

Interview with Bennie T. Wimberly
Date: June 27, 2001
Interviewed by Tracy Caradine, Unknown interviewer

TC: My name is Tracy Caradine, Director of Library Services at Jarvis Christian College. Today is am interviewing Mrs. Bennie T. Wimberly. Mrs. Wimberly was a school teacher in the Hawkins Colored High School, as well as the Hawkins High School, which was the integrated high school. Today's date is Wednesday, June 27, 2001.

Mrs. Wimberly, let's start out by getting a little background information about yourself. Tell us where you were born and how did you end up in this Hawkins area.

BTW: I was born in Anderson County in a little community called Brushy Creek, thirteen miles north of Palestine. I went to school there through the fourth grade. The school was only six months. My dad was deprived of an education, and he wanted me to go on to school, so he purchased a place in Palestine. He wanted me to go nine months because we only went six months in Brushy Creek.

He moved my mother there, and mother stayed with me, and he brought cows and she sold milk and butter, and he raised hogs, and he would sell meat all the year. So my mother stayed with me. She moved when I was in the seventh grade, and she stayed with me until I finished high school, then she went back to Brushy Creek. I went to Butler College, Tyler, for two years. In between those times, I even came here and took some reading courses, some art courses.

TC: Here at Jarvis?

BTW: At Jarvis, yes. I attended colleges, but I can't think of the name of it. You see, I am eighty years old. [Laughter] That was many moons ago, and took several different reading courses in Dallas in summer school there in the college. But my tenure for teaching was forty-nine years. During that time, it was the first through the eighth grade with high school. Summer school I taught high school students. They had English courses. They had failed English, after I came to Hawkins.

TC: Was your first teaching job in Hawkins?

BTW: No, it was in Anderson County where I was born in a little place called Brushy Creek.

TC: That was your first teaching job?

BTW: That was my first teaching job. I taught there for six years. I'm not sure why I left—oh, yes, I got a leave of absence because that was when my first child was born. They didn't hire me back after he was born. That is when I came to Hawkins in 1948.

TC: When you came to Hawkins and got a teaching job here in Hawkins, you were employed at the all-black school?

BTW: The all-black school. Right.

TC: Describe the physical condition of this all-black school?

BTW: Well, I can say that we had just about what the white school had. The school—more was added to it in 1950, and that is when a school from out in the community at Fouke consolidated with us. We had an all-brick school. We got new books. At that time, so many black schools didn't get new books, but you know, when they was issued from Austin, but we got new books, the children got new uniforms for playing basketball. We didn't have football, but we had basketball and track. The school really supported us in every way.

TC: So often I have heard that the oil money here in Hawkins played a big part in the finances for the schools. Do you think that money was shared equally between the black school and the white schools?

BTW: I would say yes, because we got what we needed. We could order supplementary materials, and there was never a question about it. When it came to books, we got new books. You know, in a lot of places, the black school didn't get new books. But if we needed books, they came from Austin. The children got uniforms for playing sports. I would say that we got what we needed. Then we could order supplementary materials.

TC: Going back to the all-black high school, were many of the teachers from the Hawkins area, or did they come in from outside of the area to teach here?

BTW: There were a few who lived here in the Hawkins area, but quite a few came from other places. A music teacher came from Mexia. The home economics teacher came from Mexia. I lived in Troup at that time. On weekends we would go home. They were not all from here.

After Fouke came in, that was the name of the school, Fouke Elementary, they went to the eighth grade. They consolidated with Hawkins in 1950.

TC: The name changed then from what to what?

BTW: It changed to Fouke-Hawkins High School. It was Hawkins Colored High School before then, and then it was changed to Fouke-Hawkins High School. Of course some of the teachers didn't want to come, and they were a little reluctant about leaving their school out there, you know, in the country. But we got along real well. There were no problems.

TC: Do you think those people like yourself commuted like, from Troup. Was the reasoning behind that, was it that Hawkins paid more than other districts in those areas?

