

Interview

with

PURNELL SWETT

February 19, 2004

by Malinda Maynor

Transcribed by Sharon Caughill

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

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

PURNELL SWETT  
FEBRUARY 19, 2004

MALINDA MAYNOR: This is tape 02.19.04-PS, interview with Mr. Purnell Swett. We're in Pembroke, North Carolina, and the interviewer is Malinda Maynor, and it's February 19, 2004. Okay, Mr. Swett maybe we should start out by you talking about your parents, and your childhood, and what you remember about education in those days.

PURNELL SWETT: Well, I was fortunate to be, I guess everybody says their fortunate to be born to the parents they had, and in my situation my father had a limited education. When I say limited I think it was about a fourth grade education, and my mother went to the seventh grade. Of course they got married when she was fifteen and he was eighteen. If she had gone to school one more year she would have been able to have taken that test and become, back then, a school teacher, an elementary school teacher. In that union they put a high premium on education.

Let me explain that. They were tenant farmers down in the MacDonald/Raynham area. He became a Methodist preacher and worked under the auspices of the Methodist bishop at that time. I think it was Bishop Henry Lowry. The bishop took a liking to my father. There was a tract of land that became available, which is the home place now right across the river off Three Bridges Road, and he loaned my father the money to buy that land.

The reason my father wanted that tract of land was because it was close to Pembroke, and he wanted his children to be able to come to these schools in Pembroke, that is the elementary school and Indian Normal. Back then it was Pembroke Normal School, high school together. That was where they put a premium on education because

he saw education as a vehicle for upward mobility to be able to achieve those things that he was not able to achieve, he and my mother. So they made sacrifices.

The family, we worked on the farm. He kept us in school. He might have come to school at one o'clock and picked us up to do farm work, but he would not keep us out of school just for the sake of keeping us out. Of course now I've worked many a time by the moonlight at night unloading wagon loads of corn or other activities, and I worked all day Saturday on the farm. We didn't know what Saturday was to have a day off. Saturday was another day we put in tobacco.

My oldest brother who got killed in World War II, he went at that time to Pembroke Normal. He could only go two years, and so he got a scholarship at the University of Virginia where he achieved his degree. After that he volunteered for the Army Air Corps, and he served in that until his plane went down in the Caribbean Sea. My oldest sister died of pneumonia. That left six of us in the family, five boys and one girl, and all of us, fortunately, have educational experiences beyond high school. My oldest living brother today, Furman, who is eighty years old, lives in Memphis, Tennessee. He became the national sales manager for an electronic company in California. My other brother, Vardell, he's still living here in Pembroke now. He retired. He came back here a few years ago. He's a minister. He went to seminary school.

In fact, I tell people my family really is three families, but we had the same parents, mother and father. Out of the first union there were four children, three boys and one girl, and then there's nine years between Vardell and me. Then in this next set there's three of us: myself, my sister, Dorothy; and Tommy. And then there's eight years

between Tommy and Bruce. In fact, Bruce was born after my brother James got killed, so Bruce's name really is James Bruce, first named after my brother that got killed.

So that's the family. We worked hard on the farm. He said if we can't get a bus to school we could walk to school, but he was able to get the bus to come across the river and pick us up, so we all went to school here in the Pembroke area. So that's it in a nutshell. But, again, let me say this. Our family, you know the ethics of hard work, and if you work hard and education's a premium, it will pay off for you in many ways.

So that's the background I come from. I come from a family that believed in love, and daily devotion at the eating table in the morning. Back then sometimes I wasn't sure of the significance of that, but as I became much older and started appreciating things I realized those values that they instilled in us were very important for the success I might attain in life.

MM: Tell us about some of those early school experiences. Well, school as you remember it and also school as you perceived it for whites and blacks that you might have been exposed to or if you weren't exposed to them. Tell us about that.

PS: As I said, they moved up here, and all of my experiences were here in Pembroke, Pembroke Elementary School, Pembroke High School, and then I got my degree from, back then, Pembroke State College. It was our school. We were all Indian schools. Probably at that time [we] didn't understand all the issues about segregation because we went to an all-Indian school. In high school the only experience I had with Caucasians was I had some—well, just Bondanella he was Italian, but that race. All of our teachers basically were teachers that were reared in this area, I mean Robeson County, and attended various schools but might have gone away to different colleges or

Pembroke. Most of them are graduates of Pembroke. Some, in the early days when Pembroke was only a two-year institution went elsewhere to get their degrees.

As I got older then I started, I guess maybe after high school, in high school, that's when I started had some experiences about segregation. I realized I couldn't go to the movie theaters in Lumberton. I could go to Pembroke, but I couldn't go to the movie theaters in Lumberton and sit downstairs. I had to go upstairs. That started nagging at me, so I refused to go to the theaters there. However, there is one exception to that. That's when the movie with Jimmy Stewart came out, Carbine Williams, and I wanted to see that so bad, so I swallowed my pride, and went down there, and went upstairs. However, when I first went down to go upstairs they wouldn't let me go. They weren't sure what I was. So I went around the front. They weren't sure. They wouldn't sell me a ticket, so I went back around to the side door. I said, "Listen. I want to see this movie. I'm American Indian. I'll go upstairs." I enjoyed the movie, but it still gnawed at me that I was beginning to be treated like a second-class citizen. Most time after that if I wanted to go to a movie I go to Laurinburg. That was typical of many of the people of our generation. There were no problems there. We'd walk in, pay our admission, and go and see the movie.

MM: And in Pembroke you didn't have to worry about segregated seating?

PS: I didn't have to worry about it. No, no. At one time they had two theaters there, but that didn't last too long. The old theater kind of faded away. That's where that little washerette across from the Texaco place is located. Then the Sampsons built their theater which is today sitting there vacant, if I remember. I don't think they have anything there, but you could go to theaters there during the night, and I'd walk from

home to the theater. If I wanted to see a movie I'd walk over there and walk back. I'd whistle most of the way. That gave me company.

Those were some of the experiences, and yet I started experiencing, too, from the school aspect, when I went on through college and I started moving around, that's when I started noticing that there are differences, and those differences being—I guess I subconsciously noticed it in school about our textbooks and our furniture, even though I think maybe in Pembroke we got some new furniture occasionally and maybe some new textbooks occasionally, but Pembroke was treated just a tad different than most other schools, our Indian schools.

