

SOHP Series: Listening for a Change  
Davidson College Interviews - Ada Jenkins School

TRANSCRIPT - KENNETH NORTON

Interviewee: Kenneth Norton

Interviewer: Brian Campbell

Date: 23 March 1999

Location: Davidson, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)  
(approximately 45 minutes)

Notes: This interview is one of several investigating the history of the Ada Jenkins

School in Davidson, N.C. The school opened as the Davidson Colored High School in 1937-38 to serve the African American community of Davidson and northern Mecklenburg County. This neighborhood school was initially elementary through high school, and became elementary only in 1946-47 when a high school opened in Huntersville. In the mid-40s, the school was renamed Ada Jenkins, honoring the longtime teacher and leader. The school closed in 1965 when Mecklenburg County integrated schools. The facility has recently been renovated and re-opened as the Ada Jenkins Center with a variety of programs and services.

Kenneth Norton grew up in Davidson and attended the Davidson Colored Grade School (later Ada Jenkins) in the 1930s, graduating from Davidson in 1945. He attended Carver College in Charlotte. Like his father, Kenneth Norton, Sr., he runs a barber shop on Main Street. Although he has continued to work in Davidson, Ken moved to Landis, in nearby Rowan County in 1959. He is a leader in that community, where he has served on the local school board and has worked with numerous young men in the Boy Scouts.

I interviewed Mr. Norton at the barber shop in Davidson. He confidently and comprehensively remembered facts about the school, including people's names and

specific dates. He describes a number of Davidson teachers, including Mr. Poe (sp?), Mrs. Jenkins, Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Baucom (sp?), and Mrs. Byers. Although most people claim that Mrs. Jenkins was the first Principal of the school, Ken maintains that in fact the Principal was Mr. Ives (of the white school) and then Mr. Poe. Mr. Norton recounts his experience as a player-coach for the school basketball team. He describes his experience with integration and the struggle to save a black school from being closed.

### TRANSCRIPT

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A]

BC: It's March 23rd and this is Brian Campbell interviewing Ken Norton at his barber shop in Davidson, NC.

KN: Ok, I'm Kenneth Norton and I attended the Ada Jenkins School back in the thirties. I first started school at a little one teacher across the street behind, just off of Mock Circle. Really, the building is still there, but it is turned into a house. Mrs. Brown was the teacher there, Mrs. Josephine Brown. And we had a three-teacher school across the road from that one

that shows up on a picture I have made around 1938 or 1939. That was a three-teacher school. I don't remember going to school in that building because somewhere around 1938-39 I think the new building was built which we call the Ada Jenkins building. A picture was made shortly after we got into the school and of course I bought one of the pictures. Mrs. Ada Jenkins' picture appears on that.

I don't remember how many students we had then, but it was a relatively small school. It was called a high school and it went first through eleventh grade. We didn't have a twelfth grade at Ada Jenkins school, so we graduated after the eleventh grade. So, if you took chemistry one year whoever came through that class would have to take physics. Physics was offered one year and chemistry the next, so I missed chemistry in high school because physics was the subject when I came through.

We did not have a principal there until a fellow by the name of Lorenzo Poe (sp?) came. We had one male teacher there before him. His name was Gordon. I don't remember his first name. Mrs. Ada Jenkins was the lady in charge there, but the principal was really at Davidson High School on what we called School Street, what we now call South Street. Mr. Ives was the Principal. Mr. Ives was Caucasian. Many people didn't know that - they thought that Mrs. Jenkins was the principal. She was never the principal

to my knowledge. Mr. Ives was the principal of the school here that is used by a special group now. His son and I were personal friends and played together - Claude Ives. The father was Claude, the principal of Davidson High School at the time. Ada Jenkins School as it is called now was called Davidson Colored High School.

