

Interview

with

JACKIE ROBINSON

February 11, 2005

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Chris O'Sullivan

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Interviewee: Jackie Robinson
Interviewer: Gerrelyn C. Patterson
Interview date: February 11, 2005
Location: Robinson residence, Durham, NC
Length: 1 cassette

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

GERRELYN PATTERSON: This is an interview with Jackie Robinson in Durham, North Carolina. It is February 11, 2005 and we are in his home. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson and this is part of the Spencer Grants Project on School Desegregation in the South and will be used as part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The tape number is JR21105. Okay, Mr. Robinson can you tell me when you attended Hillside High School?

JACKIE ROBINSON: From 1962 to 1965.

GP: Tell me what you remember most about going to school there.

JR: The size of the school and the number of students participating in that school. I remember the laughter, the fun that we had and the different choices that we had in the school as far as professions. Even though we had bricklayers, brick mason school, DE, carpentry, and tailoring--

GP: What's DE?

JR: Distributive Education. So you could choose different types of trades or professions. Today, some of our classmates are in those professions that they started at Hillside.

GP: Did you take any of those classes?

JR: No. I wanted to be an accountant or a professional baseball player, based on my name.

GP: Of course!

JR: I used to want to be an accountant because when I used to watch television all the accountants used to always wear suits.

GP: That would be cool. So, tell me about some of the best memories you have of the school.

JR: Some of the best memories I have are the competitions that we always had. We always had great sports and athletics and also great academics with the Debate Society. It really started before Hillside, because our class was one of the first classes that started a course called TMAC.

GP: TMAC?

JR: It was a self-taught course and you move at your own speed in mathematics. Those kids that were considered proficient in math were put in this class and we started having it be a competitive style of working at our own pace to finish and then we would take a test after completing certain levels. That was like an experiment, it was one of the first ones to happen and we carried it over to Hillside.

GP: That's nice. Did that come from Whitted?

JR: It started at Whitted. The year it actually started we were at Whitted and we carried it over to Hillside as well.

GP: Can you tell me about some of the teachers that you had?

JR: I had a lot of teachers that were very prominent in my career, but the one that stands out the most was not a teacher. It was actually the vice principal, () that was Frank Howard Alston, known as Prop. He would come to our class and into our class that we were in and he could take the chalk and teach that class. He was that knowledgeable about all the classes.

GP: Any class?

JR: Any class. Any class that I've been in and anybody else would say the same thing. He could find out where you were and speak on the subject and ask you questions. It could be embarrassing if you didn't know what you should. [laughs]

GP: I bet.

JR: I also enjoyed Ms. Jeanne Lucas because we were learning foreign languages and it was just fascinating to see some people that could speak Spanish fluently and teach it. The things that got us started and wanting to achieve. When we arrived at the school there was also a new principal starting, John Lucas. He was new to the school just like we were, so we came all together. It was like a new beginning and we all sort of just grew together. Mr. () Smith who taught math was another person who I consider an excellent role model for me. Also, in the coaching ranks--although I considered him a teacher as well--Mr. Willie Bradshaw, he was one of my favorite people because I considered him as fair as they come. He was very equitable in how he treated people and what he did, and up to this point in my life I respect him as highly as I do any man like my father.

GP: Wow, he had that big of an impact on you.

JR: Absolutely.

GP: Do you feel that those teachers and others at Hillside tried to prepare you in a special way?

JR: Oh yes. It was a natural instinct for them, it wasn't something that they consciously did; it was just the way they were. A lot of them were Hillside graduates as well, and they wanted us to represent the school like they felt it should be represented. They felt it should be represented as one of the best schools in North Carolina, not one of the best black schools but best school in North Carolina. So just in their natural course of activity it made us something special coming out of there and we knew it.

GP: I have heard a couple people say that it was one of the best schools in North Carolina, not black school but best school. Why do you think that is, since everybody says that black schools got the hand-me-downs and the secondhand textbooks? How do you think that Hillside was able to rise above all of that?

JR: That's true that we did get secondhand textbooks and again, we didn't start at Hillside, we came from some elementary school in the 1950s like Lyon Park, where I came from. There was a lot of things that were done that would not be conducive to making you feel that you were somebody special, but by the time you got to Hillside you had some kind of foundation. When you got to that school you saw accomplishments, for example the carpentry and the bricklayer students were building a house right behind Hillside. The first three houses on Lawson Street are built by Hillside High School students and taught by the Hillside teachers that were teaching bricklaying and all that.