BTW: I am going to tell you why I was glad to get the job, because that was after my second son was born. I didn't work that year. My husband was a minister. He found out from another minister who preached in this community that there were vacancies. So I came over and was interviewed, and that is the way that I got that job. But there was one year that I did not work. That is when my second child was born.

TC: What was the pay like when you came to Hawkins?

BTW: It was good considering what I had been getting, because at my home at Brushy Creek when I worked there, there were six months school, and the base pay was \$65 a month. When I first went there, that \$65, and then you had to make that last until school started again in the fall. And it was just six months.

TC: Was it just six months for the black schools there in Brushy Creek, or was it six months for black schools and white schools?

BTW: Well, I think it was—this was down in the country, see. I think it was just in the rural areas, because the families went to West Texas about August, and they picked cotton. That is the way they made money for the winter, you know, and all. They carried the children. They would come back around the last part of November, the first of December.

TC: Black and white families did the same?

BTW: I really don't know how the whites did, but I know the blacks in that community. That was a large community. I was trying to count the families the other day, and I counted sixty-two families of blacks in that community, and I know I missed some of them.

TC: But when you came to Hawkins, you found that they had schools nine months of the year?

BTW: Right. Nine months.

TC: So the salary was pretty decent when you came to Hawkins?

BTW: According to the economy, you know, it was. In other words, I carried home around \$160 or \$170 a month. Things were cheap. That was a lot.

TC: Compared to what a black teacher was making in Brushy Creek?

BTW: Right, at Brushy Creek it was \$65 for six months. Then that other six months, you know, that old saying roothog and die poor.[Laughter]

TC: When you came to Hawkins at the black colored high school there, can you describe the curriculum? What type of courses did you have?

BTW: We had all of the courses that were required by the state. We had a home economics teacher, and she taught sewing and cooking. We had shop. Because being in the oil district, you know. We had shop. We had the boys, and I think some of the girls, took shop, and they learned to do carpenter work. So we had, after I came to Hawkins, just about anything any other school had.

TC: Whether it was black or white?

BTW: Yes.

TC: At this time, this is still prior to integration. Today teachers communicate across the grades and even across district lines in order to solve common problems that they have. Prior to integration, did you have an opportunity to interact with the white teachers over at the white school?

BTW: No, no, not really. But it was coming to pass because just before we integrated, the choral group from the black school would go over to the white school and sing, and the white choral group would come to the black and sing. That was the first getting-together. Yes. That was the first. But now when it came to the community, the boys, black and white, knew each other. They would play basketball together, and they associated together, but not the girls.

TC: Why do you think the boys associated more so than the girls?

BTW: Let's just say maybe it was a trend because the boys knew each other. The mothers worked in their homes, some of their homes, and that is the way they got to know them. That was the outlet for them. Then on the weekend, they would go to, you know, somewhere where there was a basketball goal and play basketball.

TC: Do you think the sports kind of brought the boys together?

BTW: Boys together, right.

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

BTW: They were one hundred percent. They were there for every meeting, and they were very supportive, right. They were one hundred percent, I would say.

TC: Did you get much support from the black church?

BTW: Well, not too much. You see, Mr. Burton was our principal. And those of us who did not live in Hawkins, we were required to attend church at least once or twice a month. You know, you need to come and go to church here. So I came two Sundays out of the month, because my husband was a minister, I played for the choirs. But I was here for two weekend.

There was one time when we was supposed to have visited all the parents of the students we taught. But that was a good relationship between the teachers and the parents.

TC: And the church?

BTW: And the church.

TC: Prior to integration, you said you kind of saw it coming. Did you think it was a good idea to integrate the schools?

BTW: Yes, I really do. I think it was a good idea.

TC: Why are you thinking?

BTW: Because the relationship helped both races, cause there were blacks who worked in some of the white homes, and there wasn't too many, you know, here in Hawkins, and things like that, but yes, I think it was a good idea. Yes.

TC: The year that it happened, the year that integration took place, were the black teachers given the option to transfer over to the now-integrated school?

BTW: Let me start from the beginning. Our principal, Mr. Burton, was named Assistant Superintendent, and he took care of all the business part of the superintendent job, along with the books and things like that that came in and all of that. He had an office in the white gymnasium, but he was labeled "Assistant Superintendent."