It got the name of Ada Jenkins I believe after Mrs. Ada Jenkins died because she was a wonderful person and a wonderful teacher. She made a point of telling all the students when they came to her class that - she usually taught seventh and eighth grades if I remember - that she didn't like to spank, but if she spanked, you would forever remember it. A very stern person. Perhaps a person that had a lot of motivation going for her. She made a tremendous impression in my life because she always talked about going to Yellowstone and her husband evidently was a minister, but he had passed by the time I knew her. She had two children: Plenny and Portia. She talked so much about geography and having visited Yellowstone. It imbedded in my memory that I wanted to go there someday, so I've been to Yellowstone and of course Yosemite too. She made a great impression on I think every youngster who came through her class.

I think Mrs. Brown was my first grade teacher and she could get me to do almost anything in the world because she had a way

of . . . a great motivator, she'd say: "Oh did you do that?" and the expression that she gave would make you feel that you could do almost anything.

I think the next teacher that I had, Mrs. Baucom (sp?), Bessie Baucom, had three classes and also had so much going against her that I'm not sure she was able to do a whole lot of teaching. How do you teach three different groups of kids? She had third, fourth, and fifth grades - maybe sixth - maybe it was fourth fifth and sixth. Seventh and eighth went to Mrs. Jenkins.

We later got a Davidson girl to teach there. Her name was Zeddie Mae Byers (sp?), and she also appears on this picture that was made back in those early days.

BC: Was that a college student?

KN: No, she was a local girl, a black lady that grew up here in Davidson. She was a very good teacher and a very stern person. I'm trying to think who she . . . I don't know if she got married. Of course, she stayed there for a good while. This is one of the high school teachers.

We had a Mr. Gordon, and I don't remember what classes he taught. That was during the war years, in the forties. But we didn't have a Principal until Lorenzo Poe came. That's the man

that appears here in the picture. I think I'm pointing to the right person.

BC: Did he teach anything?

KN: He taught, coached. He was . . . Like I said, we had Mrs. Byers, another lady - I can't think of her name just now - Mrs. Coles. But she got married while she was there. And Mr. Poe. Those were the three high school teachers, so there wasn't an awful lot that could be offered since there were only three teachers teaching high school. This was the entire student body that was there in attendance that day. So you can see it went from youngsters to seniors. This man is still living, this man is still living, but many of these people are dead. Even some of these youngsters are dead. This young man is dead. That's Devella Torrence, that's Freddie Eaves [individual is actually Bobby Eaves]. Many people know James Lowery. He's still around town. And of course you know some of these people out here, Vennie, that's Evelyn, Mr. Rayford's sister-in-law. That's his wife's sister. This young lady died. That's Ervin, now Ervin McClain - she's a retired nurse. And Joseph McClain is the barber that shares time with me. This is his wife. Like I say, many of these people are not around any more. This lady is in a nursing home.

That's Lottie Mae Reed. She was a dear friend - I called her my big sister really. She's had a color change from brown skin to white. She lost pigmentation. That was her brother over here, Murray Reed. Murray was one of A & T college's all-time great football players. I'm trying to think of some others that were quite outstanding. There was a I. A. Withers. I'm not sure he was there this year, but I. A., or Ike Withers as we called him, became one of Johnson C. Smith University's running backs - a very good football player.

BC: What kind of athletic teams did Ada Jenkins School or the Davidson Colored High School have?

KN: Basically, basketball. We called ourselves playing football. We got some old uniforms from Davidson College that were handed down from the varsity to the JVs, from the JVs to the freshmen, and from the freshmen they ended up with us. We called ourselves playing football, such as it was in those days, just sort of make-up teams.

Mr. Poe was our basketball coach and he called me his player-coach. During the war years he couldn't take off and he would send one of the guys that drove the bus to drive his car and take the seven of us to play wherever we played during school



hours. I was the court coach. I was fifteen or sixteen years old.

BC: Did you play a lot of other schools around here?

KN: Yeah, back in those days we had a segregated program of course so we played in Mooresville - I believe it was called Dunbar High School. We played Huntersville - Torrence Lytle. We played Pineville, Clear Creek, Plato Price was out towards the airport in Charlotte. Those schools have all since been closed and integrated into an integrated school system.

