

Interview  
with  
J. W. MASK  
February 15, 1991

By Goldie F. Wells

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## INTERVIEW WITH MR. J.W. MASK

By Goldie F. Wells

Goldie: I am in the home of Mr. J.W. Mask in Hamlet, North Carolina. Today's date is February 15, 1991. Mr. Mask is a 1964 principal. Mr. Mask, I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. Mask: As Ms. Wells has said, my name is J.W. Mask, Jr., and I am a former high school principal and I also served as assistant superintendent of schools and subsequently following retirement served as a member of the Richmond County Board of Education for six years. Ms. Wells has asked if I would be available for an interview to discuss some of the aspects of the principalship as I knew them and I have happily consented to do so and so we are going to talk a little while.

Goldie: I am doing a study and looking at the role perceptions of black high school principals. Back in 1954, when you were principal there were over 200 black high school principals in North Carolina. When I wrote to the State Department in 1989, and asked for a listing they sent me a list of 41 and I found that of those 41 some of them are principals of high schools that are not traditional high schools. They are alternative schools so there are less than 40 black high school principals in North Carolina. I want to ask you some questions today and I just want you to respond to them in your own way.

Mr. Mask: Could I interrupt you right there because this is significant. At the time of the integration of the principals, the Division of North Carolina NCTA and NCAE--I served as a member of the committee to effect the transition of the two associations at the principalship level. And about that time, this is probably right after integration really began to be implemented in the North Carolina schools so I interrupt for this reason only--I know that there were 219. I have a record of that. There were 219 black principals of senior high schools in North Carolina at that time around 1964-65.

Goldie: Did you serve on the committee with Dr. John Lucas during this transitional period?

Mr. Mask: Dr. Lucas was not a member I don't believe of the committee from NCTA that worked out the merger of the two divisions. Jim Clark was and E.V. Wilkins was and at that time we had a North Carolina unit of the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the three of us were the officers of that group so we worked with a committee from the principals' division of the North Carolina Educational

Association to effect the merger of the two principals' divisions.

Goldie: The other two names were E.V. Wilkins and Jim Clark. Is Jim Clark deceased?

Mr. Mask: Oh no, I saw Jim last Saturday.

Goldie: Where does he live. No one has ever given me his name?

Mr. Mask: Jim Clark, I believe along with James Birch worked in the State Department of Education but now Jim Clark I believe lives in Raleigh. He either lives in Raleigh or Durham and I talked to him last Saturday at the affair that they were having at St. Augustine College for Representative Dan Blue the new Speaker of the House. His wife Mary was a State Supervisor. She worked in the Department of Education. I talked to both of them last Saturday.

Goldie: That is strange I have not...now I know Mr. Wilkins and I was down there and I tried to schedule an interview with him three or four weeks ago because my home is Edenton which is not far from Roper but I wasn't able to schedule the interview.

Mr. Mask: Jim would be a good resource person. Let me say this about him because this would be significant for what you are doing. He was the first black superintendent of Halifax Schools in Halifax County about 6-7 years ago and he was there--it was that school system that experimented with the 12 month school. Jim was superintendent of schools in Halifax County at that time.

Goldie: I need to find him.

Mr. Mask: And if I am not mistaken I think he...just as Jim Burch I know Jim was because I was at his home and had a friend who lived in the same area, Hyde Park area in Charlotte when Jim Burch was...do you know Jim Burch? Jim Burch was Assistant State Superintendent and he should be in Raleigh.

Goldie: I was just asking and the way that I have gotten 64 principals is a snowball effect. Just like you telling me about somebody, somebody tells me about somebody else.

Mr. Mask: Well, these are guys that could be real resource persons, Jim Clark and Jim Burch, because they both were principals and I know Jim Burch was very close to Craig Phillips for maybe 10 years in the State Department of Education.

Goldie: I'll try to follow those leads and see if I can get

up with those two.

Goldie: Would you tell me how you... well you mentioned that you were from the eastern part of the state. Can you give me just a brief background on your family and education?

Mr. Mask: Yes, that is very easy. I am from the east and a native of Washington, North Carolina. My father was principal of the black high school over there for 17 years and we moved to Hamlet, North Carolina in 1928. While in Washington, North Carolina one of the superintendents under whom he worked was a man named Frank Ashley. Mr. Ashley had come to Hamlet from there as superintendent of schools and it was through that contact that my father came from Washington over here to become principal of the black high school here. The principal had died during the Christmas holidays. He was a Hampton graduate. His wife finished out the year and my father came and I was just in junior high school at that time and after finishing high school here I went to Hampton Institute one year and then the second year I transferred to my church school, St. Augustine College. I had a two brothers and we were just stair steps and so the three of us all enrolled at St. Augustine and that is where we continued. When I finished St. Augustine the first job that I got was principal of the academic division of the Morrison Training School. That was the state school for boys, I should say boys and I hate to say delinquent boys but that is the way they used to say it--delinquent school and I was there for four years.

Goldie: Where is that school located?