I taught eighth grade from 1950 until we integrated in the late '60s, and then when we all got together, they gave me sixth grade, and the lady who had sixth grade went to Houston to summer school that summer, and she was given the eighth grade. But she didn't work over two years. She was a diabetic, and she told me she was having

difficulty with the eighth grade. She couldn't discipline them like she could the sixth grade. So in about two years, she passed away. She had been a diabetic, and all of that, and she really passed away. She just couldn't handle those eighth grade children.

TC: This is at the integrated school?

BTW: This is at the integrated school.

TC: Was she black or white?

BTW: Black.

TC: She was black. Did most of the teachers at the Hawkins-Fouke High School, which was a black school, did they move over into the integrated schools?

BTW: I tell you what they did. They gave everybody a job. And they had more teachers than they had jobs. But the first year, they did not let anyone go, but they had them to understand and told them to see if you can find you another job for the next year. But we had teachers just sitting around, you know, when others in an ordinary school would be working, because. But they did not fire all the teachers. And they gave them notice in time that they just did not have anything—well, the population of the classroom of students, rather, they just couldn't use all of us.

TC: Were those notices given only to the black teachers, or were they given to some white teachers?

BTW: You know, I don't know about that, but I just remember the black teachers who left, you know. Yes, I remember some of the black teachers. I don't know about the white. That was kind of really in the beginning. [Laughter]

TC: Did those teachers who they had to let go, did they go to other communities to find work?

BTW: Some of them really were retirement age. So they retired. And we did have one, I won't call the name, but she had worked quite some time. So she lived in Tyler, but she just couldn't adjust to the desegregation, so she left. One teacher here, Withell Hall, that was the time when she left and came to Jarvis.

TC: Was the transition difficult for you?

BTW: No, it wasn't. It really wasn't. In fact, truthfully speaking, it was different, but it was more relaxing. We had a principal that was a little dogmatic, you know.

TC: Was this Dr. Burton?

BTW: Yes, it was Tom Burton. And with my white principal, I felt much more at ease. I have got to tell the truth. [Laughter] Bob Thunderburk. I can call his name, and bless his

heart, he has muscular dystrophy. He is in Tyler. He is sick. He was the one—that is the middle school, it was called, from the sixth through the eighth—and he was the one to integrate that school. He was concerned about all the students. He told me one day, you know, I feel sorry for the black students, because there are fewer of them than of the whites. But anyone who went into the office to talk to him, he had time. If there were some problem, he would solve it. He really would.

I remember when Martin Luther King was killed and the black students went to their flag, and they sang the song “We Shall Overcome.” He did not interrupt them. He just let them sing it until they got through and came back to class. He was just the one to integrate, you know. He really was. I thought a lot of him, because there was no pressure from him in any way.

Unknown interviewer: How was the pressure different from him to Mr. Burton?

BTW: Oh, Lord. [Laughter] He was dogmatic.

TC: Why did you think he was that way? Was it just his personality?

BTW: I guess it always was. We always said that he was born in a family where he was the only boy and he had a lot of sisters, and he just felt like he should rule the roost. You didn't sneeze unless he knew he was going to sneeze. [Laughter] Now this is the truth.

I remember one time, every teacher was supposed to do a program during that year. I choose Thanksgiving. My sons were Boy Scouts, you know, the little whatever you call

it. So at the end, I had students from other grades to be on our program. My sons were little Boy Scouts, so they had on their suits. They said, "We are thankful," then church, and we were thankful for the churches, and just things like that in the community. Mr. Burton just jumped on me just for that because I didn't tell him that they were in that.

Yes, he was very dogmatic. I am not going to say he—I am just going to tell the truth about that.

TC: Do you think that dogmatic attitude was to the benefit the school? Did it benefit the school any by his having this type of attitude, making sure that he was informed, making sure that he knew of everything.

BTW: I don't know. No, I just think that he went too far with things like that. But he wanted to know everything, and some of them told him all of their personal business and stuff. I didn't do that. That had no part in my teaching those kids.