I was already out of college and I was working at in the school system. A friend of mine started teaching at Rowland High School in the early days of integration when they started to integrate the faculty. I'll come back to that in a moment. He was teaching there one day, and they came and said, "We want to interrupt here a little bit. We want your furniture." He said, "Well, I didn't order any furniture. I've got good furniture." He said, "Well, we want your furniture." They take his furniture out and he gets all new desks. He says, "What are you going to do with that?" He says, "We're taking that to one of your Indian schools."

MM: So Rowland, it was a white school that he was in?

PS: White school, yeah.

MM: They were getting new desks.

PS: He was one of the first teachers that were part of the integration process. They went basically to one of the Indian schools, which happened to be Prospect. It galled him. Also, you start noticing then in your textbooks you see names you don't

recognize. You don't recognize a name that's not Locklear. Might be McKellan. It might be Parker. It might be McMillan. Well, we do have some McMillans, but other names that you didn't recognize historically of your Indian school. Those were some of the things that I started noticing and becoming aware of.

Now going back to that integration situation, back during that time when the big movement was to integrate the schools in the South that's when busing became a big issue. The Office of Civil Rights/HEW spent a lot of time in Robeson County looking at the whole issue of integration, that issue being that at that time we had six school systems, five city and the county. The city school systems had no provision for Indian students so they were bused out of the cities to the county school. In a lot of the communities where the county had no provision for whites they were bused into the city, for example, MacDonald whites were bused into Fairmont. Or, a lot of the Indian people were bused right out of Pembroke to Red Springs, or vice versa. We had Indian people bused all the way from what we call the Burnt Islands east of Lumberton all the way to Magnolia School, or down on the other side of Orrum all the way into Fair Grove. In the early days before Fair Grove was built there was Fairmont Indian School. Then you had Green Grove. So it was nothing uncommon for Indian students to be bused on a bus forty miles just to get to—that may sound like a long distance, but when a bus is zig zagging around it's quite a distance. Maybe I can clarify it even better by saying we were bused more than an hour one way.

But then when HEW came in, in fact, at that time I was assistant superintendent. I was called into the office to witness what was being said. They came in and told Mr. Allen, the superintendent, they said, "We're just here to make you aware that we have



visited all the city schools and advised them they have to close their doors. That is, they can't ship any students out nor can they receive white students in."

MM: To close their district lines.

PS: Yeah, district lines. Then they came to the county. They said, "All right. We can't require busing in this county because in order to do that we'd need to transport students all the way from the Maxton area to the other side of Lumberton," because west of [Interstate] 95 is where, if you looked at your map, that's where your large demographics of the Indian population, of Indian students reside. "And neither can we, we'd have to be busing whites through these city units to the western part of the county or the northern part of the county." They said, "It's really an unmanageable situation. So what we're going to do, you're going to have to start integrating the faculty. Your faculty should reflect the percentage of the Indian students, or black students, or white students," and also forced the board to have to close its own school district lines. It had to establish school district lines.

Back in the early days school systems had school district committees. Those committees really had a tremendous amount of power. They're the ones that recommended to the board what teachers should be hired, what teachers should be fired or what principal. Tremendous power. Well, when the integration came the law was changed which allowed the boards to establish school district committees but only in an advisory capacity. In that role they could recommend, but still the ultimate decision—in fact, they basically took the school committees out of the role of employment completely, and all the employment process was established by the board. These are the early days. Then you had when you started closing the school district lines—.



MM: In the county.

PS: In the county system, that's what led to what we call the sit-ins at Prospect, and Oxendine, and Maxton, and Red Springs. Indian families that were caught in that closed line at Maxton, they just refused. They said, "We're not sending our students to these city units." They didn't want it to start with, and that became sit-ins. At Prospect we had the families that said, "Our ties are at Prospect, not Oxendine," even though Oxendine was an all Indian school. Even after integration, Prospect might have had five blacks, and I'm not aware of any whites, but it was still for all practical purposes an Indian school. Oxendine was for all practical purposes an Indian school. But even though this is one Indian school and this is another Indian school, they're saying that this is our school.

Let me just kind of digress a moment. In the early days of integration the Indian population basically says, "integration is not our issue. That's the issue with the whites and blacks. We shouldn't be a part of that." You could make an argument, but it didn't prevail because the powers that be back then, the civil people in Washington, says no, you are part of it.

MM: Why did, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I think that's a really important point for trying to explain why it is that Indians resisted desegregation because most people would look at that and say, well, they're just like the white citizen's councils in Mississippi resisting desegregation or the parents in Charlotte who didn't want busing, something like that. I think people need to understand really what the difference was.

PS: The difference was Indian people said, "we have unique differences. We're not a part of this whole integration process. We didn't bring it about. We have our own

identity. We have our own schools. We're satisfied with that. We don't want to be out there in this mixture of things." I think that was the reason because they felt like—again, part of the specialness of the Indian population across the country. Even though here in Robeson County there's no treaty relationship a lot of the older Indian people said, "yeah, we may not have these treaties but we still should be treated as Indians elsewhere." That was a very strong feeling among some people. I'm not sure that issue's ever been raised with you.

MM: Well, not as much, no. I think that's a lot of what the Tuscaroras were arguing for, and we can get to that later, but I haven't heard it put that way.

PS: The reason I bring it up is because I heard some of the—and these were school committeemen at some of the Indian Schools in the county. I didn't hear it from the Pembroke area, but heard it from Indian people in some other parts of the county that felt very strongly about it that that's not—"HEW? This integration is not our issue. It's an issue between the whites and the blacks, and you should leave us alone." Now, whether that had from an educational standpoint, did that have merit, because again as I go back and look, we still were treated in the same vein. I'm not sure we were treated any better or any worse than the blacks, but we did not receive the fair share at the eating table.

Mr. Lester Bullard went down to B. E. Littlefield's office when he was superintendent and said, "Listen, it's about time that we in our school at Prospect," he was speaking about Prospect, but ultimately all schools, he said, "It's about time you start giving us the same proportion of instruction supply monies, monies for the maintenance of our schools, all these things as you treat others." He went in there, and he stood up in

front of B. E. Littlefield, and went to the window, and changed his blinds or something—that's the way they tell it. I wasn't there. But he basically left a message, now you can start treating us fairly, or you're going to see some repercussion. And it did have a positive impact for a while.

