

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

8/26/09

Peggy Van Scoyoc (PV): This is Peggy Van Scoyoc. Today is Wednesday, August 26, 2009. I am in the home of Phyllis Cain. She was one of the very few people who attended West Cary High School, when it was a high school. She was in the last graduating class of West Cary High School before it was integrated, and converted to a ninth-grade school, I believe, back in the sixties. So, let's start out, first of all, were you born in this area?

Phyllis Cain (PC): Yes, I was born in this house.

PV: Right in this house, okay. So we're right on the border between Cary and Raleigh, just down from the fairgrounds off of Highway 54, Chapel Hill Road. That's where we are right now. So were your parents born in this area?

PC: My mom was born in Apex. My father was born in this area.

PV: So you go way back as a family in this area. Now, what did your parents do?

PC: My father worked for the Seaboard Railroad. My mom originally was a housekeeper in people's homes. Later she worked at Lufkin Rule Company in Apex. After she retired, she became a, I guess you would call it a center with elderly people.

PV: What were your parents' names?

PC: My father's name was Clancy Cain, D. middle initial. And my mother's name is Gussie Horton Cain.

PV: There was a Clancy Cain who was on the Cary Advisory Council.

PC: That was my dad.

PV: It was. Oh, I definitely want to talk to you about that.

PC: Yes, he was on the Advisory Council and also he served several years as the president of the PTA at Cary Elementary.

PV: No Kidding. That's fantastic. So and this was during the years of desegregation?

PC: That's where I was in elementary school. Yes, prior to desegregation.

PV: So he was on the Advisory Board. So now tell me where you went to school.

PC: I went to Cary Elementary. High school, my freshman and sophomore year I attended Berry O'Kelly High School, which has a long-standing history. In fact, it was the high school my parents graduated from, and the high school I really wanted to graduate from because it has such a tradition. But it closed in 1964-65 and they built West Cary High School. And that's where I graduated in 1967.

PV: Okay, so when Berry O'Kelly was going to close, you transferred.

PC: Yes, it closed and they built a new high school and closed Berry O'Kelly.

PV: But you started out in elementary school, you went to...?

PC: Cary Elementary.

PV: So it was already desegregated?

PC: No, segregated. 1955 through, I guess, 1963.

PV: So was it East Cary Elementary? The Kingswood?

PC: No, it was Cary Elementary, right off of Chatham Street.

PV: Off of Chatham, okay. So you went there until your freshman year in high school.

And then you went to Berry O'Kelly.

PC: Berry O'Kelly two years, it closed and then they built West Cary.

PV: So your father was on the school Advisory Council during the years you were in elementary school.

PC: He was. I vaguely remember that, but he was. I had some pictures of the board somewhere. I couldn't find those. I remember him being the president of the PTA association also.

PV: So he must of have been very influential in, did he work on putting together a plan to desegregate the schools, or was he...?

PC: I think he did. I really don't remember the details, but I think he did. I'm not sure.

PV: That's great though. So you left Berry O'Kelly reluctantly because you had to.

PC: We hated that so bad, because so many of our parents had attended Berry O'Kelly. And the way the auditorium was built, it slanted down. So when they had the graduation, the graduates would march down from side to side. I always wanted to do that. And then when they left, it was going uphill, in the auditorium. It was one of those old auditoriums. We missed that.

PV: So then you started at West Cary.

PC: There were four classes, the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior classes. And then there was a class that graduated in 1966, and then our class was 1967.

PV: So did they bring students in from...

PC: Oh, we were bused all over the place.

PV: So did you actually ride a bus to get to West Cary?

PC: Yes.

PV: So where did you pick up the bus?

PC: There used to be a stop sign where the stop light is. This community's called Lincolntown, or the Asbury community. So we were bused to West Cary. I went to school with students that lived in the Millbrook area, Morrisville, Method community, I'm leaving out something, Bayleaf, Jefferies Grove, Cary. I'm missing somebody. I'm missing another community. But all of us were bused to West Cary.

PV: So everybody was bused in. How long a commute was it? Do you remember how long it took you to get there?