Mr. Mask: Hoffman, N.C. It s 15 miles from here. At the end of the four years I married during that period. My father accepted a job as principal of the State School for the Blind and the Deaf in Raleigh. When he did I applied for the principalship of the high school and I was fortunate enough to succeed him as principal of the Capital Highway High School, the high school from which I had graduated eight years before, and I continued in that position. We did change locations and we changed the name of the school. The school that we had was not adequate. It wasn't adequate when I was a student in several respects like library, science, and other vocational facilities. We built a new high school here in 1953, to provide for better and more standard facilities. What had been a union school from 1-12, we transferred a small elementary school to the building where the high school had been and it became an elementary school and we moved into a new high school on the 4th day of January 1954. Then we were a junior-senior high school because we had grades 7-12 at that location. I stayed there and in 1968, we effected the first two-way integration in the county. The senior students and teachers from the high school were transferred to the all white high school and the



juniors, 7, 8, 9, were transferred from the high school to what was formerly the black high school. So I stayed there for five years.

Goldie: So your school only went to the 11th grade then.

Mr. Mask: Oh no, it went to the 12th grade.

Goldie: Oh I see, you transferred the white grades over to the black school. It was a switch.

Mr. Mask: Yes, but when you raised the question of our school going to the 11th grade, there is an interesting bit of history there. The white high school in Hamlet had 12 grades before we did. I won't venture to say just how long but I do know in 1945, we did not have a graduating class. We added the 12th grade so the continuity was broken as far as the graduating classes was concerned you see. But when we moved to the Monroe Avenue High School, the new high school, we already had 12 grades at the old high school.

Goldie: Well, you have told me something about your school but I am going to ask you something about the responsibilities that you had. I am going to give you different areas that I would like for you to address as you talk about your role and your responsibilities at Monroe Avenue High School. Tell me how you supervised your personnel and how you selected your teachers.

Mr. Mask: I interviewed the teachers as they were employed. I interviewed all of the teachers who were employed. I recommended them to the superintendent but no contact with the Board in that area; that was the method of selecting the teachers and usually I would say--maybe nine out of ten times or maybe ten out of ten times when I recommended a person to teach, that person was usually hired. Now as far as supervision is concerned I directed the supervision over instruction and personnel the whole time that I was the high school principal. Now that doesn't mean that the superintendent didn't come by way of visitation and where there weren't conferences and sometimes if there were instances where there were some irregularities or where it was necessary to have the conference on a problem, I might make it a three-way conference with the individual, the superintendent and myself. But as I recall, there was no shared responsibilities as far as supervision is concerned other than let me back up just a little bit. During the time that I was the principal we never had a black instructional supervisor but we did have white instructional supervisors who dealt with our staff on a limited basis and we really didn't begin to have the full involvement and assistance by the white supervisor until about the time of integration or maybe a little before. But now I don't know if that is what you would like to know or not.

Goldie: If you had some teachers that were not performing up to standards, what would you do?

Mr. Mask: I would talk to them and then I would talk to the superintendent about it. There were some instances where I could not recommend that the persons be continued and I never had an instance where that was the case where either the teacher did not resign or move on or where the superintendent failed to recommend that person for reappointment.

Goldie: Tell me about curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Mask: Well, the curriculum and instruction were somewhat locked in. That is probably not the best way to put it but the curriculum was very much locked in by the state curriculum guide and we tried to offer as much as we could. I think maybe there are two areas that I consider significant as far as the principal is concerned and yet not so much so. When I was a principal we had Negro history--that is what we called it and it was a regular part of the curriculum in addition to a European history, United States history and civics. We always had Negro history as part of the curriculum and the thing where I sort of went a little bit beyond what was provided was to go to Raleigh and pick up some Army surplus typewriters and use them for trade with the supplier to get a dozen typewriters so we could have typing as a part of our curriculum. That is the only thing that I can think of that I did as a principal to expand the curriculum to provide a training area that was not provided by the Board of Education. There was no disposition on the part of the superintendent to do so. But now getting back to the curriculum as I said, you know North Carolina had a curriculum guide and there were the subjects for the various grade levels and I think we offered certainly maybe not all of the subjects that were offered in the white high school but most of them anyway. Now I think the white high school had maybe one or two more vocational courses than we had. We had industrial arts which attempted to provide training in cabinet making mostly but some carpentry and brick masonry.

Goldie: Were you aware of the curriculum over at the high school or just what you thought? Did you have close contact with any of the white principals?

Mr. Mask: Well, we knew what was being taught but there was very little communication. As a matter of fact I say this without any trouble at all. The disposition of the principal at the high school was probably distant and he is now deceased (deceased refers to the superintendent, not the principal) and I regret that he didn't live longer to see some of the changes that have taken place because the superintendent whereas he was a good friend of my fathers and was a good man in some respects, he was a rigid

segregationist. He did not want any interaction between whites and blacks at any level. The teacher's meetings that we had for the Hamlet School System were always separate during the time that he was superintendent. Now he went out around 1960. He had reached retirement age and was not ready to retire but a new board of education had been elected and they didn't quite agree with some of his philosophy about a lot of things so then he went out around 1960-62, or somewhere around there. The person who succeeded him had quite a different philosophy and attitude and then we began to have first meetings of black and white principals and then all of the teachers coming together for staff meetings.

