Mr. Burton went out of his own pocket to provide for us.

During this time, we were segregated. So when we would travel, a lot of times we would have to stay in his car because we could not get hotel rooms. I can remember us traveling and we would stop at service stations and places along the way to use the restrooms. And we could not use the white facilities. And we would have to go to the back or we would have to go someplace else in order to use the restroom. We made it, however.

We could not go in a lot of the restaurants because segregation still existed in those Southern states, so we would pack lunches along the way. Our mothers knew how to fry their chicken and fix that box up so that the food would be preserved, and Mr. Burton would always make certain that we had plenty of fruit. Plenty of fruit, apples and oranges and bananas until they would give out. So as far as that is concerned about our eating, we were able to do that.

Once we reached our destinations, places had been already provided and made possible for our lodging and where we were going to be living, and so that was great within itself. Of course, we as kids we didn't understand a whole lot of things that were going on, but we knew that there were differences. Because to say that there are blacks over here and then there are whites over here, and the things that we went through, and the things that we knew existed while we were coming up through grade school and all, we knew that there were differences. But you asked me to say something about myself.

TC: I know you say that you encountered all of these difficulties once you left the state traveling to other places to play tennis. While here in your own hometown, was racism as extreme as that that you encountered on the road?

CHK: No, it was not. I think Hawkins is a special place. I really think that it is a special place. I think that the good Lord has really looked down on this little town, because we never saw a lot of the racism that we knew existed. We, during the course of my life growing up, never saw a whole lot of things. We could hear about some things. We knew of some instances, because I have a cousin here who lives in Hawkins whose dad was subjected to some racism and a brother who had some encounters with law-enforcement officers, but nothing to the extent where we saw a lot of brutality, this type of thing, no.

TC: Were you surprised at things that were happening outside of your community, or were you just aware of them?

CHK: I think I was more aware of them.

TC: Not surprised?

CHK: Not surprised.

TC: Your community in which you lived here in Hawkins, the area that your house was in, was it all black?

CHK: The area where I lived? Yes.

TC: Did you have any contact with white children growing up here in Hawkins?

CHK: Oh, yes. Some of my best friends, our best friends as kids were some of our best friends. The Holmes lived here in Hawkins, the Russells, they had children, and so because my mother worked in their homes, you see we had our friends also. They would even come to our house and play with us. We would go and play with them. You have to realize that we were kind of away from the woods-type black people in the area because we lived right on Highway 80.

TC: More city types?

CHK: Yes, we were kind of city-country kids. **[Laughter]** But all in all, as I said before, we didn't have any big, big problems.

TC: So even growing up in a segregated time, you still had contact with white kids of your own age?

CHK: Oh, yes.

TC: And the relationship was good?

CHK: Yes.

TC: Going to the Hawkins Colored High School, what type of facility was that school? Describe the condition of it.

CHK: Our school was nice. Our school was very nice. Number one, Mr. Burton was the type of person and employed the type of personnel in the community who would have to take care of our school. Our school, as simple and meager as it was, was always neat, always clean. We never

walked past a piece of paper on the corridor, on the halls, even on the playground, without being aware of it and picking it up and putting it in the trash can. Our facilities were simple, but neat and clean.

To tell the truth, I was surprised to a certain extent when I came back and started teaching at Hawkins white high school to see what they also had and some of their facilities as compared to ours, because I can tell you this, ours was much cleaner.

TC: The textbooks and materials that you all received at the colored high school, were they new textbooks or were they used textbooks passed down from the white school.

CHK: They were used textbooks passed down from the white elementary all the way through high school, they were used. And we knew this because we could look at the signatures in the book and tell that they were used. Of course, we would get the ones whose backs maybe might be falling off and all of that, but still, we were able to use them. Later on, later on, we were able to get some new later on.

TC: The curriculum at the colored high school. What type of classes were available to the black students?

