

Interview

with

JAMES E. POINTER

February 13, 2005

by Gerrelyn Patterson

Transcribed by Chris O'Sullivan

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

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Interviewee: James E. Pointer  
Interviewer: Gerrelyn C. Patterson  
Interview date: February 13, 2005  
Location: Patterson residence, Durham, NC  
Length: 1 cassette

**START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A**

GERRELYN PATTERSON: Today is February 13, 2005 and we are in my home in Durham, North Carolina. The interviewer is Gerrelyn Patterson and this is part of the Spencer Grants Project on school desegregation in the south and will be used as part of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The tape number is 21305JP. Okay, Mr. Pointer can you tell me when you attended Hillside?

JAMES POINTER: I attended, I started Hillside in 1952.

GP: So you graduated in-

JP: Graduated in 1956, that's correct.

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

JP: Well going to Hillside was a fascinating experience and also a unique one. And the thing that I remember most was days in the bricklaying shop. I had an instructor, his name was Mr. Tucker.

GP: Tell me about him, because his name has come up but nobody took his class. They just told me about him.

JP: He was a very strict disciplinarian. He was an ex-marine. He was very athletic, very muscular. He ran track, he did it all at Hampton. And he conducted his shop as if we were in boot camp. [laughter]

GP: What does that mean, because I haven't been in the military?

JP: Well, in terms that you had to have things right. He didn't relate to us as children per say, he looked at us as being young men. And he, I guess, at times thought that he was back in boot camp for some of the language that he used. [laughter] But we took no offense to that. He would say something that probably, if you said it again today to a student, that someone would have you up for foul language or this and that.

GP: Okay.

JP: But most of the guys in his class took it at heart and we admired and respected him. And the thing that I will never forget that he said prior to graduation is that your high school days are your best days yet. And he said there will be no other days like that. And looking back, I must say he was on the mark. I remember and those were good days. You know you had your ups and downs, but basically high school memories are fond memories.

GP: Were there other teachers that made a difference, had an impact on you?

JP: I might be somewhat--oh yes, there was one. I'm sure you might hear his name quite often; that was what we called Prop Alston. Now he, again, he played it by the rules. He did not allow any loitering in the hall if you had to be in the classroom he expected you to be in the classroom. He would stop you on a dime and say, "Where do you belong?" and you would have to go and give some explanation.

GP: Did you ever get in trouble?

JP: You know believe it or not I was never in trouble.

GP: I believe it. [laughter]

JP: Oh, you can? [laughter] No, one story I must share with you. I tried to play hooky [skip school] once in my life. Now, if I can go back and give you a brief background. My mother, now she probably finished the third grade. She believed in education and she would always tell us "you are not going to school without some books under your arm and some lunch as you're going to work." Okay, going back to the near-trouble, once I decide to play hooky--I wanted to play hooky. I told my mother I was sick. She said, "Okay, I will stay home with you until you get well." [laughter]

GP: That wasn't in your plan.

JP: That was not in the plan, I was staying in until 12 o'clock I was well. [laughter] She marched me over to Hillside, we caught a bus. And she carried me to Mr. Alston's office who was the dean of students, and said here he is. He was not feeling well, but he's okay now. [laughter]

GP: Miraculously, he's cured.

JP: Yes, and that was the end, that was the only time that I ever tried to play hooky. I played hooky before--and for the most part I have a perfect attendance. And I've never been to the principal's office for any misgivings.

GP: Okay. You started telling me about your family background, can you tell me--because I'm still just really in the research process--

JP: Sure.

GP: What was it like to live in Durham when you grew up? Is it similar to what it is now?

JP: Oh no, no, no, no. Durham is far, far different now from the place where I grew. I grew up in a section of North Durham called East End.

GP: East End, okay. Where is that now, exactly?

JP: It's over in North Durham, just off of Dowell Street. I lived on Lee Street. If you want to corner it off it would be between Dowell Street and Gear.

GP: Okay, alright.