Goldie: What about discipline? Was it a problem?

Mr. Mask: No, not for me and I don't say this with any conceit either because you see through good fortune, the first job I had was at the State Training School for Boys and there were boys there who were committed for all types of crimes and misdemeanors. Sometimes, unfortunately, even homicide during that time. I went there from college in 1935, and I stayed there until 1939. They had a system there--they had a boy's supervisor who also was referred to a disciplinarian and we had a part-time social worker and we had seven staff people in the academic division. I went there as teaching principal of the academic division. So I was responsible for the discipline within the academic school. I had a few serious discipline problems with some boys, no girls involved, but I maybe had pretty good luck because I was challenged a couple of times but I never was over ridden. So when I came here as principal of the high school from Morrison Training School, I was challenged by about four students over the first two or three years that I was here and they couldn't prevail but I always felt this way. I would tell anybody, you know we are here for a purpose and I have told more than once. I said, "I am here because I was employed to do a job," and I said, "The state provides the school and the school is here for you to learn and they provide me to help you in every way that I can. I will help you if you will let me help you." I would say, "You are not going to run the school and I will tell you why. I came to stay and no one person is going to cause me to leave. If you are going to run it or if you are going to have your way, right over there on that rack is my hat, the day that that happens I am getting my hat and I am going but you are not going to run this school." I said, "Now you know you can stay if you want to but you don't have to. You know when you get to be sixteen you don't have to stay but what you will have to do is you will have to change and your parents will have to come and they will have to be a part of the conference and whatever counseling they can give you here or there will be fine with me." I said, "Now there are 600 students here and I am responsible for all of them and you are not going to mess it up for me." They got the message.



No principal of the secondary school ever stayed there a month without having some discipline problems but I never had a bat, a bull horn, and I was always a little leery of using a strap. I never used a strap, not with high school students. I think this was a mistake but it was probably the custom at the time. Elementary teachers sometimes have switches and sometimes the men had these little belts that they would use on the boys. As I look back that was not good practice because I never thought that that was very effective but it was the custom and I still don't believe that that is the best approach to discipline. So I had it pretty easy from the standpoint of discipline but I don't think it was by chance. I just did not intend--you see I had to work because I had a family coming on and I couldn't stay there. I couldn't keep a straight face. You know a guy tells me that he is not going to do what I ask him to do and his reason and I said, if you don't there is no way both of us can stay and I wouldn't raise my voice. I had a problem with a teacher once and this is digression just a little bit. It was an exceptional thing as long as we are on discipline--it was a young teacher and I believe this was her first job. I wasn't so old that I couldn't appreciate youth. The CIAA Convention was being held in Greensboro and my youngest son was in high school at the time and I can't remember all the details but this person stated that she had to go to see a doctor or something like that. The person was a counselor. I said, all right. When the reports came in, there were some three or four guys who were not in class in the afternoon. So then we began to inquire around and to make a long story short, this person had taken an automobile and taken some boys to Greensboro to see the CIAA and they got back at night sometime. You know they start during the day you know so it wasn't difficult to get all the facts so when I called the person in, I said, "That was a very irresponsible act on your part. Now you can't do this even if you weren't in the role that you are in, as a young adult and working with young people you can't do that and expect to have that much influence." I said, "I can't recommend you for reappointment" and of course, there had been one or two other instances before but anyway I said, "We will have a conference with the superintendent and these are the facts and if there is anything different from this, let's you and I establish those now so when we have the conference there won't be any misunderstanding or misrepresentation. On one occasion it was either that time or when something else was an issue the superintendent would say, "Now Ms. So and So, Mr. Mask is principal of this school and he has been here a long time and he was here before I got here." This was the new superintendent who had just been here two or three years, and I have a lot of respect for him and a whole lot of other people do too. "He is put here to run the school and I am working with him. It can't be run by you and by him and I think he is going to run it."



Goldie: Tell me about transportation.

Mr. Mask: Transportation came slowly. The first bus that we got here and I'm not sure that we raised all the money but our PTA did initiate the bus acquisition. The whites had buses long before we did. The county has to provide the first bus so they did at that time. Sometime in the late fifties we began to get buses and after we bought our initial bus then they began to provide buses for us as our route enrollment required. Transportation was really not a problem. We are talking about the segregated school system. Our only concern was having the availability of the buses to provide for the children who had to get to school. Some of them had to walk four and five miles to school. As a matter of fact there was a girl in my class when I finished high school in 1931, and I don't mean that even the whites had buses at that time, but who walked for about six miles to school every day for the whole high school career and she was not the only one but I just remember her so well because she, a girl named Arin McArn who died about two years ago this past November. Transportation I don't know what else I can say about it.

Goldie: Did you have many buses in 1964, and were you directly responsible for them or did you have an assistant principal that was responsible?