CHK: We had classes that were comparable to any school that you could think of. We had typing. We had access to typing, which we thought was great at that time for us. Of course, we had the English, the literature, the spelling, the reading, writing. Writing and memorization was just almost embedded us, and to be the very best that we could be, and we did.

TC: Do you feel like the black teachers pushed you harder than normal?

CHK: Yes, I did. Yes, I did. We had some wonderful teachers. And we worked hard. Everybody worked hard to be the best.

TC: Was the school day at the black school longer than that of the white school?

CHK: I think it was. **[Laughter]** I really don't remember that. And the reason why I can say that is because my school day never ended before six o'clock.

TC: Why was that?

CHK: That was because immediately after school was out, I had to hit the tennis court or the basketball court. So my day was long, anyway. But it seemed like we got out at four o'clock, at four o'clock.

TC: What type of transportation did they have for the black students to get to the colored high school?

CHK: We did have school buses, but those, of course, within a certain radius had to walk. From where we lived along Highway 80, all we did was cross the highway. We had a little trail, and we would go across the railroad track, and then we would go up by the black Baptist church, and we were right at school.

TC: How active were your parents in the PTA at the black school?

CHK: My parents were very active, very. And they had a long time to be active, because there were eight of us. And so my mother and daddy made certain that they were actively involved in the PTA.

TC: Do you recall the relationship between the black church and the colored high school, what kind of relationship existed there?

CHK: Between the churches and the schools?

TC: Right.

CHK: They were together, they were together.

TC: The church supported the black school?

CHK: Always, always.

TC: Well, I know that integration did not take place while you were in school here in Hawkins, but did the idea of integration ever cross your mind?

CHK: Yes, it did. Along the way I can say that it crossed my mind because, you know, we had access to radios, and so we could hear what was going on. Later on I can remember our dad was able to get a little used TV and a little screen with something like this, you know. So we were exposed to that, and as we grew up and read and all, we were hoping that we also could be integrated in order to get some of these things that we saw other kids were getting.

TC: So that little thought was there?

CHK: Yes, wonder whether it will ever happen to us here.

TC: I understand that after your schooling here in Hawkins, graduating from high school, you went off to Gramlin College, and you decided to become a teacher. What influenced your decision to become a teacher?

CHK: Oh, my goodness. First of all, I think my mother and my daddy, and second of all, my principal, my coach. Those were my most-influential people.

TC: Do you think that the colored high school kind of had geared their curriculum towards producing students that would go into the teaching profession, as far as the girls, and maybe a different profession for the boys? They kind of geared them toward certain professions?

CHK: Yes, I think that the teachers did try their best to gear us towards teaching because, as I knew back then, it seemed that the majority of the graduates went into the teaching field. They were either teachers or coaches. In some instances, went hand-in-hand.

TC: After becoming a teacher, why did you decide to come back to Hawkins and teach?

CHK: I really didn't decide to come back to Hawkins to teach. There were changes in my life. I did teach in Louisiana. But when I had changes in my life, prior to that, I got married, I have a son, I am divorced. My son is thirty-four years old. But back then when I did come back home, I only came back for a visit.

Mr. Burton was the principal then, told me that if I ever decided to come back in the area, he would like for me to coach and teach in Hawkins, and I told him I would think about it, if that ever happened. But, of course, I returned to Louisiana. At that time I was teaching in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Later on, I came back again, and this time I stayed. That was in 1972.

TC: In 1972 when you returned, you became a teacher here in Hawkins, and Hawkins had been integrated, correct?

CHK: Yes.

TC: What was the first grade that you taught here at Hawkins?

CHK: To tell you the truth, I taught them all. Because I taught from first grade physical education through high school, which went into my coaching, so I taught them all.

TC: So you had a mixture of black and white students?

CHK: Yes.

TC: This was shortly after integration. How did the races seem to be getting along at that particular time?