JP: Borders between Tucker and (Elizabeth).

GP: Alright, I know that area. Okay. So tell me more about how it's different.

JP: It's different now if you take people in my generation. Of course, we all went to segregated schools. East End School, the elementary school was two blocks from my house. I could walk to school each morning and return and wave and the thing that I recall was my grandmother was there at all times. She would see us to school, at the end of the school day—this is no joke—you would be at the end of the playground where she could look all the way up to Dowell street and watch me return home.

Now, by some chance if she was busy and could not be there, literally there was three little old ladies in each house. I mean, they sat on the porch and they had their little snuff and I don't know what twig they used—I call it sage brush—and they would have that in their mouth. And if you misbehave, they would say, "I'll tell your mom on you," which was frightening, and if they chose to they could whip you. And nothing was said. So, you respected those individuals as we proceeded on. I would say I had to do in the evening what we'd call night's work. Have to chop wood, we would have to bring in coal and put it on the back porch before we could go out to play. Then we would change our school clothes. We had three sets of clothes. You had your church clothes, school

clothes and play clothes. [laughter] Once you completed the night's work, then you could go play. Then you would come back and do your homework.

GP: And so, after you went to East End Elementary--is that still there?

JP: It's still there, but it's inoperative. The physical structure is still there but I think a church has it.

GP: Okay, in some other capacity.

JP: Yes.

GP: Where did you all go to middle school?

JP: I went to--

GP: Was it called middle school? Junior high?

JP: Junior High, Whitted.

GP: Whitted. And, that's where the Operation Breakthrough?

JP: That's correct. That's the building.

GP: And it was segregated too?

JP: Yes. Everything was segregated right up through I guess the early '60s, late '50s.

GP: So, when you went to Hillside there was no—wait, you went during 1956?

JP: Yes.

GP: School desegregation was in 1954.

JP: That's when the *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. That's the time that the Supreme Court, I guess you know--

GP: Yeah, made its decision.

JP: Yes, but that did change anything for years, for some time to come.

GP: So nothing changed?

JP: Not for us. I mean it might have taken place elsewhere, but it was not until after I graduated--I think Joycelyn McKissick, what in '57-'58, when she tried to integrate Durham High. But you'd have to go back on those dates; I'm not quite sure about those dates.

GP: So there were no white teachers at Hillside when you were there?

JP: No, none whatsoever.

GP: Not even after the school desegregation?

JP: I don't recall, now once I graduated in 1956, the summer of '58, I would imagine not until the '60s before there were white instructors, but you might want to verify that also.

GP: Do you remember people talking about, like when the order came down do you remember hearing a lot of discussion about it?

JP: In my circle, we never discussed it. We knew it was there, but no one [pause] I don't recall any classmates saying, "Wow, we want to go to Durham High--we going to Durham High." [laughter] I mean, we could go to Hillside. [laughter] And, that's the way it was. Certainly not in my conversations.

GP: Okay, so do you think the school integration had any impact on your family? It didn't have any impact on the school.

JP: No, the school had impact on my daughters.

GP: How so?

JP: They both went to Jordan High School, what was the name of the middle school?

GP: Sheppard?

JP: Okay, they went to Sheppard Elementary and Lowes Grove, which was white during the time when I was coming up.

GP: Okay, so how was that for them?

JP: Fine. My youngest daughter was on the cheering squad at Lowes Grove-

GP: So, it didn't really impact you and your family until after you got married and had your own children?

JP: That is correct.

GP: And did your children go to Hillside?

JP: No, unfortunately.

GP: Why do you say unfortunately?

JP: I think Hillside has a rich tradition to the fact that if you go by quite a few athletes came out, we had some noted people--I'm sure someone has mentioned Ernie Barnes, Shirley Caesar, to name a few, Wes Covington--

GP: I haven't heard of him.

JP: A famous baseball player and you could go right on to list the people who came out of Hillside.