Mr. Mask: I had people assigned to bus duty. But it was not a problem for me. As a matter of fact the boys--we had books each bus driver had his book and he would come to the office in the morning and make his entry on a daily basis and then we would pick that up. I had somebody in the office to take the bus driver's book and make a compilation of the monthly bus report, but it was never a problem really.

Goldie: What about the cafeteria management?

Mr. Mask: We began by having our home economics teacher manage the first cafeteria that we had. That person was in charge of the menus however; I employed the personnel. We did not receive any money from the local school funds as payment for personnel. We did that through our office and through the profits that we made but we did get the USDA commodities you see, so that made it possible for us to do that. I supervised the cafeteria and it wasn't until quite sometime later that we had a Food Service Supervisor for the whole school system.

Goldie: Did you literally start your own cafeteria?

Mr. Mask: Yes, I did. I saw a need for it. As a matter of fact we took a part of the building that was not in use and refurbished it. It was a basement room and we converted it into a cafeteria. That is where we had our first cafeteria.

But now let me say this. When we moved to that point, the superintendent through his office made sure that tables were provided. But we bought our utensils, we bought the dishes and maybe the silverware; however, as I think about it maybe most of the cooking utensils we bought ourselves but with the help of the parents, through school activities, we raised money to get dishes and to get the utensils that we needed. If I am not mistaken, I could be wrong about this and I don't like to be, I would just rather give the administration the credit for providing the first gas range that we had.

Goldie: But you had to show that you really wanted it and that we needed it. You made the first sacrifice and then you were aided.

Goldie: Buildings and grounds. Were they your responsibility? And how did you maintain your buildings and grounds?

Mr. Mask: Yes. Well, they provided you one janitor but the maintenance though, for instance like putting in window panes and fixing doors and locks and things of that sort were done by maintenance personnel provided through the superintendent's office, that was from the time that I became a principal and I think even before that time when my father was principal of a school. They began vocational education and vocational training when my father was principal in 1928. But they did not have it when I was in high school. There was no vocational department of training but when they did get the first vocational teacher from A & T as an industrial arts teacher, the superintendent saw that as an opportunity to provide a service to the schools. At least to the schools in which they worked, you see. So things of that sort were nearly always done by the vocational education classes. The aspect of the building maintenance was taken care of by the instructor in the class as a class project you know. The grounds, if there were any flowers, shrubbery or anything like that, was usually done by classes, by a teacher or a group of teachers and there was a time when they didn't even provide us with a lawnmower to cut our grass. Now they have a maintenance crew and they are responsible for cutting the grass. They did get around to providing us with a lawn mower probably in the late '60's. But the grounds were the responsibility of the principal and whatever he could do about it--and most of the time without any help at all from the administration. Wherever you are you just make the best of it and do what you can. This is a little bit beside the point but this is something that I think of sometime. My wife had a stroke three years ago and I hope I have the time sometime to put it all down because there are some things of a personal nature of experiences and statements that were made. A.C. Crowder was the principal of the Elizabeth Street School in Goldsboro and I know that we used to talk about the time of segregation. We would meet and we would talk about the experiences that we had with some of the superintendents.

He was saying that he had 600-700 students and this was in the Goldsboro district and he told the superintendent that he needed some toilet tissue. He said, just let them use--he gave him six rolls of toilet tissue and said, if they need anymore let them use newspaper. That is what they use at home. That's right. That didn't surprise me at all but some superintendents, and I hate to say this, sort of wanted to run the school systems as they would a plantation you know. You know, like give the slaves enough to survive on and don't provide them too much by way of elevating experiences or expanding their opportunities.

Goldie: What about the books? Did you get used books and desks?

Mr. Mask: Yes, not all books, but used desks. Used desks were common. We never got used desks until we moved to the Monroe Avenue High School on the 4th day of January, 1954. Prior to that time we always had and always received some furniture that was used in another school. There were two things that integration brought about--because you didn't have to use second-hand books and desks.

Goldie: When you got your brand new school, did you request brand new furniture or because the school was a showplace for the Hamlet Schools that they gave you brand new desks.

Mr. Mask: Well, yes and no. I tell you not every piece of furniture in the new school was new. We brought some furniture from the old school but we got more new furniture then and more classrooms stocked with new furniture than we had ever had before. Now I can't say that I requested new furniture but we knew that we were going into a new school and we had to have new furniture and so the new furniture sort of came along with it. There was a new school Board of Education I should say, and that Board of Education had a different philosophy from that of the previous group. As a matter of fact now, this is something that I repeat and it is rather personal. On one occasion there was a member of the Board of which I referred to who was a good friend of mine. He was owner and publisher of the local paper and he would inform me of things that actually happened and one of the things that he related to me, when the superintendent would sometimes be critical of me and he didn't like me. I think he liked me all right personally but he did not appreciate the fact that I was very active in the NAACP and that I would not try to hide the fact that I was, and that I resented some of the things that were done and some of the things that were said, and some of the practices and I couldn't do otherwise. So when he had raised the question once and he had withheld my contract and he had, there had been no representation to the Board and only the Board could have okayed my dismissal or refusal to renew my contract so one of the Board members asked me, "Do you have your contract yet?" I said,