CHK: At that particular time, and as far as I could tell, everything went pretty smoothly. The students seemed to get along all right. You could tell starting at the junior high school that, of course, the white and the black kids—and I hate using those two words. I would much rather say pink and chocolate—that the pink kids all stayed together, the chocolate kids all stayed together. So we were still separated.

But the faculty tried to show that we could integrate, and we were trying to show this to the kids. So at lunchtime, we would all kind of sit together, mingle together, to show the kids that we could do it this way. And I'm sure that within the classroom the teachers tried to do the same thing, at least I want to believe that they did.

TC: There was a deliberate effort by the faculty to mix and mingle?

CHK: Yes, I think so.

TC: Interesting. Were there ever any times where there were problems between the white teachers and the black teachers? Were there ever any sort of problems where the teachers were divided racially?

CHK: Yes, but you have to understand, from the time I came to Hawkins and when I retired in 1994, there were several incidents along the way, and so I would have to step back in time to talk about some things. There weren't any real big issues, but there were concerns, and there were things that happened that we really had to try to settle and try to do something about, or else it could have caused rifts in the community, as well as in the school.

Yes, we did have some problems as far as our black teachers and white teachers were concerned, because I never shall forget when they integrated that some of our better black teachers had to be let go. They retained all of, or the majority of, the white teachers.

TC: Regardless of ability?

CHK: Yes, yes. They had ways of saying how they did this, all of which I really didn't understand and how they could do this, but it was done.

TC: Now at this time, the administration, was it still completely white? The principal, the superintendent, the school board, when you returned in '72?

CHK: Yes.

TC: Do you feel the black teachers were able to go to the white administration to express concerns and maybe talk about problems that you were having? Were they receptive to the black teachers?

CHK: Again, we have to step back, because Mr. Burton was our spokesman for the black teachers. Mr. Burton was well-thought-of in the community by the white. He was looked up to. He was respected. But he was a black man in a white man's world. The community was not going to do a whole lot to go against Mr. Burton because of many reasons—because there possibly could have been an uproar. But Mr. Burton was our spokesman. Therefore, any problems that did exist, Mr. Burton took it upon himself to try to do something about it.

TC: At this time, what position did Mr. Burton hold? He was formerly the principal at the colored high school. At this time, what position did he hold?

CHK: He was still a principal.

TC: He was still a principal?

CHK: Yes.

TC: Do you feel that the white teachers gave equal amounts of time in the classroom to the black students and the white students?

CHK: I cannot say. I cannot say. I can only think about insights and instances, things of which I observed.

TC: And what were some of those things?

CHK: We never liked to talk about what you call the bad things, and I don't think that it is bad, but I never shall forget, I have a nephew, who is really a good boy. He is full of life, energetic, enthusiastic, little robust, little twirp.

Anyway, he used to get into so much at school, and this is when he was in elementary school, that the teacher just put him in the back of the room, so he became the classroom clown, so he could just cut up and do what he wanted to back there, just as long as he didn't disturb the rest of the class up front. He was at the back of the room just cutting up, just giving himself something to play with. I could remember that, and it bothered me, and I watched this for a long time before I stepped in.

But before I stepped in, I did go and see the elementary principal, and I talked to him about it. And he came and through a peephole in the door, he observed and saw this happening. And I really think that Jerry was crippled at that time because of the things that he was allowed to do and not participate in class like a regular student should have at that time.

TC: Do you think that if the same kind of behavior had been coming from a white child, would she have done the same thing?

CHK: I don't know, it could have just been her as a person. She wasn't one of the better teachers, anyway. I'm sorry. **[Laughter]**

TC: Do you think integration helped or harmed the education that black students were receiving?

CHK: Now I think it has harmed it.

TC: How do you think it harmed it?

CHK: Because, as a race, I think once discipline was taken out of the schools, as far as blacks were concerned, I think that it hurt us. I think that the black students started to see that, "The white kids don't have to do this, and they can get away with doing this, and nothing is done to them, so why should I?" I think discipline played a big part in education, as well as what they did, have become, I really do—

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

CHK —hurt in the long run, It really did.