I left Davidson in 1959 and sold my house and lot to Duke Power company and I moved into Rowan County. I continued to run Norton's barber shop until 1993, so I've lost contact with a lot of the things that go on in the Davidson community since I don't live here any more. I have some pleasant memories of growing up in Davidson and I went to Carver College in Charlotte, which is the counterpart of Charlotte College, which later became a part as it was integrated into what is now the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. I played basketball at Carver College.

BC: Did your school have a team name or a mascot or anything like that?



KN: I don't remember having a mascot. We might have, but I don't remember. I don't remember. That's fifty-five, sixty years ago so I can't remember.

We didn't have a gym, so we played on the opposite side of this building. The court was on the back side where now the senior citizens' lunch room is. That's where our basketball court was on that side. We had to put the posts up and put the baskets on it and all that sort of thing. I was a sand court and we got to play in a gym when we played Mooresville or some of the Charlotte teams. We played Second Ward, West Charlotte occasionally. We played Kannapolis.

BC: So, were you guys a pretty good team? How did you fare against these others?

KN: Oh, we held our own. We had a very good team. Back in those days, if you beat Mooresville, you had to run. If you beat Kannapolis you had to get out of there in a hurry. We didn't have any trouble in Charlotte or any other areas that I remember. They were very competitive. I remember my senior year we beat Second Ward in basketball.

BC: Were there a lot of other clubs and activities and things at

the school?

KN: We had a student council at the school, which I was a member of. There was not a whole lot of activities, no. I was just thinking that this is a cousin of mine and she became a teacher. She didn't teach in this school, but she taught in the old Davidson Elementary School and she finished her career teaching over at - she married a Byers, and she lives over there by Anchor Grill - she taught over in Cornelius until she retired.

BC: Now what year did you start at this school? It was early in your . . .

KN: It was probably around 1938-39 I imagine, 38-37.

BC: And you were in what grade you think?

KN: I don't remember being in Mrs. Brown's room, so I was probably in about fourth or fifth grade, in Mrs. Baucom's room. I came up there and her room was right here on this corner.

BC: Do you remember when they were just building the school and all of that time?

KN: Oh yeah, when we came into that school, we still had pot-bellied stoves, you know. We heated - and ink well desks - and we had to go down under the school to get coals to bring up to put in the stove. We started the fire with wood, and the students would keep the fire going. We had a janitor that would maybe make the fires in the morning. Can you imagine, under there was a space for a furnace but we didn't have a furnace at the time. We stored coal down there.

This was a playground out all the way back to Mock Circle, so whatever brand of ball we played was out there except for basketball which was on the back side. That's about all I can tell you about.

BC: So what was the reason? How did it begin, the idea to build a brick school? What was the energy behind that?

KN: I don't know, they built a gym over here. They were talking about how the gym was so bad over here at the white school and it seemed like it was raining as much on the inside of this building, the roof was leaking and everything. It had a porch that extended across the three classrooms on the back side facing the first grade building. The street came down between that. The

reason probably was that they were going to bring students from Smithville, Cornelius. They were going to bring kids from up there to turn that into an elementary school for that community. And Withers School, which was out near the Catawba River, near where Lake Norman is now, those kids came to this school. So, they consolidated the youth from different communities and brought them here. That was probably the reason behind that. Instead of building permanent buildings throughout the county they built this one here. And of course when they went to the twelfth grade, which was a year after I graduated, they didn't have a graduating class - I guess the whole high school department probably - to Huntersville, to Torrence-Lytle. This became an elementary school then, and I think that's when they named it Ada Jenkins. So, I finished school around 1945 so it might have become - at least the twelfth grade went to Huntersville, to Torrence-Lytle.

BC: So, how did those students come from Cornelius and everywhere else to this school?

KN: They had buses. They bused them... in the north end of the county.

BC: So they bused them from the time this was opened, they had already started busing?

KN: This looks like to me most of these people were from Davidson, so I don't remember what year they really started the consolidation, but when this building was built, that was the plan. It might have been a few years after that before they . . . Because all the people I see here are from this area.

BC: So was that the plan of the people in Davidson or do you think it was something that the county decided to do, to build this school?