"No, I don't have a contract yet," but everybody else did have their contract so at the next Board meeting they asked him if all the principals and everybody else was coming back, "Do you have all the contracts to that effect." He said, "Well, yes, but not one that I am not quite sure about." They said, "Which one?" He said, "Well, that is Mask. I have been sort of debating what to do about that. He is very active in the NAACP." That made the chairman mad. The chairman was a medical doctor here who is now retired. He said, "Well let me tell you something." He said, "Now I'm a member of the AMA, NC Medical Society, and I am a member of this and I am a member of everything that there is for the advancement of my profession or anything that I am a part of. I don't think I would want Mr. Mask as principal of that school if he were not a member of NAACP." So he lost that battle. I say this privately, I don't mention it as any particular compliment to me but it does show something about the attitude. You see, the Boards of Education set the tone for the superintendent. If the superintendent figures that he can get away with certain things with that Board of Education, he will do it.

Goldie: Tell me about community relations. How your school fit in with the community?

Mr. Mask: I think it always fit in very well.

Goldie: Was it a vital part of the community?

Mr. Mask: I would say maybe yes for the time. We didn't have very much by way of outgoing programs that were community oriented. We had programs that began in the school that were presented at the school and they appealed to the community for support. Our choral society used to sing around at the churches and would go caroling during the Christmas holidays when school was still in session. During that period, around the Christmas holidays, and I can't think of any particular organized community collaboration beyond what the students in a particular church would be doing.

Goldie: It seems to me from what you said before that the PTA was very active.

Mr. Mask: The PTA was active. We had a very active PTA. Let me tell you something else too. This is significant. A lot of times we were told that white groups and organizations provided certain experiences and opportunities and no doubt they did. I wouldn't repute that because I have no way of knowing but now we moved from one part of town to another part of town and our PTA bought the stage curtain for that school and that stage curtain is still there if I am not mistaken because that was shortly after we moved in in 1954. Then our PTA also purchased the first band uniforms that we had. The students purchased their own instruments for the



most part. We didn't have the money nor the resources to get into that so we encouraged students to buy their instruments. We had an excellent music instructor at that time, Drayton Oglesby, whose home was in Monroe. He is retired and plays for one of the churches there now. He was one of Dizzy Gillespie's music instructors.

Goldie: How much administrative power or control did you have over your school site and your responsibilities?

Mr. Mask: Now when you say over my site. I would say I had all the administrative responsibility over that school. I had only one incident where my administrative control was challenged and that was based on the superintendent under whom I worked from 1939-59, who was a strict segregationist. I could give you some examples of incidences along the way that sort of pointed to that fact but it must have been around 1956-57. There were some fellows who had come back from the Korean war; white fellows who had formed a basketball team, and we didn't have a comparable group, I don't believe. I can't recall whether there were any black players in that group but one of the players, the guy who was in charge, asked our basketball coach if our basketball team could have a little practice and if they could come to our gym and practice some with our players. Then they conceived the idea that we will charge ten cents and that will help get a few things for your team because all of our athletics was provided--we didn't get a dime or anything for physical education either. But anyway, it was put in the paper that this local Veteran's Team was going to play Monroe Avenue high school basketball team, which was probably stretching it a little bit because they were not school people but, it was sort of an after school basketball game. The superintendent didn't say anything about it and I don't know if he even noticed it before hand, but he came the night that we were playing and came up to the gym. We had a multi-purpose room, we didn't have a regular gym. We had all the chairs to clear away. He came to me that night, looked at it, and said, "It won't work!") He didn't tell me that he was going to do it but he had the principal to stop by his office on his way home and asked him where the idea came from. He asked if he had planned it with me and he said, yes he had. So that was it. The same coach, who lives in Rockingham now, is an active young man who was recently appointed to the City Council -- Bill Blackwell. We noticed that the local paper would pick up things that we would learn about that we wouldn't know otherwise. They were paying the white coaches a supplement and they were not paying black coaches a dime. So we saw it in the paper and we began to talk a little bit about it and so we sat down and talked about it one day and decided that we ought to do something about it. I don't know if I wrote something to the paper or whether there was something like an open letter that was sent to the paper, not unsigned however. We noticed that the coaches at the high

school are receiving a supplement for their duties and that is not happening at the black school so they did begin to do a little something about it after that was exposed. But he called the black coach and had him to stop by his office and the first thing that he said was, you know what, that letter came right off Mr. Mask's desk, didn't it. It was signed by the coaches. He said, no it didn't. That was our idea. Anyway he didn't like it. He didn't ever like to be challenged but there was that type of discrimination in providing services and opportunities.

Goldie: He never challenged your supervision or your educational or your administrative decisions except where there was a racial issue involved?

Mr. Mask. Hardly ever. Mostly racial.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your role as a principal?