See my husband had a nervous breakdown when my two sons were in the first and second grade. And it happened during the Christmas holidays. I carried him to Dallas to the white sanitorium, and they gave him treatments. Then they said he wasn't responding, so he would have to go to Rusk. I went up there and got him, and he was admitted to Rusk. I told my boys, "It is plain. This is a sickness like any other thing. It is an illness." I said, "If you are teased about it or something, just tell them it is an illness like any other illness, like pneumonia or what have you."

So when I got back to school, it was during the Christmas Holidays when he had to go -- we carried him to Rusk. When I got back to school, Mr. Burton said, "And you didn't

even tell me, you didn't even call me." I said, "Well, I had everything in hand, so if I had needed you, I would have called you."

But you see, they had this little clique in the faculty, and Mr. Burton's friends, his wife's friends, and they just knew about everything happened here in—

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

BTW: --sanitarium at Rusk until he was there. But then, the way it would happen for us, this little clique, I had a friend in it, and all. And everything she knew, she would tell me, you understand? I didn't want—you know, nobody saw him, and he, by having gone to Dallas and taking treatment, he did not get out of hand or anything. And he just told me, "There is something wrong with me. And I'll do whatever you say." I said, "I think you should go and get your treatments and stay there a while. In about ninety days, you'd be ready to come out." And, you see, nobody saw him, you know, in his state of mind, but he was pastor. We were living in Troup and he was pastoring a church there then. And when anybody knew that he really had a nervous condition, he had been admitted to Rusk.

TC: Did Mr. Burton's attitude or the way that he did things, did it change after he was named assistant to the white superintendent?

BTW: They took Mr. Burton, and I don't think he didn't live long after that. They took Mr. Burton and made him Assistant Superintendent, but he was dining and had an office in

the basement of the white school, in the gymnasium. He took care of the books and all the papers, Dr. Harmon's paper work, and they called him Assistant Superintendent.

He didn't work a year, there, if my memory serves me right, and he died. He was the type that didn't want you to know when he was hurt, you know, and all. But Mr. Burton didn't last long, he died.

TC: What type of relationship existed between the black student and the white teachers, and vice-versa, the white student and the black teacher?

BTW: It was good, it was good. I said, when we integrated, we had a principal who could, you know, keep things in line. Then the white parents had really kind of schooled their children on things. Those were the parents then, you know, and they told their children, "Don't call, don't say 'nigger'", and they told their children to obey the teachers. They were just, you know, and that helped a lot. It really did. So we had no problems.

Now Mrs. Rucker, this lady that took the eighth grade had, because she had been teaching sixth graders, and there is a vast difference between teaching a sixth-grader and teaching an eighth-grader.

TC: So her problems were not a result of integration. They were just disciplinary problems.

BTW: Right, and she was the kind that didn't have much patience. Because she would throw a book at one moment in the other school. [Laughter] She just couldn't take—you know, when she says, "This is this, just do this," you know, she didn't have much leeway.

My success with students in the eighth grade was for to have something for them to do when they walked in. And then they worked the whole hour. They didn't have a little leeway to "I've finished mine", and turn around and talk. Well, that was just my philosophy in school. I mean, any class, that we would just work until the bell rang. But she just couldn't handle those children, and she was a diabetic, and she didn't work a whole year, I don't think, if my memory serves me right.

TC: Earlier you stated that in the community, the black boys and the white boys socialized all the time because they played basketball together. After integration, did the black girls and the white girls begin to interact more?

BTW: It started with the first graders. Those in the sixth, seventh, and eighth, and all into high school, they didn't. But then when they started the kindergarten together, that is when you saw more of it. They would spend nights with each other, and I had three granddaughters to go through the integration, and most of their friends were white girls, you know. They all, in a course of time.

Because the group of parents then were quite different from now. Then after they built this lake out here at Fouke, and then here come these people from the city. It made a little difference, but not much. But when we first integrated, those white parents would tell their children, "You obey the teacher and don't use the word 'nigger'." And my principal, by the way, that I was telling you about, he told me one day, "You know, I just heard 'nigger', and I thought that was the right word." [Laughter] Because that is all he knew.

