

Interview with Ms. Winifred Washington

Date: June 27, 2001

Interviewed by Tracy Caradine

TC: My name is Tracy Caradine, Director of Library Services at Jarvis Christian College. Today I am interviewing Ms. Winifred Washington. Today's date is Wednesday, June 27, 2001.

Ms. Washington, before we go into the topic of integration of the public schools and Hawkins, Fouke, and the Big Sandy area, I need you to give me a little background information about yourself.

WW: My Name is Winifred Jo Washington. I was born here in Hawkins, Texas, and I attended the Hawkins public schools from '59 to 1970. I first attended Fouke-Hawkins Colored School, and then I graduated from the Hawkins High School.

TC: Is your family still in this area?

WW: Yes, they are. They are still here.

TC: Were your parents employed here in the Hawkins area?

WW: Yes, they were. My mother was employed here in Hawkins, and so was my father.

TC: What type of work did they do?

WW: My father worked at a private hunting and fishing club. It was a private lake. My mother was a housekeeper for one of the teachers in Hawkins.

TC: The community in which you lived, was it segregated?

WW: Yes, it was. There might have been maybe one or two white people that lived in that area, but more so it was more segregated, mostly blacks.

TC: Did you have any type of contact with the white neighbors or white people that lived in the community?

WW: There were some people—they didn't really live in the community. They lived in the surrounding area. My dad was friends with the white man and his family. They would come over. They would go hunting. My dad and him would go 'coon-hunting at night. His wife and her children would stay there with me, and my mother, and I had two more sisters, and her children would stay there until they returned. Sometimes it would be in the morning, because you hunt 'coons at night. **[Laughter]**

TC: So you had a pretty good relationship?

WW: Yes, we did.

TC: Going into the integration of the public schools, you will be speaking from a student standpoint. Can you give me maybe a physical description of the type of facilities that you had there at the Fouke-Hawkins all-black high school?

WW: When I was a student at the Fouke-Hawkins School, we had, according to what I saw, was good facilities, you know, we were very fortunate, I think, according to the other schools that we would visit, our school was up to par, and we had good books, a good school, a good gym, and all of that. So at that time we thought we were probably rich. **[Laughter]**

TC: Did you notice any differences between your school and the white school across town or across the track? Any noticeable difference?

WW: We seldom went there, but their school was an old school. It was an old school. It might have been larger at that time than ours, but basically it was probably the same. I didn't really realize any differences, because we really didn't go over there, just when we walked downtown and we had to pass it.

TC: What kind of transportation did you all have?

WW: We had school buses. We had three bus drivers that would pick us up. Each area that you lived—we lived in Fouke, so we had a bus to run the Fouke run. At that time, they had a Red Hill run, we had a Foxes-Front run. There was a little community, it was in Hawkins, they called it Foxes Front, out north of Hawkins. We had a Jarvis run, because we had students here at Jarvis going to school. Then we had a cross-the-river run. There were kids that lived across the railroad track. The buses would come and pick us up and bring us to school, so that was good.

TC: What kind of classes were offered at the all-black school? What was the curriculum like?

WW: It was very good. We had English, math, social studies, sciences, and everything that the white kids had, I am assuming.

TC: What kind of extracurricular activities?

WW: We had basketball. We had softball, tennis. That's all I can remember, because we were real big with basketball and tennis. Mr. Burton loved those two games. We didn't have a football team like the white school did, though.

TC: No football?

WW: No football.

TC: Did your basketball team ever go to play the white school?

WW: Oh, no, we played black schools.

TC: Only black schools?

WW: Only black schools.

TC: How active were your parents in the PTA?

WW: My mother was very active in the PTA, and my aunts. All of the black parents were very active in the PTA at that time, because I can remember my mother coming. At that time, the buses would actually pick them up at night to bring them, because most likely we didn't have transportation. But they were very active in the PTA.

TC: How active was the black church?

WW: In the schools?

TC: In the schools. Did they play an important role there?

WW: I don't really remember if the black church played an important role in the school or not at that time. I probably wasn't even aware of it, not meaning that they didn't.

TC: Being a student?

WW: Yes. [Laughter]

TC: Do you think integration was welcomed by your parents? Was it a welcomed idea?

WW: I can remember my mother and my dad talking about it, and they thought that it was more than right that we should integrate.

TC: Did they have any type of discussion with you and your sister?

WW: I was the only one. My sisters were already gone. They had already left. We had always been taught, you know, you don't want to be acting up, and going down there and try to get along, things like that.

TC: Do you know if there were any community meetings held prior to integration to kind of introduce the idea to the black community and tell them how it was going to progress or maybe address their fears and concerns about integration?