KN: Well, I'm sure it was the county, but Davidson had a lot of influence I'm sure. I don't know who the board members were back then. I didn't know the board members. Now, they've done away with the board members. I was on the board, president of the PTA over in Rowan County after I moved over there. I was on the local school board. If I had been over here, I would have fought to keep this building and this facility, because I fought to keep the one over there. Now it, it was a black school and now it is an elementary school. They blew out the thing and enlarged it, but they spent a lot of money to try to maintain segregated

schools. Somebody put me on the local school board and I fought to keep that facility open, to turn it into a seventh grade school to start with. They weren't going to let me win because I said: "This would be the perfect place for a junior high." The high school being on the downtown section of this little town of Landis and the high school being just off 152 towards China Grove, and the school that we had called Agra Memorial (sp?) in Landis, just outside the city limits would be between the elementary school and the high school. They weren't going to let me win that case, but I was just satisfied to keep it open. The German Lutheran settlement over there - Rowan County - and I'm tax conscious. I said, "Do you want your tax dollars wasted? You've got this facility here and you're going to let it die?" I would have done the same sort of thing if I had been on the school council over here.

No one really fought to keep that. Mecklenburg might have not gone along with it anyway, but . . .

BC: You don't think there was much of a fight to keep this one open, that you remember?

KN: I don't think there was, no. Kids went . . . My uncle by marriage, my aunt's husband, was the last principal I believe of

this school, John Tibble (sp?). I don't think there was much organized effort to keep it open. People fight now in the Charlotte area, but this was a separate school system then; Mecklenburg County Schools and the system in Charlotte were two different systems, and since then they've been consolidated. Now they've got too many kids down at North Meck[lenburg High School], way over 2,000 and someone said 4,000. That's too many in one high school. I believe in smaller schools, a more community type situation.

BC: Do you remember the community being really active in this school?

KN: That was the leading thing, and we had nothing else other than churches and schools. We had three little churches and I always felt that there could have been one, but we have Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist out there vying against each other. I'm not hung up on denominational things. But that was it. All the social life was through the church or the school. In fact, we saw a movie once a week. A man by the name of Henderson would come down here and show talking movies. Prior to that my foster daddy and his brother had a place around across from the old train station where they showed silent movies. That's about



all I can tell you.

BC: Were there other events, like did the churches ever have big gatherings and stuff at the school or any other groups that met at the school?

KN: No, the school programs were basically like Halloween. Most of the social life of the school I don't remember the churches being involved in the facility that much. The churches had there own little thing going pretty much. They had picnics - Davidson College used to let them have ball games over there and picnics, baseball games. We had the Christian Aid Society which brought some people from each of the churches into a group. That's the little cemetery behind the baseball field, the Christian Aid Society cemetery. We had a Masonic Hall behind our church. The church has been destroyed, but the church was built out of brick from the old Chambers building that burnt [a Davidson College building]. That's the Methodist church that's now there that bought the old white Presbyterian church and tore the old building down, and the Masonic Hall has been torn down.

BC: Were the teachers of this school really involved in the community? Did they live in Davidson and do a lot here?

KN: Mrs. Jenkins' house, now Mrs. Ruby Houston and her mother, they live in Mrs. Jenkins' house. Mrs. Baucom built a house next to me, and I lived on Mock Road. Mr. Brown lived with her there. They were involved in whatever social life went on. I didn't talk into that mike so I don't know what you've got in there.

BC: I think it will pick up. Were they leaders in the town a lot? Were they looked to as important leaders?

KN: We had segregation back then, so I wouldn't say . . .

BC: I mean even in the African-American community?

KN: Yeah, they were leaders there. Mr. Logan Houston, a Presbyterian, was a big community leader. I think he was perhaps one of the strongest leaders in this community until Esther Johnson came on the scene and she took over a lot of leadership in the black community. Joe McClain, the barber, he was on the, he was top vote-getter on the Davidson Commissioners. Now I think - trying to think of the name . . . young man would kill me if he knew I couldn't think of his name right now. You have to realize I'm seventy-one years old and names evade me. Evelene's, one of

her sons.

BC: Garfield.

KN: Yeah, he's on the council. But Joe was on the council before Garfield. We only have had one on there at a time I think.