To show you it was special, it's in the pudding just by looking around to see where the students are and see what they have accomplished. That's what happened with the generation we saw before. We saw what Willie Bradshaw did, what Jeanne Lucas did

and what Frank Howard Alston did and we knew that we could do it too. They let us know that we could do it and should even do better than they did.

GP: Could and should do better--

JR: Should do better because we had more opportunities, more support and more facilities. Jeanne Lucas is a good example going on to State Senator, but there are so many at Hillside that once you start naming names you would never stop. Hillside graduates span all professions and own their own businesses from lawn businesses to painting businesses, there are quite a few that are very successful.

GP: Were you in any of the clubs or did you do sports?

JR: I had to play baseball.

GP: Nobody has told me about the baseball team.

JR: When the pictures were taken it was during the summer, so seldom did they get the baseball pictures in. Coach Bradshaw was coaching baseball and I had to play baseball. My dealings with Coach Bradshaw did not start at Hillside; they started when I was in the midget league--when the uniforms were dragging on the ground. Coach Bradshaw coached the Walltown team and my dad was one of the coaches in the West End, so we would meet them and compete at an early age. So it is from that experience that I knew him growing up. That was the way it was with most of the teachers, they grew up in the neighborhood just like we did. That's not necessarily the way it is now because people live farther out, but the teachers were our actual neighbors or somebody close to us. My fifth grade teacher Ms. Odyssey at Lyon Park lived right up the street from us on Carroll Street. I remember all of those things from when we grew up.

GP: So they were really a part of your community?

JR: Oh yes.

GP: You said you had to play baseball, why did you have to play?

JR: My name is Jackie Robinson.

GP: [laughing] It was destiny.

JR: Well, I was born on April 15, 1947 which is the day and the year that he came into the Majors. I remember in the first grade Mr. Frank Burnett, who was our principal, played the World Series over the intercom when Jackie Robinson came up to bat. It was a big event because Jackie was the first black player in the Major Leagues. When Jackie Robinson came up to bat I remember sitting there in the first grade holding my chest out. No matter if he hit the ball or he struck out, I felt like it was me because I was named Jackie Robinson. I had no choice; I had to be able to play somehow.

GP: Tell me more about what it was like to live and grow up in Durham.

JR: Durham in the 1950s was decidedly separated by race, black and white fountains, bathroom facilities--

GP: So you remember all that?

JR: Oh yes, no question. That is something you would never forget. As a matter of fact, I remember accidentally drinking at the white fountain and being chastised more by blacks for the fear of what would happen to me as opposed to anybody else. Growing up in Durham then was about staying close to your neighborhood and not going far away. We didn't have cars to drive around and go to different locations or areas. The only time we got to travel in a group was during safety patrol or pride patrol or sports. Even then, if we were going across town to participate in an organized sport we would walk as a group.

GP: Across town?

JR: We walked across town. We walked as much as we caught the bus when we went to Whitted and the same when we went to Hillside; it was common place to walk. It wasn't that long of a trip because there were always five or six of us and we were talking. If you could imagine Lakewood Shopping Center and Hillside, that is the West End where we would walk from. We walked because we either didn't have the money or we had the money and missed the bus.

GP: Right. That's a long walk.

JR: Well, it is now, but it wasn't then.

GP: The bus was the public bus?

JR: Yes. They also had school buses, but not to the extent that they have them now. Most of the time when we took the bus it was the public bus. Even when we would ride the school buses going directly to the school you needed to have a token to get on the bus.

GP: So you grew up near Lakewood?

JR: Yes, I grew up in what is known as Rock Street. It's one of the streets that runs into the big cemetery, not sure if you have ever seen that cemetery?

GP: Yes.

JR: I grew up on one of those streets.

GP: Can you tell me a little about the different neighborhoods in Durham, I know there was Walltown and the Bottom--tell me about them, help me with that.

JR: Walltown is pretty much a society that was built around a lot of people that worked at Duke University, and they have a () with Duke. If you notice, it is in very

close proximity to Duke and a lot employees actually built their homes with the contribution made by Duke and their contribution to Duke. The West End was pretty much west of Walltown and there were people who lived there that also worked at Duke, but mostly the people from the West End worked in the Chapel Hill area. The West End had its bottom just like other places. It had places like Gattis Street or streets that you knew you were not supposed to go to if you were young. We had lots of churches, especially up and down Morehead Avenue, and people that were prominent in those churches and active among the students. A lot of people from the West End worked at the factory too.

GP: Which factory, the tobacco factory? The one that is right downtown?