WW: There may have been, but I wasn't aware of it. But I do know we had several meetings at the school before we integrated. The teachers would tell us, "You know, next year we're going to integrate. You all will be at the white school." And, you know, we want you all to go over there and don't be acting up, and just have some intelligence, and all of that. It was drilled into us that "You are going to the white school" whether we wanted to or not. There was no choice. It was sad, because it was an ending of an era, an all-black era.

TC: The year prior to legal integration, I understand that the students had a choice if they wanted to attend the white school. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

WW: Yes, we did. I want to say maybe sixty-five or sixty-six, we had a choice. I remember Mr. Burton probably called us all in the gym and told us that we had a choice if we wanted to go. We did have two girls that went and one guy that went there, but we didn't go.

And the ones that did go, they were not successful there. One was going to play football, the black guy was, but it didn't work out that way, because at that time I don't think his grades were good enough, so he was not actually playing football, he was the water boy. Then there were two girls that went over, and I am not for sure exactly what happened, but they came right back the next year to the colored school.

TC: Did you consider going to the white school, or there was no desire?

WW: There was no desire to go.

TC: You didn't want to go just to see what it would be like?

WW: I never really thought about it. I was comfortable in my own surroundings at that time in those years. Everything was all-black. We would go to the fair on all-black days. It was on a Monday. That is when all the black kids would go to the fair, I mean the Dallas Fair. We had buses from Hawkins that would take us there. Even the Tyler Fair, there was a black day. So we were comfortable in our own little black world.

The white people, and I am not saying all of them, but some of the white people were not very nice, so why would we want to go to a place where people were not nice to you. We could be standing around the streets at Hawkins and going in and maybe a truckload of white people would go by and holler out, "Nigger!" They always had bad things to say to you.

Also, we would go to the stores, and not all of them, but sometimes they would want to wait on the white people first, even though you had been there, standing there, and they would wait on the white people first and not wait on you. So why would we want to go somewhere where we weren't treated right? So we were comfortable where we were.

TC: Now, once integration was going to come to pass and you knew that it was going to come to pass, was that transition hard?

WW: As a matter of fact, it was real smooth. It was much smoother and more easier than I ever dreamed it would be from all the talks that we had had about white people and this and that. Like I said, I knew them. My dad was friends with one, and then my mother worked for some. We just knew white people, but we had never been in a school background with them.

Actually, it was a very smooth transition from what I could see. I didn't have any problems with them. I guess they had been drilled too. I remember the first time going, I guess they had been told, you know, to be nice, and then we all got together in the auditorium, and we all went, we all sophomores, we all got together, white and black, and went together. From there, everyone was nice. Everyone was nice.

There was a few little looks and a few little things, but basically it was nice. Seemed like some of the white people went out of their way to be nice to us, because I am sure they had been drilled. The white teachers, the ones that I had, they were all nice.

TC: Do you think the black students and white students got along well, or was it more of an act? Was it a genuine likeness there that they really enjoyed going to school together?

WW: Some probably did and some didn't. Some were doing it because it was the way of life, and some were doing because of their heart, their Christian heart, you know.

TC: How were the black students treated by the administration, in particular, the principal?

WW: The principal was very nice. His name was Mr. Moore, and we all called him Coach Moore because we understand he had been a coach before. He was a very nice man, and I really liked him. He treated everyone real good.

TC: Did he discipline everyone there, or did he discipline the blacks the same as he would discipline the whites?

WW: As far as I know, he did. Now there might have been some that, they didn't say, no one may have told me, but as far as I know, to me he was a fair man.

TC: Do you feel that the white teachers gave the black students and the white students an equal amount of time in the classroom? Did they pay more attention to the white students than they did the blacks?

WW: Not the classes that I was in. I think it was equal. If I needed help with a problem, the teacher was always willing to help me and some of the other blacks that were in there. I can't see any differences in that.

TC: Did you feel that you could go to a white teacher with a problem, if you had maybe something going on at home, or a problem with another student. Did you feel comfortable in going to a white teacher?

WW: There were a few there that I did feel comfortable with, that I felt like I could go to them if I had a problem.

TC: Were the black students recognized for high academic achievement after integration?

WW: I am trying to think, and I can't hardly remember, because we did have two students that were real smart. You know, I can't even remember if he was recognized or not because we did have white people and two guys. It seemed like they were really in competition with each other. There was one guy—I just can't remember. I don't know if he was valedictorian or not? I just can't say that, so I'm not going to answer that question, because I might not answer it fair. **[Laughter]**

TC: After integration, did you see any noticeable change in the community—well, the schools were now integrated, the restaurants in town, the stores. Did you see any difference in the way that blacks were treated in those public facilities?