Mr. Mask: Well, probably the most dramatic departure from what had been the custom was the selection of personnel. There were times when somebody would pick up the phone and the superintendent would say, so and so is coming by and has made application for a job and I would like for you to talk to him. I think maybe he would make us a good teacher. There were some instances when teachers were assigned to work in the schools that I hadn't had any contact with at all. These were whites. I would say in the matter of selection of personnel it was a whole new ball game to put it as simply as I can. The whole practice changed--the practice of selection.

Goldie: Did that make a difference in the supervision that you had no dealings with selecting?

Mr. Mask: No, that didn't present me any problem. I didn't operate that way.

Goldie: Did you see any differences in supervision of blacks and whites?

Mr. Mask: No, I didn't to be honest, I didn't. I had this experience, when it comes to the selection of personnel, I had a young woman who was my secretary and she also made the financial statement required by the State. She was having marital and domestic problems and she left and didn't complete the financial reports. When they began to go through them in the office they found that there were some errors and they were kicked back on me. When I knew anything, she was gone. When that happened, I had to get another secretary, as a matter of fact I brought somebody in--a commercial education teacher -- to go back and go through them. It was not a matter of embezzlement. She hadn't taken any money.

The reports weren't right and the accounts weren't balanced. She had to take all that information and go through and get it all straightened out, but when I had to do that then I had to hire somebody to take that person's place. The man who was the superintendent at that time was a man named William Byrd, who was from Haywood County up in the mountains. Dr. Byrd, I reckon he had just gotten to be a doctor, but he wasn't too bad to work with and he didn't have some of the biases that some from the east have. But there was another man who had been here in the county for quite some time who was the associate superintendent -- and that goes back to another whole story as to why this person who had been a superintendent was associate superintendent and was a person who had brought in a superintendent, the politics and all that you know. Anyway he came up to my office and told me that Dr. Byrd said, now this happened just at the time that we were getting ready to integrate, Dr. Byrd told me to come out and suggest to you that you get a middle age white lady as your secretary. You know, somebody who will be able to meet the parents. I said, you go right back and you tell him I am not about to do that unless he orders me to do so. I said, let me tell you something, I said, we have two schools in this state that are preparing people for clerical work. I said, I did not like the implications of it and you just go back and tell him. He is supposedly bringing me a message from the superintendent. He said, "Dr. Byrd thinks it would be a good idea. You know you are going to have a lot of white parents coming and that you ought to have a middle age white secretary here." I told him, I just jumped right up out of my seat and I hit the corner of my desk -- which I regretted the manner in which I reacted because it wasn't very professional but it certainly did make the point. We have two schools that are preparing people and they don't get jobs in the businesses but what they do is they have to go to Washington, D.C. to get a job in government but we have just a few places here for this type of work and we train people in our high schools to do the same thing. Now where are they going to go? You tell him that I don't intend to, and I'm not going to do it unless I am ordered to do it, and I never did.

Goldie: Did you ever get a message back from the superintendent?

Mr. Mask: None. I never got a word back from him because I was so damn mad that day that if he had come in there because you see, that just bothered me no end. That just upset me something awful. It still bothers me--for him to come in and make a statement like that to me. But I didn't do it and I never did. I knew and he knew that they were not about to and they haven't done it yet, hired a white young woman as a secretary in those schools. Now at the high schools they have people who work in the office and do various things. They haven't done it yet and that was in 1968, and this is



1991, and there is not one yet. Now they have had extra people working in the office, but they haven't hired, the number one secretary in the school.

Goldie: Who is the principal of the school where you were principal?

Mr. Mask: Well, for the first time they have a young white fellow. His name is Ricky Watkins.

Goldie: But each time before they replaced you with a black. Well, that is kind of unusual too.

Mr. Mask: Well, we protested that. As a matter of fact there was a representation made by the local education committee of the NAACP and I didn't save the clippings. I do have some here but I just can't put my finger on them, where we protested the fact that the school had been there and started out as a black school but after it was integrated and they weren't replacing any white principals with blacks anywhere. You see what I mean. So we made a representation. It ain't over yet you know. It's not over.

Goldie: Did you enjoy your job?

Mr. Mask: Every day of the year I enjoyed it. Now the only thing that bothered me, and it didn't bother me; it got to be sometimes tiring. I always taught and I love to teach. I majored in English and history when I was in college and I loved the classics. I loved literature and one of the greatest pleasures that I have had from the teaching experience that I had was some of the guys and gals who appreciated and understood Shakespeare and could quote him. There are some who still do so. As a matter of fact one of my favorite Shakespeare pieces is "MacBeth". I like "MacBeth". What I was about to say, is this correct in the papers and I was saying this to somebody Tuesday night, we went to my wife's church on Tuesday. I was talking to some another teacher, current white teacher, and we were talking about teaching experiences and I said, the only thing that ever bothered me about teaching was that you can't do a good job of teaching if you don't have people doing things that they are going to have to do and you can't do it all together by precept you have to give them some examples and there has to be some implementation and you have got to have them doing some of the things. I always had people to write. I have them to write, not multiple choice. It is criminal if you have them to do it and do what I've seen some do, take the papers and put them in the drawer and they get stale. Then when the janitors come along this afternoon, you reach in the drawer and you put them in the trash. There might be something to that--going through the mechanics of whatever they did might have helped them somewhere in exercise but that is not the way to teach and that is not good practice so