In fact, when I went to Rex-Rennert as a principal, Rex-Rennert was an Indian school. It had been there for about four years. It was, again, established out there because there's a pretty good population of Indians but yet, again, the Indian population had to be transported by bus to Union Chapel or to Magnolia. They felt, really felt like, we're second-class citizens up here that nobody really cares for. Once we got the school going up there it started moving. But that school up there, again, had a tremendous positive impact on the people up in that area. They started feeling like we are part of the greater population of the Indian community. There's many, many examples of where the Indian community felt like integration is not something that we should be concerned with. As I said, that's a perception, but at the same time we did experience some treatment as a separate class system as far as the supplies, as far as the other things of that nature.

They got a bond issue back in the 50s that built a lot of classrooms. That's what triggered the Fair Grove School. That's what triggered some classrooms at almost all, not all, Indian schools, but quite a portion of them. Basically they were boxes. They were match boxes, four walls, flat top, one receptacle in the classroom, light switch. I guess it was better than what we had, and we thought we had moved up many notches. But later on it became a tremendous expense for me and others who were trying to upgrade our schools with all the technology coming and all the audio-visual type equipment, we had

to go to Union Elementary for example, and completely rewire that school. Put a whole new wiring system in to handle that. That's just one example.

On the other side of the coin though, there was a lot of good leadership came out of the Indian schools. We had, for example at Pembroke High School, we had clubs, and we developed leadership in those. I'm an example. I came through the high school there, and I was president of my class during my junior year and senior year. I was president of my club. We had boy's club and girl's club. Then we also had the FHA. Those type of organizations developed leadership that I really give credit, plus Baptist Student Union at church, those vehicles probably developed me. If I have any leadership qualities I started developing those skills because of that experience. Our Indian students have a tendency when they move into integrated situations to draw back. They feel that they're not quite up to par.

I'll give you an example. In my home with my own son Anthony, we call him Tony. I was a member of the Pembroke Kiwanis Club. At that time our Kiwanis Club had Jim Paul and some other whites, Charlie Walters. I guess about once a year, I don't remember exactly how frequently, we'd visit members' churches. Well, that particular Sunday we were supposed to go the Memorial Baptist Church here in town, Pembroke, which is now Calvary. I told my Anthony, I said, "I want you to go with me." He didn't want to go with me because it was a white church. It shocked me that my son felt that way. I said, "Listen, son, let me tell you something. I don't want to ever, ever get the feeling that you feel second class and don't feel comfortable going into any church in this community." I said, "I haven't taught you that way, and I don't know where you're

picking this up at. If I've given you something subliminal, subconscious on my part I apologize for it."

That was typically a feeling that permeated many of our kids during the integration time. They went to these schools. They felt, we're not wanted. They felt that I'm inferior. They felt that I just oughtn't to be here, so we didn't see much leadership emerge out of that situation. But going back to the Indian schools, some people may disagree with me, but there was a lot of Indian leadership developed at Indian schools.

MM: So do you feel that that argument that some parents out in the county made about it's a black and white issue, not an Indian issue, do you think they were on the right track looking back from it? Talk about that. You said the other side of the coin. Obviously, you have a passion to make integration work like my father did, but you see some of the repercussions of that experience.

PS: I felt that if we were going to really be treated fairly at the table, integration had to become a part of it because society itself, theoretically there's integrated society. Even though we still have probably pockets that are more segregated today than we've had for quite some time. My philosophy has been a lot of the time that the whole power in this country is not black power or white power, it's green power. It's those who control the dollars are going to have the power. I think time has proven me to be correct with that.

On one side I see we gave up something. Of course I've seen Indian kids today, over a period of time, where those feelings are not quite as strong, emerge as valedictorians, or president of groups, or leadership roles in the schools, but back then it was a very—blacks felt like that with blacks. Blacks also felt like they gave up

developing leadership in their schools. When you started integrating the whites saw it as a threat to their leadership development. It was not just a one-sided sword, but it had implications for everybody involved. Of course, I guess that's true of any time you have transitions from one mode of operation to another transition.

Just like the whole issue of the merger of the five school systems. I was a strong proponent of that. People say it never would have happened if it hadn't been for Purnell Swett. I don't know whether that's true or not. I was in the background. I put some things in place, and a lot of people say the things I put in place are what brought merger about. Even some politicians, Danny DeVon and others, he was a legislator, he was part of that process of making that deal, I mean, offering that deal. He said he didn't think it would ever work.

MM: I'm sorry, what was his name?

PS: Danny? DeVon.

MM: DeVon. Okay.

PS: He told me one night, he said, "If I'd known merger was going to pass I would have written a different bill. He said, "We didn't think it would pass." But, it did and, as I said, some people said it was because of Purnell Swett. I don't know. That's the issue that Terry Smith and I had even the last time I was superintendent. He just bitterly detested me because he knew that I was a strong force in the merger, and he was a strong force against it. He was on the team that opposed that.

MM: Would he be worth interviewing do you think?

PS: Give him a chance.

MM: Yeah.



PS: Yeah.

MM: I need both sides of the story.

PS: Well, it gives you a flavor or something that you may not have picked up anywhere. In fact, after I left the last time he told somebody that he really never gave me a chance because he was so mad with me and bitter towards me because of integration that he didn't really fully understand me or really saw what I was capable of doing until after I left. He said after I left, "I realized the man was sharp, the man knew this county, and the man knew what should be taking place, and I didn't work with him." He said, "In fact, we, the board, really treated him wrongly, and I was part of it."

Of course you've got that issue about the money. Dexter Brooks says, "Purnell Swett didn't swindle nothing." He said, "Swindle is hide." He said, "He didn't hide nothing. He kept that as a—." The issue was never about whether I was due the money. In fact the lawyer and everybody said Purnell Swett was due the money. It was just the fact that I didn't go ask the board for the payment. The reason I didn't do that is at that time I followed the same process that had been in the system for umpteen years when you determined somebody was owed back pay you just paid them. I realized afterwards I should have gone in and said, "Here, I'm entitled to this. Do you want to authorize it to be paid or not?"

MM: Right, gotten approval.