WW: Yes, I did. Before integration, we could not go into the front of a restaurant. We had to go into the back, because they would not serve you in the front. You had to go into the back. I can remember when it started. The schools were not integrated, but the law had passed for blacks could be treated equal.

There were three black boys that went into the City Cafe, and they were thrown out, and that didn't set well. But that was before we integrated the schools. But after we integrated, there were a few people that still didn't like it, but when we went into the front, some of the waitresses didn't want to wait on you, but some would. But you could tell. It took them a while to get used to it. Some white people just did not feel like a black person was good enough to come into the front of a restaurant.

TC: After integration, did you have more socializing between the young people in the community, blacks and whites, maybe at sporting events and proms, and different things like that. Did you have more of that after integration?

WW: Yes, after integration, there were more people became friends, you know, maybe, with the white people, and we could all talk and laugh and stuff like that. Yes. There was a relationship.

TC: Did you all have a prom at the integrated?

WW: Oh, yes.

TC: It was the black and white students went to the prom together?

WW: Yes.

TC: Were there any incidences where maybe you had a mixed couple to attend the prom?

WW: No, but there was one ugly incident that did happen at the school, and I won't go into it all the way, but it was told that this black boy had asked a white girl to go to the prom, jokingly. She had two brothers that attended school. She went and told them about it, and they beat the guy up real bad. That was the only thing that I can remember that ever happened, was that.

TC: One thing, and I didn't mention it earlier, was that when we did integrate, we lost our school colors, we lost our school name, we lost most of our teachers. I don't remember one black teacher when I got to high school, I mean when I integrated. I don't remember any black teacher being there. Most of them that did not lose of their job were kind of demoted, you know, unless they were in elementary or something like that. But I don't remember any of them coming to the high school.

I thought we were stripped of everything. We adapted to the white school song, the white school colors, and everything. We couldn't take anything that we had with us. I don't think that that was fair.

TC: There was no mention of the Fouke-Hawkins High School in the now-integrated school?

WW: Right.

TC: It is like you all came out of nowhere.

WW: Right. We left everything that we had back there: high school colors, high school name, high school song. When we integrated, we went directly to the Hawkins Hawks, and we were Dragons at the old black school.

TC: I understand that prior to integration there was a new school built for the black students?

WW: Yes, there was.

TC: After integration, what became of that building?

WW: After integration, the students that were in high school went to the white school, and that was all high school. That school that we had became a junior high school, and then they had a little elementary school over on the other side of the white school. But that school became a junior high.

TC: What became of the old Fouke-Hawkins High School building?

WW: Basically it just stayed there until they finally tore it down. Nothing was ever done of it. When we left that school, and they built our new school, then that was the end of that old school.

TC: You basically answered my next question. I wanted to know what did the black students lose with integration, but you stated that they lost a lot, maybe not as far as the education standpoint, but more of the standpoint of who they were. They lost maybe some of their identity.

WW: Right. We lost our identity.

TC: Once that process had been completed, were the black parents still active in the PTA? Did they continue to play a part?

WW: Some would come, yes. My mother would come. She would come, and there were some more blacks that would come.

TC: Did you still have that complete participation that you had formerly at the black schools?

WW: No, I didn't. No, we didn't, because there were a lot of black people and black parents, and I am going to say, probably those that were not educated as much, that felt inferior—

TC: To the white people?

WW: And they didn't want to mingle to them. But some didn't have a problem with it.

TC: What do you consider the greatest accomplishment of integration here in the Hawkins, Fouke, and Big Sandy area? What was the main thing that it accomplished?

WW: The main thing that it accomplished to me was that we were equal. We could go into the front of buildings, you know, in restaurants, and go to the stores, or they could wait on you like you were a human being, and into the drug stores, and what have you. All that, even though it was not in the school system, it all played a part in the integration.

To me that was it, you know, to let some of the white people know that we were just as good as they were, you know. We didn't have to back up to them anymore. To me that was an accomplishment. They could not tell us, "Nigger, go home," or "Nigger, you can't come in here," or anything, and I think that was a big accomplishment.

They didn't like it. Some didn't, some did. But it was a way of life and they had to deal with it. Not all of the people that I met, there are some girls that I knew from the Hawkins School. We started together, and we are friends today from there. There are some people that didn't have that hardening of the heart when it comes to black people. Something I never understood of why white people hated black people so, and they hadn't done anything to them.

TC: Ms. Washington, I thank you. Very good of you.

[End of interview]