TC: Do you think that integration deprived the black students of some of the moral lessons that were traditionally taught in the black school, as far as how to dress and how to behave in certain situations?

CHK: Yes, I do.

TC: In the integrated school, were there any attempts to teach these type of things: moral as well as—

CHK: Yes, there were, because we cannot say that all black teachers were good teachers, all white teachers were good teachers. I think you had an intermingling of both, yes. There were some pink teachers that I just loved, respected, and thought that they were doing a good job. I thought that there were some of my color who were not doing a good job. It could have been me, also, because I am not above anything like that, but I think there were some who tried to do these things.

TC: In the now-integrated school that you entered into, as far as teaching, did the races eventually start to socialize? I know, you said that they were still kind of separate in '72 when you were teaching, and that was by their own choice, but did that eventually disintegrate? Did they eventually start to mix?

CHK: Yes, it did. Yes, it did. And I think that this change started to happen later in the seventies and into the early eighties, and on into the mid eighties. Yes, it did start to change. The children started playing together more, having fun time together.

I think that athletics, though, made it happen even more because these athletes knew they had to play together in order to compete together in order to have a unit of a team together in order to win together. Yes, I think that it made a difference and change.

TC: Did the community change as well?

CHK: Well, yes, yes.

TC: I understand that the black people and the white people had a pretty good relationship and it just continued to get better.

CHK: Yes.

TC: What do you consider the greatest accomplishment of integration?

CHK: I think one of the greatest accomplishments of integration has been that our chocolate kids, black students, have been able to now go into fields, the job markets, that they were not able to enter into years ago. Ways and means have been opened up. Dreams now can become realities because of integration. So I think that is one of the best things that has happened.

TC: With integration?

CHK: Yes.

TC: Before we wrap up, I just want to know, whatever happened to that old colored high school building and all of the memories and trophies and school songs?

CHK: You almost are going to make me cry when you talk about things like this. With our school reunion coming up, it brings back so many memories. Right now, the only thing that we have left of our old school that can visibly be seen is the border of a brick wall and some steps in the area where our old school used to be. Over a period of time, it started to kind of decay, fall in. Then the building, the school facility was sold to Jarvis, and then later on, I am not sure how it got lost in the flow.

But all of our trophies, our band uniforms, our basketball uniforms, those types of things, was stored in the old white high school underneath the gymnasium. So the majority of those uniforms, equipment, blah, blah, blah, eventually just decayed away.

However, through the foresight of Mr. Burton and some of the persons in the community, we were able to salvage some things, and so in my own possession, I have salvaged some trophies, some plaques, some basketball uniforms. We were able to salvage, because of Mrs. Burton, Mr. Burton's wife, who passed about four years ago, we were able to salvage, and she gave me some mementos that I still have, but all the rest of the equipment and all, it was just decayed away, thrown away. We understand burned, carried to the dump grounds, and so.

The school song we lost. We still know it. The dragon we lost, our mascot name, and all. We still retain that in our school reunion.

TC: In the white high school, are there any signs, any type of remembrance of the old colored high school?

CHK: No, I was able to, along with Mr. Burton and Mrs. Burton, again pull out some trophies, some plaques and all, and put them in the trophy case at Hawkins, because Mr. Burton later on after integration, much further on, Mr. Burton became the only administrator, and we were able to get a great big picture of him fixed and hung on the wall in the school. So I think it is still there. I really cry whenever I go back to my old alma mater, because it just brings back too many memories for me

TC: So in order to retain those memories and to keep the memory of that old high school alive, you all do the reunions every year?

CHK: Every two years. So this is our reunion year.

TC: Well, Ms. Clara Henry-Kay, it was nice interviewing you.

CHK: Thank you very much, I really enjoyed it. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]