PS: That was a whole issue. At that moment I was so, I think, I'd been whipped down with some things where I was mentally exhausted. Hindsight is always better. Dexter Brooks told ( ), said, "Purnell Swett's taken nothing. Crooks hide what they—. He left a trail where anybody could follow it."



MM: Right.

PS: Honest people do that. Dishonest don't do that.

MM: Let's go back.

PS: I digressed a little bit. Focus back on what you want.

MM: That's okay. I was just thinking, you'd mentioned blacks and the fact that blacks didn't want integration either, or felt that they would suffer some losses, because I haven't had very many Indian interviewees that can tell me much about African-Americans in the county, and what people were thinking, and what they were trying to do with their schools in the 60s and the 70s.

PS: I think the real issue with the blacks, you go back and study those court cases and all that, is that they wanted parity. The big issue was parity. "We want the same quality schools. We want the same quality of instructional material. We want the same quality of all these things." Of course, that's what Indian people wanted too. We want parity. Now, if you go back and read some of the information that's reflected upon so many of them after many years, they probably came to the same conclusion that we did, that we gave up something in the process. Did we gain more than we lost? I don't know. Did we lose more than we gained? We gained better instructional materials. We gained better facilities over time. Of course, this county is a poor county, and it's never been able to have the best facilities. When I was superintendent I was accused of being able to take a dollar and stretch it to buy two dollars worth of stuff. We just had to do that. We didn't have much money. Yet, at the same time, I had certain things I couldn't stand. There were leaking classrooms. I would walk in a classroom, if I'd see a bucket I'd just

go berserk. I just resented that, and we worked hard to do what we could to patch up roofs and make sure we handled leaks.

That's the reason I started the career center down here, to give our Indian kids—it was county wide for all. We could not offer the same program to every person, but here you had a chance to go. In fact, the guy who wired my apartment is one of my trainees from the career center down there, Mr. Alton Hagin, a very competent young man. He's making a darned good living. If we hadn't had that program there I'm not sure he would have gone into electrical work or what he'd be doing today. I don't know. We were able to turn around some kids, or students, and get them in fields that became very productive for livelihoods for them.

But going back to the original question there of the black situation, they gave up—. Let's go around. Do we find any high school, do you really find any high school that was an all black high school? There might be a middle school or elementary school, but the white schools became your high school. The identity of it. For example, even though we have merged in this county we still have Red Springs High School. We have St. Pauls High School. We have Lumberton High School. We have Fairmont High School. In the southern part, Rowland gave up because we integrated Fair Grove and Rowland High School. That became South Robeson High School. What is now Purnell Swett was West Robeson. That was Maxton, Prospect, and Pembroke. That was the situation. I knew you could never merge Maxton and Prospect. Pembroke could have survived separate, Pembroke High School, but for all that to work the board felt you have to have all three schools come together with a big, nice school out there, a big campus, and a neutral territory. It's not related to Pembroke. They told me, they said, "If you

recommend to the board a tract of land that would be anywhere close to Pembroke you'd be fought tooth and nail." But you take it out there in Red Banks, it's not too far from Prospect community. Too, well, Prospect community is closer to the school than Pembroke or Maxton, but still it was agreed upon as a neutral site. I'd recommended that the board consider the site up here at the intersection of [highways] 710 and 711, the Joe Sampson family estate. Man, I could see all kind of trails back on that swamp there for ( ). No way. No way.

MM: Because it's too close to Pembroke.

PS: It was on that road coming to where Pembroke High School was. But going back to the issue, the whole integration, as I'm saying, the blacks also gave up the identity of their high school, so they lost something in the process too.

MM: Well, for example, one lady I interviewed from Maxton, she talked about she had gone to the Robeson County Training School which was the black school in Maxton, and she talked about how the black community in Maxton wasn't particularly active, I guess is the right word, in pushing for integration. They were kind of holding back, waiting, praying, hoping that it would go smoothly, and the white community was very interested in opposing it.

PS: That was so.

MM: I thought that was kind of interesting how unlike some of the other places in the South where you have blacks that are more interested in making sure that their students get to go to the white high school, that wasn't the case in Maxton. She talked about the school being burned there. Do you remember that?

PS: Oh, yes. Yeah.

MM: Do you remember the black high school being burned down? Tell us what you remember about it.

PS: I really don't know much about it other than the fact, since you mentioned it, I remember that what is now R. B. Dean you see certain sections there that's concrete flooring where at one time there was a building there that's burned. But you see, again, the black high school didn't prevail. It was Maxton High School that prevailed.

There's some people today that's still mad with me because I tore that building down. It was about to fall down, and they're mad at me because we integrated high school with the other schools, but also eventually that building, it needed so much repair that we felt we couldn't afford to do it. We offered to give it to the town or some others. We wanted to keep it as a museum or renovate it, but the cost of doing that was such, in fact, that they couldn't. The roof started coming down. We went in there and said, "Let's demolish it." I was not a popular guy when I did that.

MM: Let's talk about those few years since you were superintendent then. You had said you knew Maxton and Prospect couldn't be integrated. Tell us why.

PS: In fact, Prospect really didn't want to be integrated with Pembroke because you go back to that long history of rivalry between these two communities. Even though you have several people out of the Prospect community who teach in this area, you still had that rivalry. It's like in high school with basketball and athletics, it was a rivalry. Prospect had so much pride that they didn't want to be the ones who, in my opinion, would be out there in an integrated situation with Maxton. They said, "If you do that you're excluding Pembroke," even if Pembroke schools were integrated because we had

the pockets of Tubbs out here, Clarence Tubb section, back in there, and one or two other pockets around here in town.

MM: And they were black.

PS: Black communities. Also, back off of Back Swamp over here. Back Swamp really was finally integrated from Fair Grove because historically those buses came up there. Pembroke could argue, "well we've already integrated." "Prospect, you have no"—you might have five blacks in that one little pocket up there on the old Red Springs-Maxton Road—but yet, to bring Maxton and Pembroke together, Prospect was saying you're treating us differently. Why are you making us do this when you should be making Pembroke a part of it? That was since I ( ) what was going on and as I talked with people. We were able to make it work.