I used to sit up sometimes at night, now I am principal of a school, but the superintendent that I had up until 1959-60, always required -- not me as a black principal -- but the principal of the white high school as well, to teach one class or two. There were times when I was a high school principal when I taught two classes and then I got down to one class. It was in 1960, when Dr. Maylon McDonald came to Hamlet as superintendent of Hamlet City Schools. He came from North Durham High as principal. He had received his doctorate from the University of North Carolina. His first superintendency job was here and he said, when he looked at the schedule and we had our first conference he had already seen when he was here earlier that the principals here were teaching. He said, Mr. Mask, you don't teach anymore. He said you don't have time. A school the size of your school and the size of the other schools here, you don't have any business teaching. What you are doing is a full-time job and if you do a good job you don't have time to teach.

Goldie: Had you already come to that conclusion?

Mr. Mask: I knew that. But it was required and it was the superintendent's prerogative. The man who was principal at the high school was white, when I was principal and when my father was principal of the high school. He is still living. He is living right here in this town. His name is Mr. Haltewanger. He is in his nineties and he is still living. I say that to say this. The whole time that I was principal of the high school here and was teaching and had some teaching duties, Mr. Haltewanger, who had a much larger high school, had teaching duties as well. I'm quite certain that he always had teaching duties until Dr. McDonald came. He made some changes. I loved every minute of it except when I had to stay up sometimes late at night during the week reading papers.

Goldie: What do you consider the major problem of your principalship? Is that any different from what you just said?

Mr. Mask: No, I don't think so. It wouldn't be very different. I think the main problem was the lack of support staff. If you have 600 people, you can't get into all of those classrooms and supervise and observe to the extent that you need to and there was no evaluation criteria. So I knew there were teachers who weren't doing a good job. A lot of people would tell me that I wasn't doing a good job but I would be quick to admit to you right on target but you didn't have the type support personnel that you needed. I had the people who were supervisors. They were not always available for the type of visitation and consultation that you would need and that the teachers needed. So I would say that one of my main problems was a lack of time to supervise and to be a part of the curriculum and development and implementation.

Goldie: Did the lack of funds present any problems for you?

Mr. Mask: Always. I needed some file cabinets and I said, I'll never buy a file cabinet. I was a principal a long time before they would provide any file cabinets. Some principals would raise money to buy furniture, to buy office furniture. I would do without it first. That is right. I drew the line because I knew that the system wasn't supposed to work that way. If you don't provide it, it won't be here. I'm not going to spend my time and my effort and ask other people to give their limited resources to provide things that the state is supposed to provide. The money is somewhere but, it "ain't" getting where it is supposed to be.

Goldie: What do you consider the most rewarding about your principalship?

Mr. Mask: The people that I got to know and the rapport and the appreciation with the students that I worked with. Some of the finest people that I would ever want to know-- staff people and students and we began something two or three years ago. You heard me refer to the old high school and the new high school. Some graduates of the old high school and the new high school came together and formed a committee to have a Monroe Avenue Capital Highway School reunion. We had about 350 people here in 1988. Then we had a second one this past August 1st, the second all-school reunion and we have a video tape of both. They had a picnic. One of the graduates, who has a big home--a nice home out on the north end of town, had a pig picking on Sunday afternoon. We had a church service at one of the school auditoriums and that has been really one of the most interesting things that we have had. Kenneth Lee was here and he was one of my students. He graduated from high school here--not this year, but the one before. Elejah Griffin was here. The speaker this past year was a graduate of the class of 1950, and the speaker two years earlier, I don't remember the class that he graduated from -- but he is a doctor in education. The son of a principal of one of the elementary schools and I had Kenneth Lee, who finished high school in 1941, as my commencement speaker in 1961.

Goldie: That was rewarding to have a student to come back.

Mr. Mask: That was rewarding that I had Kenneth as my commencement speaker. So actually that was the thing that has been most rewarding to me to see the progress and the station in life attained by some of the young people that you have worked with. This was very interesting too. You never can tell about people. There was a boy whose name was Nathaniel Wallace, but anyway he went to Pittsburg. He came back for one of his class reunions. After World War II, he was successful in building a transportation business that

hauled coal and steel so he was quite successful. I think he had about 12-15 trucks in his fleet and he had a staff of about 4-5 people in his office. He was doing remarkably well but nobody ever thought that he would do anything like that so that is rewarding.

Goldie: I told you at the beginning that there were over 200 and you said there were 219 black high school principals.

Mr. Mask: I don't have the list of those people but I tell you what, you see I was the last president of the Black Principals' Division. It was a division of principals' and supervisors. I was president-elect when we merged.

Goldie: I was trying to think of the man's name down in Halifax County and he was the first person that gave me names. We had a Chapter I meeting and I was just writing names down on the napkin as he tried to remember the people who were in that association.