I would say, “Well, no, it is Negro. That ‘e’ is long, that ‘o’ is long.” He said he thought ‘nigger’ was just the right word, because that’s all he heard growing up. So I told him, no problem, no problem. But I couldn’t say too much about Bob Thunderbird.

TC: After integration, was there any noticeable change in the community after the integration of the schools, maybe with the businesses in Hawkins, the public facilities, did anything change there?

BTW: Yes, and my two nuts integrated that café up town. They were the first two blacks that went in there. One of the cooks came down that evening, and she was just scared to death, because Cornelius and Benny were walking in the front door and sat on those stools.

TC: These were your sons?

BTW: Yes. [Laughter]

TC: So they integrated Petty’s Cafe.

BTW: They integrated Petty Cafe. They really did. I said, “What did they say?” He said, “They didn’t say anything. They just served us.” You know, that is when this integration thing got started.

TC: Brave fellas.

BTW: [Laughter] I tell them, I say, “Well, you know how I feel. I didn’t want them to be the ones to integrated.” [Laughter] But nothing happened, and I mean, it was really easy here in Hawkins, really. We had very few problems.

I remember one time, we had two little incidents, well, one. I remember one time, a black girl was getting on the bus, and she dropped her books, and a white boy picked it up. It was David Haskell. I never forget his name. He picked up her books, and he helped her to carry them on the bus. Then some white person even went to his dad or called him on the phone or something and told him about it, and so his dad says, “So what? He was just helping her with her books. That is what anybody should do.”

We had another incident in high school, where two white boys walked up to the black one. They were just before prom time, and he asked him, “Homer, who are you carrying to this prom?” And he just turned around and said, “Your sister,” being smart. The boys jumped on him and beat him up a little, pushed him around. He was the baby child of about eleven children, and his sisters and brothers were in Dallas. They flew in there like a hurricane, and had it not been for Mr. Burton, that might have escalated, but it didn’t.

TC: How did Mr. Burton defuse the situation?

BTW: He could just handle those black children, because he had taught them, see. And he talked to them, cause they went in there. Dr. Harmon was the superintendent. Now those are the only two incidences that we had.

TC: Was anything done to those white boys for beating up the black boy?

BTW: I am not sure. I think the school disciplined them, yes, because it happened at school.

This black boy, see, was the youngest of about eight or ten children. You see, you don't bother the baby. [Laughter] No, you don't touch the baby. And they asked, "Who are you bringing to the prom?" And he said, "Your sister, and they carried him around the house and jumped on him.

Those are the only two incidents that I know about. And after Martin Luther King, I don't know if I said this, when he was killed, the black students went out to the flag and sang, "We Shall Overcome." Mr. Thunderburk left them. He didn't bother them, punish them, in no way, for going out there. He just let them stay out there until they wanted to. They left class. But I just thought he was the man to integrate the school.

TC: Do you think black students lost anything with integration? Do you think it took away anything?

BTW: Not in Hawkins, I would say. No, it didn't take anything, cause children, you know, they were recognized. Some made the honor roll, even the first year, and I don't think so. And at that time, you had people whose families through the years had been living in Hawkins. And there was just a different attitude with them.

TC: One question that I don't think I have asked any other interviewee, but the Fouke-Hawkins High School, which was the colored high school, had their own alma mater. Now after the school integrated, did they carry over their alma mater, or did they create a new one for the now integrated, or how did they do that?

BTW: They just used the one that the whites had.

TC: What about all the trophies and different memorabilia from the black school? Didn't they bring it over?

BTW: Some of it, or most of it. The trophies were given to the groups who won, you know, in track and field and all those kind of things. Some of them, and I don't know what happened to the others. I don't think there are any in the trophy case, but they did start putting them in after they all got together. I don't know what happened to some of them, because my son had some that I would have liked to have, because in basketball, he made more points, you know, than anyone in high school basketball. Yes. He had an average of free-throw of about 92 or 93 that he made of his free throws and stuff like that. And he got some trophies.