JR: The tobacco factory, American and Liggett & Myers. American is the one that is being renovated now right across from the ballpark and Liggett & Myers is the one that actually still exists. It still exists but not to the extent that it once did, that's where they have done some renovations and the shops downtown near Durham High. A lot of folks worked at the factory and lived in the West End. They were also outstanding citizens. I remember one of the people, Mr. Willie Haskins who worked at the factory, never drove. He was a barber too, he cut my first hair cut and my son's first hair cut was in his chair too. That's how the generations worked. Mr. Willie Haskins was also the one that signed for me to be able to pay for my last semester of college. I didn't have the money to pay for my last semester of college, so I went to him. He actually went down to the bank, and when he walked in they asked him what he wanted and he told them to give me the money to finish school and he signed for it, and they did it. I made sure I paid it back.

GP: Oh, that's nice, that's very nice. What did your parents do?

JR: My mother was a nurse and my dad was a painter. My dad was also a World War Two veteran. My mother worked at Duke and then later she worked at ().

GP: Do you have brothers and sisters?

JR: I had three brothers, the oldest was Anthony and he has passed, I'm the second, the third one is named Christopher and he is also passed and then the youngest that is ten years younger, we call him Poochie. I won't give his real name.

GP: Did all of them go to Hillside too?

JR: No Poochie went to Durham High. Everyone else did go to Hillside. I also have a half-sister, my daddy had a daughter prior to marriage, named Ellie Mae that also went to Hillside and then became a nurse.

GP: You said your parents went to Hillside too?

JR: No, my mother did. My dad didn't graduate from high school.

GP: Poochie was okay with not going to Hillside?

JR: By that time there was no longer school segregation so from where we lived in the West End Durham High was the natural school for him to go to. Also at that time there were quite a few black students that were () Durham High.

GP: Durham High? So when you went to Hillside from 1962 to 1965 were there--
-school desegregation had already happened--

JR: It had just started yes, there were just a few.

GP: There were a few white students there?

JR: No, there were a few black students that went over to Durham High. There were no white students at Hillside.

GP: Were they supposed to come? Where were they?

JR: Not to my knowledge. The key then was that it was voluntary, and what parents did was break the () line and they would send their kids to Durham High. The problem was that it would be a difficult time for them and a different experience for them. This was also the era, although Greensboro is known to be the first () Durham was right behind them and there was a lot of violence, both physical and mental. So, whoever went to those schools during that period of time was a real sacrifice for them. Also, they never had the comradery of people that cared about them that were actually going to school and it must have been a lonely life for them. As a matter of fact I am trying to remember someone that you could talk to about it. I thought the McKissick's, one of the McKissick kids went there but I am not sure.

GP: Do you remember Hillside changing in any way as a result of school desegregation?

JR: Not during my era because not only was my school still one hundred percent black but also there were only a few black students sent away. Our competition and our support remained intact. It actually started in 1963, once we merged first from Pearson Town, Lyon Park, W. Pearson, wherever we came from as elementary students to join together as junior high students at Whitted and then from there we all went to Hillside. So we were not just high school classmates, we were friends for life and friends from the beginning.

GP: Where was Whitted Junior High?

JR: Whitted was where the Operation Breakthrough is sitting now.

GP: Oh.

JR: Someone older than me can tell you that actually that was Hillside's location at one time too. So Hillside didn't start where it is now.

GP: Across from Central.

JR: It started on Concord. Someone else that graduated from Hillside when Hillside was over in that other location can tell you about that.

GP: Do you think that there was something special that Hillside did for black students that schools might not be doing now?

JR: No question. That's not a question, that's a fact as far as the nurturing was concerned and the understanding of the students. That seemed to be something that was natural during that time. Certain things were not tolerated from students and the teachers and instructors that would not tolerate it had already been through it, so it wasn't like they were trying to figure out the backgrounds of the students or the things that might or might not offend people. The students received their home cooking and their knowledge about how to teach, so if they said to shut up and sit down there was not going to be an issue of how you might respond to that--you were going to hear that--

GP: What you needed to do--

JR: If you were in school you should not be disrupting, so that was going to be something you definitely received and had. That is one thing, and that has a lot to do with just about anything else that you do in life. If you are receiving instruction from someone, not necessarily just by them telling you something but also by them showing you by what they have accomplished, and if you can't pull the wool over their eyes like you could with your parents--if you are in that environment you really need to straighten

up or get body slammed. That was the way it was. I don't mean physically body slammed, I mean you are going to be embarrassed because you could not snow them.

GP: Did everybody graduate?

JR: If you are talking about the percentage, I am sure it was as high as anyone else. I don't remember many people falling out or dropping out of school. I remember some people might want to spend a couple of years enjoying their high school environment, but very few people did that when I was around. The ones that I knew that didn't graduate turned around and went back and got their GED, which tells me that whatever they heard and didn't listen to while in school finally hit them somewhere once they got out of school. Nobody was hired if they didn't have at least their GED, not to say you couldn't be successful, but it was a lot more challenging.