PC: Oh, it's on Evans Road, maybe, probably fifteen minutes. Because there were no traffic lights or anything like there are now, so about fifteen minutes.

PV: That's not bad. So it wasn't a long ride.

PC: No, it wasn't.

PV: So how did you feel your first year there in your new school?

PC: Well, I think a lot of us were, as I said, sort of depressed because we didn't get to finish Berry O'Kelly, but once we got there, it was a very close-knit school. Only 300 and some students, so we were like a family. The thing that really stands out is our principal, Mr. J.E. Byers, and he really instilled in us that we were the great West Cary. And so we had the philosophy that we were just as good as any other students at any other school. There was a larger high school in Raleigh, Ligon High School, much larger. But he just instilled in us that we were the best. So we became a big family. I guess the most exciting thing that stands out is, we beat Ligon in basketball. We had, we were arch-rivals and had never beaten Ligon, and finally beat Ligon High School. So that was a very exciting time.

PV: I bet. And Ligon had been around a long time and you were a new school. That must have been exciting. Were there a lot of extra-curricular activities going on at West Cary? A lot of sports?

PC: There were, we didn't have football, so mainly the sport was basketball. I think we had track. Yes, we had track. There is a funny picture I was looking for and I couldn't find it. We had track, we had basketball. I believe that's all. No football, tennis or anything like that.

PV: Were there any other activities, drama club or chess?

PC: Yes, we had drama club, we had 4H. The Crown and Scepter Club was a honor society that, of course we were segregated so we had our own separate honor society. This was the Crown and Scepter Honor Society. We had a conference at St. Augustine's college, that

really stands out, March 18, 1967. So that was neat. Ronnie Harris, who was a member of my class, was elected president. This was the year he gave the president's message, so we were very proud of Ronnie.

PV: Yes indeed. So did this honor society...

PC: It was state-wide, of African-American students.

PV: "The Crown and Scepter goal: success through knowledge, leadership, character and responsibility." So the Crown and Scepter Club, now were you a member?

PC: Yes.

PV: Oh how exciting. So this was statewide. So it must have been a real honor to become a member, to be nominated. Now what did you have to do to qualify?

PC: It was. Maintain a B average, I believe. It was a long time ago. It was honor roll students.

PV: Did you, when you moved from Berry O'Kelly to West Cary, did your friends also come with you. So you weren't separated?

PC: Yes, everyone moved except, when we went to Berry O'Kelly our freshman year, that was the first year they integrated the high school. So maybe, I don't remember exactly, maybe six students went to Cary High School. Basically all of my friends stayed together.

PV: And came over to West Cary. So you weren't separated from your friends?

PC: Like I said, it was about six. I think maybe one from my class, that would have been in my class from Cary Elementary, and the other ones were older.

PV: So, tell me what you remember about your two years at the school. Do you remember the teachers, or?

PC: I remember all the teachers. I think the one thing that stands out, the teachers were very concerned about us. They knew our parents, our parents knew them. There were PTA

meetings, so we knew that if something wasn't right at school that we were going to get told on. They communicated well together. I think the thing that stands out, I can't speak for the other classes, but our class, the class of '67, we were a very tight-knit group. There were only 53 of us. Four are now deceased. We had a one-year reunion, a twelve-year reunion, I think we skipped fifteen, the twenty, twenty-five, and maybe we had thirty-five. And we haven't had a fortieth. But that stands out, even though it's been years and years, and then there twelve to fourteen of us who used to go out to dinner, that stopped maybe about a year ago. We would go out to dinner and celebrate birthdays. So it was just that, everybody knew everybody. Everybody knew each other's parents. We really enjoyed the games a lot. I'm trying to think of something else. It was just really fond memories. I really can't think of any negative experiences. Everything was just a lot of fun. We hung out together on weekends. It used to be, sounds hard to believe, but if you wanted to meet people or see people, you would just go downtown on Saturday and you'd run into everybody. That was before the subdivisions and all the other shopping centers. But if you went downtown on Saturday, you would run into a lot of people from school.

PV: This was downtown Cary?