I'll tell you where to me the black schools failed. The black teachers would bend over backwards or try to let the other children feel that they weren't catering to the teachers children. And mine were neglected. They were neglected. Now this is the truth. I tell anybody this.

Now my son, for example, if he went to school, and somebody didn't have a pencil, there was one teacher in high school that would insist that he give this person a pencil because he always had two or three, or give him some paper. And he came home, he would tell me about it. I said, "Well, maybe it just won't hurt you just to go on to keep from stirring up something, you know, a big rigmarole." I'd say, "Just give it to him." And it seems that—see, I didn't have a husband. There was some pressure that was put on us, you know.

You know, if I bought my children a pair of shoes when they needed them, something would be, Mr. Burton and the Ag teacher, Mr. Attison, they would always have something to say about it. But my children didn't come to school raggedy. And yet, I didn't try to dress them above everybody else. I just bought my children what they need cause their daddy was gone. There was some pressure put on us in the black school. They were out when we desegregated.

TC: Did the black parents continue to be active in the PTA after integration?

GTW: A few, yes, some.

TC: But not as many as came when we was all black.

GTW: Not as many as came when we was all black.

TC: Why do you think they?

GTW: I think they kind of took things for granted and just quit coming. [Laughter]

TC: How active were the white parents?

GTW: Well, the white parents were active. You know, they had a mothers' club that would support the band, and all. And you would find a few of the blacks in it, and things like that, now. And of course, at football games, one organization would sell, well, blacks take part in things like that. There was a little falling away, you know, of that full participation.

But I tell you one thing—when it was Hawkins per se, there was a relationship between the white and the blacks, and there were a few problems when they built the lake and all these people came in and they turned out to be the majority. It wasn't that they was doing anything, but the atmosphere was somewhat different, it really was.

TC: These were people from outside of the community?

GTW: These blacks and whites had been knowing each other's families all the time. And even when we all got together, the white parents would tell their children, "Don't say 'nigger'," and things like that, you know. And it was more like a family.

But then when they got the lake and these others came in, it has colored everything to a degree.

TC: So the outsiders coming in?

GTW: Yes.

TC: Did those people from outside of the community, did they associate with the blacks and the whites, or did they just mainly associate with the white people once they came into the community?

GTW: It seems to me that they didn't associate with the blacks too much. Like the others. See, there were blacks who worked in homes of the whites, and things like that. And they just became really, really close, you know. They were just different. It was just more like a family.

Even the white children were obedient in class. We had no disciplinary problems because the parents had told them.

TC: The outsiders that came in were mainly white?

GTW: They were mainly white. And it gave it a little different color.

TC: Now, Ms. Wimberly, some final question. What do you consider the greatest accomplishment of integration?

GTW: What do I consider the greatest accomplishment?

TC: In this community?

GTW: In this community.

TC: What did it do, the best thing that integration did for this community?

GTW: I think the fact that the black children and the whites were together coming up through school, and, you know, being friends with each other, visiting each other's homes and things. I think that helped a lot, because it brought the children together. And they didn't show any resentment at all at the idea of all coming together. There might have been one or two every now and then, you know. But I really think that they really just got together, they got together.

And I am saying that because I had three grandchildren to come through this school. Most of their friends were white girls, they were girls. They would visit each other, go places. The middle girl, her friend married not too long ago, and she's in Houston at the University of Houston, and she came and sang for, you know. I think that it really kind of worked itself out after the children got together.

Because all of them, and my youngest granddaughter, finished school. This was her first year in college, and she goes to Steven F. [Austin]. She dances, and she is studying to be a nurse. She was just a tomboy. All her friends were the boys in the senior class. And they would go and do anything, date, riding through the woods and stuff, that was

her forte. I think they really did get together. They accepted each other. You might find one or two kind of standoff, maybe, but they were just all together.

TC: Ms. Wimberly, it was a pleasure interviewing you.

BTW: Thank you, thank you. I know everything I said is the truth. [Laughter].

TC: Yes, and it was a very good interview.

BTW: I just couldn't bite my tongue, and I just had to say what was, yes ma'am, yes.

[End of interview]