There's another reason that a merger should have occurred. Prospect was a union school, K-12, and Fair Grove was a K-12, and Magnolia at one time was a K-12. A K-12 school at one time might have been fine, but today, back then with all the issues of busing, you've got high school kids on a bus with elementary kids, and all the things going on, research says you just can't run a union school successfully and provide those type things. Plus, your union school, your high school was very small. You take Parkton up there. It was isolated and by itself. There's not a whole lot we could do about Parkton except put a lot of money in and more staff up there to allow those students to have a half way decent curriculum.

Also I brought into the county the information highway. I had studios in all of our high schools, this was after I came back the last time, we had studios in all of our high schools where we could have certain courses, it might be in French in Lumberton, taught

in French in Fairmont High School, or it might have been calculus at Purnell Swett taught to the students at South Robeson, or it might have been Latin. We had Latin taught over the information highway. There were a lot of things I was able to bring into our schools. I can be honest with you. I guess they still have the information highway today. I don't know. It became a very—the state started withdrawing their support. It's a very expensive proposition. When you have short dollars you start saying, which is worth which? My philosophy—.

MM: It increases the curriculum at every school if you've got it.

PS: That's what it was doing. It allowed the students at South Robeson, it was a small high school, again to be able to be exposed to a broader curriculum. As I said, before we got the information highway we had to, Parkton, they're both small high schools with over two hundred kids. We had to just pump extra teachers and extra money up there to make sure that the kids had a least a pretty good foundation and really be competitive in the world today.

MM: So just playing devil's advocate a little bit. I can imagine myself a person, a parent from Prospect saying, "Why does Parkton get to keep their small high school and we don't?"

PS: At that time you still have five city units. You had Parkton isolated up there, St. Pauls over here and Red Springs over here. We had proposed to merge at one time Parkton and St. Pauls and bring the school further down. In fact, before that we even proposed merging Parkton and Magnolia. I got one of the biggest fights you've ever seen. We were going to go to the Rex-Rennert campus, then we backed away from that.

We were going to take Rex-Rennert campus and develop it into a high school. I ran into opposition at Parkton.

MM: From whites at Parkton?

PS: And blacks. And I ran into it when I went to Magnolia for public hearings.

MM: From Indians.

PS: These people jumped all over me, and so we backed off of it. I said, "Okay."

Another reason, I knew merger was going to come at some point, and that would be the focal high school. I think the whites also realized that, and St. Pauls another place, so they were in the background, I think egging the Parkton people on to being bitterly opposed to it. If that high school in that northern part of the county was established it would knock down all arguments for Red Springs and St. Pauls to maintain their high school, and then you'd have one big regional high school up there. But it didn't prevail. We backed away from it.

In fact, the money was set aside to build that school first before West Robeson. The board told me, go ahead and make plans for West Robeson, so we did that, so it flipped flopped. We got West Robeson built, and the northern part never really got built. But now before merger occurred the money that the board had made a commitment for that school went back, and we appropriated that money, we designated that money to a classroom to Rex-Rennert, facilities at Parkton, and facilities at Magnolia, so the money that was originally earmarked for that high school, most of it was spent in those three schools because they were the communities that were affected by it.

MM: They got it sort of equally divided or roughly divided between the three.



PS: Yeah. There were needs for funds. Parkton, the new library, the new administrative office, all that was built. In Magnolia classrooms that were badly needed because they umpteen mobile classrooms over there. Rex-Rennert had umpteen mobile classrooms, so it was funds that were badly need to replace those mobile classrooms.

MM: Tell me a little bit about, for the purpose of people in the future listening to this who aren't from here, the connection between integration in the 1970s and the consolidation of these high schools or the various efforts to consolidate the high schools. This is all happening in the early 80s, am I right about that? Didn't West Robeson open in 83?

PS: Somewhere in there.

MM: Somewhere in there. Was the Parkton-Magnolia-St. Pauls situation about that same time?

PS: Oh, yeah. That was on the table to do before the West Robeson.

MM: Okay, so tell us a little bit about how those efforts are connected to the integration of the schools.

PS: Maxton merged with the county. In fact Raleigh, the State Board of Education, said it was probably one of the smoother mergers that they had witnessed. Their board of education and our board of education negotiated a merger. That negotiation involved phasing in services over a period of two years. In that merger package it was written that the Maxton Board of Education would become a Maxton advisory board with power, budgetary power. So the money that would be normally allocated to Maxton from local dollars from the county commissioners was set in our budget with a specific line item.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

MM: Why don't you start with what you were saying about the advisory board at Maxton had budgetary power.

PS: As I said, the merger proposal that was approved by the two boards and also approved by the State Board of Education, and also the county commissioners bought off on it. It was written in there that the Maxton elected board would become an advisory board with budgetary power for two years because the merger was laid out to occur over a two year process where you would phase in certain programs. I think the first year we merged in the school food service. Then we merged in the instructional program. We absorbed the instructional staff from Maxton into our instructional staff. And then the final year the whole maintenance and all of that was merged into it.

At that time Maxton had its separate high school, a real small high school up there. Doug Young, who is legislator Doug Young today, was superintendent. Prior to that they had offered overtures to Rowland High School which was a small high school, let's go out on [Highway] 130, and we'll build a new school, and the Rowland district merge with the Maxton district. Well, that didn't fly. After they tried those attempts they realized, if we're going to provide a broad curriculum for the boys and girls of Robeson County then we need to have a merged situation. That led then to the funds to build the West Robeson High School.

Fortunately for us it was a time when construction costs per square foot were very cheap. Material was very cheap. When we started building that building we weren't sure we were going to build a lot of the facilities that we finally built in terms of classrooms.

We planned the core, that is the gym, and the guidance facilities, the administration facilities, the media facilities, and then we'd have classrooms sprung off of that.

Basically, when we opened up there, we had all that in place. Maxton said "we're not going to be able to offer," and it was predominantly black students, they had some whites there, but they said "we're not going to be able to offer our students"—and I admired the board and the leadership there. At that time I think the majority of the members of the Board of Education in Maxton were American Indian. At least I know there were two American Indian guys on the board. It might have been three. They felt that we're not able to offer the curriculum here, so that was brought about. And, yet, at the same time the whole merger, my board and myself included, realized that if you're going to provide Maxton then Prospect is sitting there with a union school, you're going to provide those two schools, and it would have been a high school of about 700, but you're going to need to bring all three schools together to bring in a broad, comprehensive high school.

MM: So were there white members of the Maxton Board of Education as well?  
Was it a tri-racial board?