GP: And so you think your daughters missed something by not going--

JP: And didn't want to go. I mean looking retrospectively, they said, "Guys, I wouldn't mind graduating from Hillside because of the history."

GP: What else do you think makes Hillside so unique?



JP: I guess the thing that made it unique in many ways, if you look at. It was a huge high school, it was a large high school. And when I graduated in 1956 we had one of the largest graduation classes at about 188 of us.

GP: That's a large class.

JP: Yeah. We had what I would say one of the top band directors. We called him Shorty Hall--

GP: Shorty Hall--Shorty Fillmore Hall.

JP: Shorty Fillmore Hall, was, I mean second to none, he was great.

GP: Were you in the band?

JP: I wanted to go join the band early on, but I could not afford the instruments at the time, so I didn't try to put the pressure on my mother for that.

GP: But you still knew how great Mr.--

JP: Oh yeah, you could not--of course I loved music. Okay there was one Ms. Claridon, choir director she was great, Hillside choir. I'm sure you talk to anyone about Hillside, you heard of Mr. John Gattis ( )--

GP: Mr. G Swing school.

JP: Yes. You could not--he was good.

GP: I talked to Carolyn Thornton and she told me about Mr. G Swing school and she said she was his friend.

JP: Yes. And who else was noted? And of course you had a good football team under coach Riddick. And of course, later Coach Higgins, and Coach Blunt. I think basically, you look at the extra-curricular activities it was tops, I don't think any school could rival Hillside at that time.

GP: Who did you all play?

JP: You've heard of John Baker? I guess he went to Ligon High School, the great rivalry. There would be a fight every Friday. [laughter]

GP: Hillside vs. Ligon.

JP: Yeah, and when it came to the second war I think it was down in Charlotte. E.E. Smith in Fayetteville, a great rivalry. And Winston-Salem--

GP: So basically you played other segregated, all black schools.

JP: Other segregated schools, yes.

GP: Do you feel like the teachers sent you any special messages when you were a student there? Do you remember hearing them say the same thing over and over again? Or, things they didn't even say that made you feel a certain way while you were there?

JP: No, this is on the down side of my experience at Hillside. I guess the only one of the persons that I can recall most vividly was as I mentioned before Mr. Tucker. Okay, number one as I go on back. I was born in North Durham, single parent, ( ), no one had finished above third grade. I was the first in the family to enter high school. It was at this time that I discovered unless you were a star athlete, which I was not, unless you came from a well-to-do family, usually the well-to-do families during that time was light-skinned. I got the impression for myself, because I can't speak for other folks, that teachers did not treat us on the same plane.

GP: There was favoritism?

JP: There was very much favoritism. Students who were born in the square around Central and Hillside were favorites, because most of their parents either taught school or bankers, lawyers, or something like that. But ones coming from my section of

time were not treated as well. So I can't say no other teacher stands out as Mr. Tucker for me.

GP: Okay. Because you feel like he did what?

JP: He, it made no difference with him. Each person was judged according to your ability to do, and as long as you performed it was okay. But, again if you did not have money but you were smart, then people gravitated towards you.

GP: Okay. So that must have been painful though?

JP: It was painful but you learn to move on, don't spend too much time dwelling on it. And then as I got older of course I had joined the Naval Reserve as a junior, and I felt very good about that. That was one of the highlights. A bunch of us joined. There was camaraderie there, and then you had some of the guys coming back from the Korean War. So you had something militarily in common with them. I guess the thing that really made me feel good, was that I was able to receive a check each quarter from the Naval Reserve. It wasn't a big check, but it was enough so I could have money to go to movies and buy ( ) what have you. So that was a big plus.

GP: So then, some other people have brought up the whole favoritism, teachers showing favoritism to people. I guess what I want to know is even though that was there, how is it that you still seem to have such good feelings about the place.

JP: It's the, I guess it would seem it has to do with my shop experience with Mr. Tucker, and the part of being in the Naval Reserve. Because once I got out of the first two years, if you break them down, was before I went into vocational. So those were the rough years, but my two last years--junior and senior years--were the years I spent in vocational. So, which were super and prom--

GP: So it kind of outshined the rest of the stuff?