GP: Can you help me figure this out, it seems that during my early research people said that Hillside, NCCU, North Carolina Mutual, this black mecca and that everybody in Durham that was black was living large?

JR: No, that's not the case. Absolutely not, it was that everyone in Durham had in their midst one of the most prominent black insurance companies in the world, and one of the most silent ones. It was probably silent because of how conservative they were and because their loans and their investments. They were just there, in your face. In 1965 is when the new North Carolina Mutual was built, the one you see standing now. It was the tallest building in Durham, which was really a statement to make when you become the tallest building and you are black-owned. It wasn't living large; there was a definite distinction of economics and students. One thing that was really an education that people learned later was that the factory was a strong contributor to people buying

things and owning things in Durham. Factory work wasn't considered professional or skilled; however, the people in the factory to me were the most prominent citizens because in doing their jobs they did as well economically as anybody wearing a suit and tie. It wasn't that they were not respected; it was more that there was an understanding that the factory people were willing to work hard to get whatever they could for their children.

GP: So basically what I am hearing you say is that if you were black and living in Durham you could earn a good living? It was a place that you could earn a good living.

JR: Yes, you could earn a good living.

GP: Whether you worked at the factory or at the hospital or at the insurance agency or Central or teaching at Hillside.

JR: Right and Durham also had more black employers than most places. For example the bank and the insurance company were black owned. There were a lot of private businesses that were very successful like builders and electricians.

GP: It seems that what you are saying is like what you said about Hillside, there was something for everybody. For all walks of life you could find something.

JR: Yes and you could call it opportunity if nothing else.

GP: Okay, so opportunities for all. So what did people think was a good education for black students when you were in school? What was considered so good about an education from Hillside?

JR: A lot of people from Hillside fed right into North Carolina Central, the North Carolina college at the time or went off to college at A&T or other places. What was good about coming from Hillside was the understanding that you received a good

education. For my parents, graduating from high school was considered very successful and that's what a lot of people would strive to do. Even people with only an eighth grade education made sure they did a lot to ensure that by the time their kids got to Hillside the goals would be to go on to college.

GP: So there was an expectation of going on to college?

JR: That's right. Every generation was expected to improve or have more opportunities and that is exactly what happened. A lot of men of my parents' age were World War Two veterans and finally with the GI Bill and fighting and forcing to be treated like anyone else they received the GI Bill and it gave them the opportunities to own a house or go to school to get an education. That bill () us and helped us as well.

GP: Okay, so the GI Bill was important?

JR: Oh yes, no question. In World War Two of course because there was a large contribution of blacks in that war that came home looking for the same things. Even though it wasn't there as far as treatment, it was as far as benefits. They could not be denied the benefits that were being provided to other soldiers who were coming home. Of course there were still some restrictions, such as owning a home. They couldn't just choose where they wanted their house because there was still red lining. They could get a house, just not where they wanted it.

GP: I'm glad you said that because I had not put that together like that before.

JR: Yes, that was the way it was. You couldn't do but so much if the person was a vet, you couldn't deny him but so much.

GP: Okay so I am hearing--I'm kind of skipping around--

JR: That's okay.

GP: There were some things you said you thought a school like Hillside did for black students that's now lost. Since school integration, you said the nurturing of teachers.

JR: Right, the nurturing by the teachers towards the students and the opportunity to be with certain people from childhood through high school. When you know a person as a child and you grow up together there is an understanding and a comradery that you can't get any where. It's not like you have to try and learn this person because you knew them in the most innocent stages and you meshed. When you meet someone as an adult you try to figure out whether you are compatible, have the same interests and whether or not you can sit down and be totally bored or totally understood by them. Hillside gave that.

GP: Hillside gave that?

JR: Oh, no question we all had it and we were all in the same boat.

GP: Do you think there is anything that the schools gained from being integrated?

JR: I'm sure there have been some benefits, but not in the sense () that people viewed when they first sought integration. Integration should promote equity. It promotes that to the extent that you get to sit with someone else but it doesn't promote that in the sense that you get the same things that they get. You do have the opportunity. If a teacher treats young children differently it affects the self esteem of the children. For example if I am a favorite student of a particular teacher's and I make a mistake, that teacher may tell me Jackie that's a mistake and you need to work on it this way, and if you do you will get better. Then another student may make the same mistake but she is told that it is a stupid mistake and gets scolded for it. Both children made the same

mistake but receive totally different messages, one child's self esteem is up and trying to improve and the other is hurt and possibly damaged. That's just an example of the way it could be when people are in an environment where people just don't have the same feelings towards everybody.