PS: Yes, it was tri-racial. I think there was one white. There was one black on the Maxton board. He deceased shortly after that, but he was a strong force of that merger as well. He was a business person there in Maxton and a very respected individual. He was a strong proponent that merger should occur, that we're not going to be able to provide for our students what we should provide for them.

MM: Okay. So am I correct in saying that Maxton sort of initiated it with their concerns over the curriculum size?

PS: Yeah, they approached us.

MM: After their attempt to incorporate with Rowland failed.

PS: Right. They approached us. In fact, they approached me and then some of my board members. I think they approached my chairman, at that time Mr. Ralph Hunt, and wanted to start a dialogue. We started a dialogue, and I was involved with that administration, and we worked out the whole merger package.

MM: I think it's interesting, again talking to this lady in Maxton that I'd interviewed before, she gave me the impression that there were almost no white students to be considered in Maxton.

PS: That's a very small population. Most of them had gone, all kinds of ( ) in Scotland County. In fact, right out of Maxton in that community ( ) something, it's in Scotland County. The reason it was established over there was because it could be in Scotland County where the kids go to Scotland County schools.

MM: So many of the white students went to Scotland County schools then?

PS: Yeah. And also you had some top athletes that went out of Maxton to Scotland County. In fact, that became a problem even after the consolidation of the schools. We finally had to step in and say, "Wait a minute. You've got some of our students up there. You can't have that. My board has not legally released them to go to your school system. Now, if you play them we can call foul, and you'd have to forfeit your games." It got worked out.

MM: Yeah. It's fascinating, those technical matters. I just wonder, it's hard to say this without feeling like I'm leading you towards a conclusion or leading you to say something that might not be true, but I guess from, again, a researcher's perspective you look at what happened with the Parkton/Magnolia/St. Pauls potential consolidation, and

Maxton, Prospect, and Pembroke, and what you're looking at in this western part of the county is mostly Indian and black students.

PS: Um-hum.

MM: And what you're looking at in the more northern part of the county is mostly Indian and white students, is that right, or Indian, black, and white?

PS: Indian, black, and white. You have pockets up in the northern part that are blacks. However, with the growth of people coming in out of the northern part of the county, mostly from Cumberland County with military connections, the black population is becoming very minimum. You still have your pockets in St. Pauls, and then you have your Indian population that spills out of part of Magnolia into St. Pauls. The Rex-Rennert goes into St. Pauls. They're divided, St. Pauls and Red Springs. I haven't kept pace with the demographics in the last few years so I'm not sure what those demographics might be today.

MM: Right, but at that time could somebody have reasonably said to you, "The reason these high schools over here in Pembroke and that area are getting consolidated is because it's majority non-white"?

PS: That probably could have been an issue even though that was not the issue of the board. The issue of the board was what can we do to provide the education opportunities? What will a consolidated high school allow us to offer all the students? The conclusion was that we did all kinds of analyses in how you can enhance, broaden your curriculum. However, you reach a point of diminishing return. You can reach a point where your extra numbers are not going to broaden your curriculum because you're just repeating the same courses. You might be having more calculus, and more

advanced Englishes, and these honor courses. That's a positive because you have more students that you can serve, whereas at a small school it was tough to offer these advanced courses.

MM: So from the board's perspective it was really a curriculum issue?

PS: Yeah.

MM: That's the kind of thing that I wanted to know, how that works. There's sort of two other main things I'd like us to try to address, and one of them is the Tuscarora movement in the early 1970s and another one is the impact of double voting on the board and on the way that the county school board functioned. Since you had mentioned the sit-ins and things like that already, maybe we could talk about your experiences working with some Tuscarora parents and leaders, what their main interest was, as opposed to Lumbees, as opposed to the other groups in the county.

PS: First let me say that I was not in the county. I was in Washington, DC, when the Tuscarora really came to the forefront. I got involved in the Tuscarora after the fact when the sit-in at the Board of Education was over and many of those issues were resolved. I say resolved, at least the Tuscarora issue, I don't know, sit-ins. That led to some law suits and some court cases.

My involvement with that is that after I came back from Washington, DC, I had been appointed associate superintendent. It wasn't long that the superintendent, Mr. Allen, asked me. He said, "Here are some of the parents of the sit-in. I would like you to sit down and talk with them and see what you can work out." Not knowing them, and I knew that Mr. Noah Woods knew them, so I asked him to arrange an appointment for me to meet with the Barton family, it was the senior Barton. It was their grandchildren that



really were affected. I was advised that they were the ones that what they say all their children and their grandchildren abide by. So we went there. We had a meeting one night. I sat down and started really listening, and talking with them, and trying to see where they're at and build a case of the importance of going to school where you should be going because Oxendine's an Indian school, and Prospect's an Indian school, what's the difference? Pembroke High School at that time was a predominantly Indian school, "Why are you wanting to go to Prospect?" Basically, they said, "This is where we've always gone to school. Our family has always gone to school here. This is our school. We're not a part of this whole integration movement, so you just leave us alone."

What was rather interesting after the conclusion of the conversation the lady, the wife of Mr. Barton, she looked at me. She said, "Son, where have you been?" I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "I didn't see you anywhere around here when all the sit-ins and stuff were going on at the board." I said, "No, I was not here. I was in Washington, DC. I was working in Washington." She said, "Son, I'd advise you to stay out of this and go back to Washington." Sincere. She said, "Because I think you're a good person. I don't want to see you to get hurt."

Shortly after that I had Mr. Noah arrange a meeting for me with Kever, Kever Locklear. He was one of the ring—. I went to Kever's house and sat down with Kever and talked with him. That meeting established a link between Kever and I where we may not agree with each other, but he respected me for coming to his house and talking to him on his turf. We had a long conversation. As a result of that I never had to deal with any more sit-ins. He worked, I think, to keep the lid on some things. Eventually we were able to kind of break that sit-in because I recommended that we appoint one of the



members of that Barton family who lived in the Oxendine district on the school advisory committee. That started a process of breaking that down where eventually they went where they were supposed to rather than having a confrontational situation.

Also during that time you have some families that lived in Red Springs, many of them were McMillans if I remember. Then you had, Braxton Chavis, I believe he lived in Maxton, his family. Those families, eventually there was a law suit. In fact, I think that happened just before I came back. Anyhow, they were sued. They were taken to court.