JP: Oh, yeah.

GP: Okay, plus you had your check.

JP: Yeah, I had a check. [laughter] I was lucky. And, I've always worked. I worked out of high school. But to get a check, a government check, or one with my name on it, I could go down to the bank ( ). Take the young ladies to the movies or buy lunches at the Green Candle.

GP: Oh, I've heard about the Green Candle. The Green Candle was the place to go right?

JP: Yes, super food. I could (splurge) for my group of people. [laughter]

GP: Do you think there are special things that schools like Hillside did for black students, that schools don't do anymore?

JP: I think one thing, even with the stressing of scholarship. I think they did demand that you do the work you are supposed to do. There was very little compromising on that. I must say too, if I'm going to be fair, is that they had a sense of pride. They did show a sense of pride, that I don't see that much now. And the skill of ( ), once you--you had a great love for Hillside--whatever the experience was. People just felt good.

GP: How do you think they did that? A lot of people have said that they had this sense of pride, that Hillside instilled a sense of pride and belonging and self worth. How did they actually do that?

JP: Well, first of all I guess with dress. You had to dress a certain way. Your mannerisms, they expected you to respect the young ladies, respect your elders and, of

course, your teachers. I guess part of that would go back to most of our backgrounds. My grandmother would always say if you want to get somewhere then you have to be smart and you have to show that you can do. Whether you were academically were able or not, it was instilled in you to do your best and that you would not go on to succeed in a white world--that's how they put it--if you didn't have an education. You have to be twice as good, so those are the premises--

GP: That you just kept hearing over and over again? Do you think those are some of the things that you think have been lost? That schools like Hillside are not able to do?

JP: I think it's lost, again, by not having any children in there now. I don't hear much of that same--okay if you go back to dress. Now, you could say it's generational or what have you, but I don't see the dress being encouraged--proper dress. At times if you are going out, when we went out to a play, then you had to put a tie on. If we didn't have a jacket, then you had on a long sleeve shirt with your tie. I don't see that. Of course, the language...I don't see that as being reinforced. I'm not sure what they are saying in terms of the kids having to, or the students if they want to move forward to really dig. I'm not sure that's going on.

GP: So, the opportunities that you all had at Hillside?

JP: I think the opportunities we had; we took advantage of everything that was open to us. One thing we knew for sure when we were growing up; if we graduated from high school you were going to do two things. You were going to college or you were going into the military. That was it. There was no--. Now if you did not go to college because of grades you were expected to go in the military.

GP: Ladies too?

JP: No, not the ladies.

GP: Okay, just the guys.

JP: Yes, I'm sorry just the guys. Now if you did not qualify that was another story. But you take, 75 percent, maybe not that high maybe 65 percent, of the fellows graduating from high school during that time have some military experience. That was a given, that you did. If you chose to go into the military, then that was a 20 year--that was a career.

GP: So there was an expectation that you were going to do one--

JP: Oh, you are going to do something. Pick. [laughter]

GP: You were going to do something! [laughter]

JP: It's the truth; you were going to do something. You are getting out of here. [laughter continues] You are going to work, and then if you didn't qualify you were going to find a job. During that time the tobacco factories employed a lot of guys who did not go to school, and they made a career out of that.

GP: Could you make a decent living at the tobacco industry?

JP: My land, that was tops. If you during the time, if you had a job at the factory you were on salary about top that of a teacher.

GP: Oh really?

JP: Oh yeah. You didn't have the status, but you had the money.

GP: I didn't know that.

JP: Yes. Those were top jobs.

GP: So, not the status but you had the money.

JP: You had the money. For people, those guys got along well.

GP: I bet.

JP: Yes, they did.

GP: Do you think that those are the kinds of things that we lost through school integration/desegregation? Do you think that there are things that--did you see gangs? I know you talked about your daughters' experiences some.