Mr. Mask: I could pull together some stuff for you because I have some files on it. As a matter of fact I have some files on the merger, the black and white principal association. We had an eight year guarantee and alternating representatives, you know black and white. I served with E.B. Palmer, as chairman of the legislative committee for NCAE right after we merged, when Palmer was associate executive secretary of the NCAE.

Goldie: If you knew of a black young lady or young man who aspired to be a high school principal in the state of North Carolina, what kind of advice would you give to that person?

Mr. Mask: I would say to the person first of all, don't do it unless you have an almost burning desire to be helpful and to be of service to young people. Then the next thing that I would say is, become as well-informed as you can about people -- all kinds of people and then prepare yourself to become as proficient as you can in some discipline. If you can do that, if you choose to be a principal, you can be successful but there is no guarantee. Some times good people get bum raps. The best people don't always get the best jobs. A lot of times the job gets a whole lot more out of the person than the job itself provides by way of developing a person.

Goldie: Do you have any words of wisdom that you would like to share.

Mr. Mask: I've never been able to develop any words of wisdom. There is one thing that I always think about. It is very simple. I'd tell people, if I were talking to young people I would say, don't hate yourself nor anybody else. Hate destroys and there are some things that probably go



without saying -- and that is if you want to achieve anything worthwhile it will require the best effort that you can give it. Those are actions that you hear all the time and I think they are very basic and very important as far as doing anything is concerned, but you have to work hard. You have got to work hard at what you want to do if you are going to be successful. Don't hate, hate hurts, be helpful where you can.

Goldie: Knowing that you have been a part of the struggle and just from listening to you, you have been active sometimes behind the scene and then you have become more vocal. When you are younger and you know that there are a lot of demands and you have felt that you couldn't do a lot of things but then you were free to say what to say and as young black children as you see the children today, what is your assessment of where we are and where we are going. We have put in so much time and you have put in so much time in the schools. The school is the place where we mode the minds and prepare the minds.

Mr. Mask: I get real discouraged from where I sit. I don't see the motivation, I don't see the concern. One of the last things that I would ever want to be would be a prophet of doom. I don't see too much happening at the adult or at the young adult level that is going too well for us. I don't. For instance I think that most of the people of my age and time we saw that we were competing with somebody out there and we were doing it at a disadvantage. We were almost fighting with one hand behind us. We would say, we just be damned if you are going to keep me down there. I think that is one of the unfortunate spinoffs of integration. It took a good bit of the fight and determination out of us. Some sociologists would challenge that statement and I would have to concede but I don't see it. I don't get frustrated but I get very discouraged. It is not a situation in which you despair but it is not something that you can feel very happy about. I wish I had ten lives and I wish that I could go through. I would love to be involved in spite of the problems that they have today. I just don't believe that I couldn't make a big difference in the lives of a whole lot of people if I were situated where we could interact and where we could work together and I don't believe that people in leadership today, both in education and in the area of spiritual leadership, are concerned to the point of doing something and trying to bring about some type of change.

Goldie: So do I hear you saying that if you could be twenty-one or twenty-two and be given a principalship you still feel that you could make a difference because you think that the stuff is there and that is what you see a lack of.

Mr. Mask: Yes, that is what I see a lack of and I get real angry sometimes and I don't know what the answer is. I know



that parents have to work and I know that you can't be a knocker of progress. Television is one of the great inventions of the age but I tell you what is the truth; it has just about stifled the minds of our young people and it has really become something of a opiate for elder people too. I have several grandchildren and two great grandchildren and my youngest daughter married and has lived in California most of the time since she has been married. They have two kids and they know television. The little girl is four years old. She was born in Durham in 1987, and the little boy was born in California and he will be eight years old in March. They have just come from Pasadena, California. John, her husband took a job with the Ford Foundation Program office Human Rights and Social Justice. They just moved from California to Brooklyn in December. He is a Harvard Law School graduate and he came over here four years ago. You don't know Tom Ringer but he was acting dean of the Central Law School a few years ago and he got John to come from California over here to strengthen the law school because they were having so many failures. He came over here and stayed two years but he didn't like it and went back. He was a law professor out there but he took leave because they offered him this job with the Ford Foundation and he has done a good job. The kids are obsessed with "the tube." I doubt kids read anymore. You see they can't spend as much time watching T.V. and get just a little bit of the world of knowledge and the inspiration that they could get from reading. So much advice on television isn't worth watching; not everything but so much of it. I would say maybe 80% of it is not worth watching.

Goldie: Well, I appreciate you taking the time today.

Mr. Mask: I appreciate your asking me and coming and I don't think I have done you much good, but it has been a nice evening.

Goldie: Very good. I'm using the oral history method so I am interviewing everyone and then I will take what all of you have said and see if there is a similarity and it has been great. I have just learned so much from all of the principals. All of the principals have answered the questions in similar ways and I have been amazed by it. I really have.

Mr. Mask: Before you complete your dissertation there are two principals that I want you to talk to. They are good friends of mine.