MM: State vs. Chavis.

PS: Yeah. They were sued, and they lost their suit if I remember. In fact one case in McMillan, they were actually in prison. One of them went to prison. I think the wife, and then she ( ) the children. Both of them were not in prison at the same time. But that was, again, spill over because they said, "We're not a part of this integration. This is our school. We've always gone there, and nobody's going to tell us where we've got to send our kids." They felt so strongly about it they went to court. I don't remember, I think it was the wife of McMillan that went to court and was imprisoned first if I remember. It's been a long time since I've thought about that. Those were some of the issues surrounding that. It was a strong feeling among the Tuscaroras of that group. Again, integration is not our business. This is our school. We've always gone there. Leave us alone.

In fact, at one time I went to the Braxton Chavis house. Drove up in the yard. Parked the car. Went in there, because I'd heard all kind of rumors about, you'd better be careful, how violent they could be. Again, if you approach people in a civilized way and

respect them on their turf you can talk with them. You may not accomplish what you want to, but you establish communications and you talk with them.

So all that twelve years of my superintendency I never had any problems because I had established communications early in those communities with those people, understood what they were saying, but I think they understood where I was coming from and what I had to deal with. We never had any more sit-ins. We never had any more confrontation.

In fact, Miss Grace Epps told me after I came back to Robeson County from Washington, she said, "Mr. Swett, if you would have been here we would have never had the problem we had." I said, "What you mean, never had?" She said, "Because I know you. You'd have gone over there and talked with those people. You wouldn't have backed away from them. You would have just gone in and talked with them."

MM: And Mr. Allen wasn't one to go talk to them?

PS: Well, he was advised by the SBI and FBI and others that there were certain players in there that would be very dangerous to his health. He was advised to really not visit with them, or not give them the audience that they wanted, or if there was an audience, it would be a small audience. I don't know. I wasn't there, and I don't know whether that's true or not true, but after the fact he shared with me that he was advised by the law enforcement. He might have called the names. I don't remember, but there were certain individuals that you'd better leave alone.

Now after I did get back, there was a meeting down at the board. When was that meeting? No, that was another meeting. That had nothing to do with Tuscaroras. A group came in who did not want to—that was the early stages of the integration when the

lines were closed. Ms. Oxendine who is Wyvis' mother she was down with a group. I talked with them. I was the one that had the audience with them. We had a healthy meeting. In fact what was so interesting, they were lambasting the blacks. There was a petition down at the old board room. There was a black guy sitting with a sign. I had to tactfully, without altering them that there was a black over there, I said, "Now, let's be careful. There are people in this building of that race that you don't need to be talking like that about because they're good people, and we need to respect them just like we expect them to respect us." So we toned the conversation down, but we got to the issues.

MM: Their objection was blacks coming to their school?

PS: Yeah, or them having to go to the black.

MM: Them having to go to the black.

PS: They were lambasting the blacks. I had to tone them down.

MM: Was this before you went to Washington? I'm sorry, I can't remember what you said about that.

PS: I said I thought it was after I came back from Washington, but actually it was before I went to Washington. That was in the early stages of the integration. All of a sudden some of these things are coming back up. Flashbacks. I guess in a summary the whole issue of the Tuscarora was, again, I alluded to it earlier, that integration is not our problem. We don't desire to go to school with blacks. Really, we don't desire to go to school with whites. We want our school. We want to be left alone and go ahead and do things that we've always done. I guess in a summary that would be about the best I could capsule it.

MM: What do you think, right when double voting was broken you were probably in Washington or coming back?

PS: No, I was right in the middle of that.

MM: You were? Okay, well tell us about that whole experience from your perspective.

PS: When I said the middle of it, the law suit had been filed before I came back. I'm sitting in my office as associate superintendent, and people all of a sudden come running in there saying that they've ruled that double voting is illegal. In fact, Mr. Harold Dial, Mr. Harold, he comes down to the board. The Indian Teacher's Association when B. E. Littlefield had retired, they had a picture of him hung in the lobby of the Board of Education with this plaque under it. Harold Dial came down there. He was riding cloud nine, and he came in there and took that plaque off. My telephone rang and alerted me. Mr. Allen was not in the building, I went out and I prevailed upon Harold to not do that. I said, "Harold, that plaque was put there by Indian people. Now whether you agree with their reason for doing it or not agree, they put it there, and you remove that plaque from that wall you're removing public property from a public building. That's criminal. You can get yourself in trouble." He put it back. Sure enough, if he would have gone out of there he would have been—I don't know how much time he would have wound up in jail—but I was able to prevail.

So that led to then the whole establishment of a whole new board which set up districts, not districts but set up how many board members would be elected and the whole mechanism for the election of the new board. The new board was elected and

served with Mr. Allen for a while. I was there as associate. Of course he left and went to Lenoir County, and I then was appointed superintendent.

What was so interesting in that process though, the word was put out—the board became majority Indian. The word was put out, and said, “Well, I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. Them Indians is going to run that school system into the ground, and they’re going to come begging us to pull them out.” When I became superintendent they were watching. I knew they were watching. Well, we didn’t run that school system to the ground. When I left there the first time we left the school system in good shape, curriculum-wise and otherwise. I was still struggling to get the thing moving.

In fact, later on one of the white principals came to me. He said, “Mr. Swett, I want to tell you something. The whites felt like you and this board would treat the whites like we had treated you.” He said, “But you did not. You went out there and fought for quality education all over this county, and you didn’t reciprocate to us as our people had done to you.” He said, “I just want to thank you.” That fellow became a strong admirer of mine.

I had another white principal tell me. Since this is not going to be heard for a few years, the white principal told me, he said, “Mr. Swett, Mr. Allen called me in,” he said, “He talk about everything except what’s going on in my school. When I come here to discuss a problem with you before I leave out of here you will pinpoint me and ask me what about my instructional program, or certain things happening there.” He said, “By you asking me those questions it forced me then to start taking a look at my instructional program and getting on top of it.” He said, “Now, I appreciate you doing that.” I said, “Well, that’s what it’s all about.”

So the double voting came about where we had the election—well, to start with I think there was, if I remember correctly, there was some appointment going on there, an appointing process and then the elective process.

MM: There had been two Indians and two blacks appointed, and when that was broken they were elected.