BC: Do you remember any funny stories about any of these teachers, or any events that happened at school or anything like that?

KN: Not really. Just what I've told you. Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Jenkins were most inspirational people. And of course we had Zeddie Mae, a local girl that grew up here, and she was very stern. She's the only local girl that taught in the school. I don't remember my cousin Margaret teaching here. She taught here after integration. That's about all I can tell you.

BC: What do you think about the changes that have happened at the community center now? Do you think that it plays some of the same roles that the school once did as a . . .

KN: Well see, I'm not familiar with what goes on there, you'll

have to talk to some of them now.

BC: Yeah, I was just wondering if you had any thoughts about that.

KN: No, I'm totally in a different community. I don't even know the people over here any more. I know some of these people, but I'm in a different community now. I've been over there, what, 49 years, '50 to '99. That's a long time away from this community, but these people ought to know about their community.

BC: Well, we're putting together this history so we can do an exhibit at the community center, so that a lot of the kids who come there now will learn about the history of the school and why it was built and remember different people who were there. And it would be great to get a picture, if you know where there is an original of one of these that would be really great to be able to put it up.

KN: I have . . . George, a lawyer - he gave me two pictures and I framed the one and he kept one and that was the intention, to put it up over there. I'll try to get the names together and get them to him.

BC: Do you know of any other pictures?

KN: He told me he wanted that picture a long time ago, but I've been involved with my mother and a number of things going. For the Methodist Church, Salisbury District, I've got seventeen churches I'm supposed to be involved with as director of scouting. So, I'm involved over in Rowan County and I'm not involved over here now. I'm not going to give interviews to anybody else.

BC: Can you think of any other people that it would be good for me to talk with? You mentioned several on that picture, but especially some of these who might remember more.

KN: Talk to James Lowery. He ought to remember things about the school. Frances Houston. You know Frances Houston?

BC: Yeah, I've talked with her some.

KN: Gordon, I don't know how much he knows about it. That's his uncle, Gordon's daddy's brother.

BC: You mentioned a guy, Barry?

KN: No, Murray, Murray Reed.

BC: Do you know how to get in touch with him? Is he still living in . . .

KN: Look him up in the telephone directory. I think he'd be in the Charlotte directory. And his sister.

BC: It seems like these people that were in high school would remember the beginning.

KN: Margaret Byers, she was on the election board, but I don't know what she does now. She's my cousin and she lives in that last house before you get to Anchor Grill. You might find her telephone listed under Arbra Byers. Ralph Johnson if you can get him to talk. He'll be 95 years old in September.

BC: Is he in that picture?

KN: No, he never went to school here, period.

BC: Was he already graduated by that time?

KN: He's the oldest native-born Davidson person that is still living.

BC: Yeah, I'd love to talk with him.

KN: He was my competitor. He ran a barber shop up where that bank is on the corner. He ran a barber shop up there and sold that building when he retired. I was three or four doors down the street from him. He's also a cousin to this lady, my cousin through his mother and her father. The man who reared me was his uncle and competitor. We didn't get along too good at times. Mr. Poe, the Principal lived with him in his home. So, Mr. Johnson should remember much. He remembers more ancient history about Davidson. I can go back to the blacksmith shop back here, but he remembers the blacksmith shop up the street. These people ought to know something about their community. Frances, Vinnie, Evelene, James Lowery, Murray could probably tell you a little something. This lady here, his sister, is in a nursing home now - Lawdy Mae. See, most of these people are dead.

BC: Why do you think they chose to name the school after Ada



Jenkins? Do you remember how they chose that?

KN: Because the people in the community thought so much of her. It was a basic thing. Everybody went to school so they had some sort of fond memories or at least great respect for her. And most of the people in the black community thought she was the principal, but to my knowledge, Lorenzo Poe was the first Principal. She was the person in charge under Mr. Ives. That was a segregated system back then.

BC: Thanks a lot. Can you think of anything else that you want to add about the school or anything?

KN: I've got some more pictures that we made, just courting. Nowhere else to go. Girls we were dating and that sort of thing. We don't have any significance for the school.

BC: Alright, well thanks a lot.

End of tape