GP: So what do you think schools can do better now to help black students?

JR: This is a very difficult time for trying to figure that out because the students have had the benefit or the opportunity of a lot of people studying why students are the way they are now instead of trying to figure out what to do to make sure kids are getting the most out of their education. In other words, a student now does something and they talk about their background and environment as opposed to () we are going to work on getting you to the point where you are self-sufficient and self-respecting instead of justifying what you are doing based on what you have experienced. That sort of happened with my son when he left Hillside and was going to Fayetteville State. I will never forget the people saying just send him down here and we will take care of him. With that assurance when he went to Fayetteville State, we knew that he was still going somewhere like home. That is what Fayetteville State turned out to be for him, and everything just blossomed for him. He just got better as he went on.

GP: Good, that's fabulous.

JR: That's what happens when people know you, and they don't have to know you personally, but they know you. You cannot correct the problem or situation unless you understand it or have some feel for it.

GP: What do you think is important for us now to remember or learn about the legacy of Hillside?

JR: Whatever an organization is measured by, it has to be something that is not simple and quick. One of the difficult things for a teacher to do is to know whether they are successful with a student. A teacher can say one hundred things to a student and the student can act like they are not listening but every one of those things could be going into the student's mind to be stored. The student doesn't even know how much the teachers contributed to their life because years later you took all of the information and became very successful or very confident based on those lessons received in the past.

The legacy of Hillside is the result of the students that exist; nobody achieved anything there by themselves. If you see a turtle sitting on a pole you know he didn't get there by himself, you know someone had to help him. It's not that you can () that because someone went to Hillside they are successful or () people, but it speaks for itself that most of the people I know who went to Hillside are very successful in their endeavors whatever they were. That had to have something to do with the school--and the home too, absolutely the home too. You couldn't have gone to Hillside and not received both the educational part and the supportive environment. It's important to give credit where credit is due, some people might not realize because they might remember certain incidents or how they were treated at a certain time, but they benefited from those years at Hillside.

GP: So why do you love the school so much? You are still so active now, you're president of your class and they talk about you being president until the end of time, and it's apparent that you love the school.

JR: Yes. Our president was Ricardo Bryant, a very outgoing and effervescent person who died much too young while in college. What we had goes back to the day we

stood in line to graduate, one of the students burst into tears and everyone was wondering what she was crying about. We were all thinking we were getting ready to go out into the world and have a good time, get some money, get out of school and drive cars and all of that. If we knew what she knew then we probably all would have stood and cried because those were the best years of our lives.

The basic responsibility of our lives was to learn and with that it set the foundation for what we are now. We didn't understand it, but had we not benefited from that time I couldn't sit down and think about my classmates when they were six years old or telling the first bad joke or the first horror story. I could not or would not remember my third grade teacher Ms. Bennett making me want to stay after school because I considered her a pretty lady that loved all of us and talked to us and made us feel like we were important. Those are memories that are not false, they are real.

When I sit and I laugh and look in the 1965 yearbook and see these skinny classmates--I still see them now but much wiser and a little less skinny. I still see them now and they are still the same people, nothing has changed. The only ones that would be very uncomfortable with that are the people that felt it was important to be something special outside of being a Hillside High Hornet, which was special. Those people needed some kind of assurance; they weren't going to get it when they stepped out of those doors, so they weren't prepared for things that happened later. Where () your momma is a State Senator so we are going to treat you special. That didn't happen at Hillside, not among us. It might have happened with other people, but not among us. Among us it was like you are a Hillside classmate and we are just happy to be with you and have a good time, and that's what we have now.

GP: Is there anything else you want to tell me that I should know about Hillside? If somebody says Gerrelyn I know you have been talking to people who went to Hillside and you are trying to find out about Hillside pride, the thrill on the hill and why people's blood runs blue and white, what else should I tell them?

JR: Well, you are going to tell them that Hillside was real, absolutely real. It's real with people that look like you, and that's a realness that brings together the backgrounds you had, the struggling you had, the worrying about life and the way the neighbors would pitch in to help you out when you needed it. Those types of things were the things that Hillside people did. Those were people that came from the elementary schools and went to Hillside. Once we got there we all had the same camaraderie that we brought from childhood. What you should also tell them is that it is as real as it gets, and you don't go this many years on something that is not real. You just can't do it, it would tire soon. When people hang around with someone because they are one of the favorite people in the school, it gets old quick. It's real.

GP: Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed November 2005 by Chris O'Sullivan