PS: Yeah. Which turned out to be, again—see, I had a problem. I just never could understand why somebody in the city had a vote for the county board. Of course the argument was everybody pays county taxes so, therefore, the people in the city should have a say so on who the board members are. My argument was, okay, I pay county taxes too. Part of my county dollars go to support the cities. I don't have a say so in that. I made that known to some people when that issue came up. The whole crux of the double voting is that we are not allowed to have a say so in there, why should they have say so in the county?

MM: Do you know anything about how that voting system was created or when it was put in place?

PS: It actually was created in, hum, was it spring of 77? Seventy-six, seventy-seven. Anyhow, the legislature created the system, so it was either in 76 or 77 when it was created, when the whole thing was established.

MM: Okay.

PS: Because I came back from Washington in 75, and I was there as associate superintendent. I think it was 76. Had to be because that board in 77, on May the 7<sup>th</sup> of 77 was the one that elected me as the superintendent, that new board, which had been in place about a year. It had to have been 76.

MM: Seventy-six. Okay. Good. Is there anything else you feel like you want to talk about or any, in retrospect, insights you might have about how integration occurred, or what you feel like could have been done differently, or what you feel like was a success?

PS: Well, I don't know what could have been done differently. Well, I know what could have been done differently. They could have got into busing, and that would have been a catastrophe as far as I'm concerned even though many of our Indian students were really involved in busing coming out of the city units into the county. But at the same time it would have had a tremendous impact on the majority of our Indian students to have gotten into busing. The integration eliminated that problem.

In the long run did integration turn out to be the best thing for Indian people? I guess you could argue pros and cons with it. I feel like history eventually will say that it opened up doors for greater educational opportunities. It opened up doors to make sure that moneys were distributed in a fairly equitable manner. I look back and I see a lot of our Indian kids today who had opportunities to go on out to college and become lawyers, and doctors, and a lot of professions that were not open to them at that time. Basically when I came along there were three professions: farming, preaching, and teaching. You've probably heard that. But today you just look around, the world is the opportunity for our people. We take advantage of it, and we have to continue to encourage our people to take advantage of it. So I guess you can say integration did allow all these opportunities to open up that otherwise might have been closed.

I remember, I got a grant. In fact it was the only public school at that time that got a grant from Washington. It allowed us to educate on all aspect of the health field, a



health careers grant. You ask people about health they just think, well a dentist, eyes, regular doctor. They don't realize all these other fields that are available. It became very successful. Eventually they changed the guidelines and we were not able to get that grant any more.

Again, I was telling somebody, I'm really competing against myself because I'm opening up other avenues for our Indian people which takes them away from the avenue of teacher education, but I said, "That's the right thing to do."

MM: Yeah. Choice.

PS: I want all those choices out there so that they realize, hey, I can do that. You look around today and just in the town of Pembroke the number of Native American Indians who are in the health fields and all these aspects of it, and then the legal profession, and then other professions around, business people, I like to feel that yes, maybe that was part of it. I don't know that it was all, but I think it just opened up a whole avenue for people.

MM: There's one other thing I think I want to ask you about which is something we talked about the last time, in 1975 the threat of the school system being taken over by the state.

PS: Not 75. What was it? Ninety-two.

MM: Was it 92 that it was broke? Well, the note that I have here says whites wanted it taken over because they didn't want merger to work.

PS: Oh, okay.

MM: Is that?

PS: (). Merger occurred in 89.

MM: Okay, okay. So tell us about that.

PS: I guess I haven't said this, but I've had two tours in Washington, DC. I had tour up there of four years in the early 70s, and then when I retired in 89 I went back to Washington until 91 so I was there almost two years. Then I was asked to come back.

MM: Was that with HEW also?

PS: The first time HEW. The second time the Department of Education.

MM: Okay.

PS: Of course, I was with the office of education the first time too. The first superintendent of the merged system, his contract was bought out. When they had an opening I was approached to apply for it. I'd already moved. Headed for Washington, DC. I'd been there a year in an apartment and I ( ). I really had no intention of coming back any time soon. I figured I was retired. I figured I was out of it. I got a lot of calls prevailing upon me to apply for the position. I had some reservations about it to be honest with you, a lot of reservations. Finally I guess I gave in to the thought that that's home. They've had a lot of problems there, and maybe Purnell can be a part of bringing some solutions to it. So I finally accepted the challenge to come back, reluctantly. I almost didn't mail my application after I had completed it. Finally on the day of the deadline I went ahead and mailed it.

When the job was offered there was opposition to me coming. Terry Smith and his group did not want me back in Robeson County. Terry Smith never wanted merger to work. He wanted to keep it Lumberton. He figured merger would not work and they could go back and have their same school system. So I came back, and I was in office there probably thirty days, and I get a call from a person from Raleigh. He said, "We

From that we put in place some programs and some things that allowed the system to start improving the academics. When I left there in 97 it was stabilized and it was climbing. As one of my former principals told me, he said, "Mr. Swett, you won't be here when the real payoff comes. You won't get a bit of credit for it." I said, "Well, I'm not doing this for credit. I'm doing it because it should be done for the children." So the amount of progress that's been made the last few years is because of those things we put in place. My successor can claim credit for it, and that's fine, even though he was told by some of the board members, "It's not a thing you've done. It's what Mr. Swett put in place." I wish they hadn't brought my name up. I didn't do those things because of Purnell Swett. I just did it because it was the right thing to do.

So we got the school system turned around. I hope, and I've said this recently, I hope that the current problems that they're having down there, that that school system will never get to the point it was when I came back in 92. It was almost broke, and it was certainly broke educationally, bankrupt. We worked day and night, and we got it turned around. I had a board back then. We just worked together, and we did everything that we could for children. There might be some of them in there who has some personal agendas, but it didn't surface until later on. Unfortunately, it's regrettable that what I see today is taking place. There may be differences in the back room, but come out in a voice and let the people know that children are the most important thing in this county, but I'm not sensing that. I'm not back here. I didn't move back here to get involved this Board of Education. I'm not hereto condemn. I've been on the stage, and I have no desire to get back on the stage.

MM: It's mostly personal politics prevailing.

PS: Yeah. It is. Personal agendas. Unfortunately children are not a part of a personal agenda. I've probably done a lot of rambling.

MM: You've said everything that I think—.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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