JP: Gangs, there have always been gangs. People talk about gangs, there were gangs even when I was coming up. We had sectional territory, we call it bottom...which is off, down below Whitten school. And, unless you had very good reason for being in the bottom you didn't want to go down there.

GP: Why? What was happening at the bottom?

JP: Well, it was always for the most part centered around your dating someone. In the bottom, and vice versa in West End. So there was that "You're not coming over here dating our girls.

GP: Okay, gotcha. Territory.

JP: Yeah, territory. And if you know the other underpass at Roxboro and Pettigrew, that used to be the dividing line for ( ) Durham.

GP: Oh, I didn't know that.

JP: And Hayti.

GP: Okay, I didn't know that.

JP: So, everything was territorial.

GP: So did the bottom change then?



JP: Eventually, with the sports and people putting up jobs. Now also we laugh [to see] guys getting out of the bottom. Things worked out.

GP: So, then things weren't as sectioned off as--

JP: They were sectioned off, but you found ways to make allies and get around there.

GP: Do you have any thoughts on how schools can better educate black students now?

JP: Personally, in looking back and this is not to say that if you wanted to be political, proper or the same with the culturalism--which I believe in multi-culturalism. I would say, pound for pound in terms of the quality, mental stability and mannerism I think the schools of our days surpassed over today. And to make a long story short, I don't know whether desegregation was an ally or an enemy.

GP: Why do you say that?

JP: [sigh] I feel we lost a lot. We might have gained, but I don't know whether the gain outstripped the losses. Furthermore, I think we lost the respect for teachers; we lost respect for self in a sense that teachers did not have that sense of connection. Then, everyone knew the teachers in the school and they knew each child. Now, you know a teacher might be 50 miles away. At that time the teachers were expected to attend services--

GP: Church services?

JP: Yes, in certain areas. In the rural areas if you taught you had to go to church at least once a month. So that's in a general sense, trying to answer your question in



terms of being different. If you look at most of the black schools in the area, whether it's Hillside or others, you would find basically the same ingredient.

GP: So you think we lost the sense of connection.

JP: We lost connection. In my opinion, in terms of the young black men, it's whether the teachers or someone else fear of them, especially your white female teachers. And a black youngster would come in, he might raise his voice--but whether he's threatening to her or not--. Then off to the principal's office. The next thing you know he's out on the street, etc. So, that's my perception on that.

GP: Because they don't know--

JP: They don't know the youngster and out of fear sometimes people can overreact, and as a result then this youngster is labeled and then he's out. During the time when I was coming up, you make that same comparison, if a youngster got out of hand, the principal would take [him] into a corner [laughter] and talk with him. [laughter] This isn't like Hillside, of course, all schools are different. Not to say that we did not have disciplinary problems, we did. But I think they were handled differently.

GP: That's a good point. Okay, so this is really my last question. What do you think is important for future generations to get from the legacy of Hillside?

JP: I guess the legacy would be to go back and study some of the people who had graduated from the school and try to analyze why they were successful. What motivated them to push on in spite of all odds, and what was that internal drive that kept them going. I think that what you will find is that notion to succeed, to be respected and to be a credit to yourself and those around you. Also, to find some sense of pride and self

worth. I think that through the legacy as I see it in terms of--I'm going after the question--but just reflected to the soul of the school and I think that's what was advocated.

GP: The soul of the school.

JP: Yes.

GP: Anything else you want to tell me? That I might not have asked you, which I need to know if people say, "Gerrelyn, Tuan, I know you talked with people about what it was like to go to Hillside." Do I have enough?

JP: I think basically you have enough. It's just a school and I do this as just a recap in a sense that--and sometimes I look back now--and even in spite of everything--gosh, how did you all survive that? My fondest memories are of the time that I went to Hillside. The prom years, the graduation and stepping out on your own is like looking back as it was just a wonderful experience.

GP: Okay, I'm going to end it here then.

JP: Okay.

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW

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