PC: No, downtown Raleigh. There was nothing. Cary used to have one stoplight. We had a friend that lived in Cary and we used to tease her about coming from the one stoplight town. When we were at Cary, Cary had one stoplight. So there was nothing really to do downtown Cary. It's very hard to believe, because you can get lost in Cary now. Our reunion, the last one that we had, (was it the last one that we had?) the last one that we had, that was when we went to the school. That was probably the picture you saw of me [in the Cary News,] I was the coordinator of that and so I thought it would be nice to tour the school. So the next Saturday we toured the school. We had a banquet at, I think that was at North Carolina State Faculty Club. And on that Sunday we had brunch. We went to church together. So finally we said, we've seen

enough of each other for awhile. So we always, we manage to get together and keep in contact with each other.

PV: That's great. Now have most of your classmates stayed in this area, or?

PC: Yes, the majority. I think there may be six or seven out of state, but the majority are in the state. Quite a few have retired.

PV: Have they? How many went on to college?

PC: I don't know the percentage. This was a very good article that I did. It kind of highlighted what some of our careers are. Let me see if I can see this. I don't know how many went to school out of the 53, but there were quite a few. Just different careers: teachers, social workers.

PV: Which is you.

PC: Yes. Okay, here it is. "In 1967, according to Phyllis Cain, coordinator of the reunion, the graduates are social workers, teachers, accountants, ministers, and engineers. Others went into businesses of their own. Some work in television broadcasting. Another in employee relations, and yet another is a successful gospel singer." There were couples in the class that have dated since the eighth grade. That stands out. () "We joked, played pranks." We loved to do that.

PV: What kind of pranks did you play?

PC: Oh, I cannot repeat those. Skipped school occasionally. I never did that, never did that. I was too scared. "We dreamed big and we studied hard." One thing we did, we always invited our teachers back as our guests to all of our reunions. They were our guests. They did not have to pay, not anything. They really enjoyed coming and reminiscing with us at the reunions. "The school changed in 1965 when West Cary became the high school." I forgot the year, I couldn't remember the year exactly. So those were the most outstanding moments.

PV: Now, did you have siblings?

PC: I have one sister. She's, I'm seven years older than she is. She went to Cary High School.

PV: I was going to say, did she by any chance go back to West Cary after it was?

PC: No, we didn't have, any of our siblings were... There were some siblings in the school at the time but a lot of them didn't get to go to West Cary because they changed it.

PV: Right, to first a ninth grade and then a middle school.

PC: Ninth grade, exactly. One of the quotations our principal always said, "We did not come here to play, to dream, to drift. We have work to do and loads to lift." We'd always have to say that in assembly. I don't know the rest of it. "Show not the struggle..." and I don't know the name of it. That's the one thing that always stood out.

PV: That was a poem that you all recited?

PC: Yes. I don't know who wrote it. I might have the words somewhere.

PV: So you have, were you the class president?

PC: No, Ronnie Harris, he was the president of everything. Ronnie Harris was the president of the class for several years, and the president of the Crown and Scepter Club. I was a reporter one year. I remember being a reporter. I don't know what I did, but I was elected a reporter.

PV: So there was a school paper, I take it?

PC: We had a newspaper our last year. This is the article. I couldn't find my newspaper. We had a newspaper. That's what I was looking for. We didn't have a yearbook, unfortunately, but we did have a newspaper. I thought this was the newspaper, but this is the Cary News article.

PV: This article you've been looking at was in the Cary News on Wednesday August 12, 1987.

PC: I think that was our twentieth year.

PV: That makes sense. Yes, twenty years ago. And there is a picture of all of you twenty years later in a group shot. That's a beautiful picture.

PC: We graduated on, this was graduation exercises Sunday May 28th. They used to have something called a baccalaureate sermon. That was Sunday May 28th, and then the commencement program was the following night, May 30th.

PV: Now was there an auditorium, and did you get...

PC: A gym. We didn't have an auditorium, we had a gym.

PV: So it was a flat floored gym, so you didn't get to go downhill and uphill like you did at Berry O'Kelly?

PC: No we didn't. No, just a flat floored gym. And I must say this. I loved our graduation activities were very dignified, were very dignified. You could hear a mouse drop, because if there was any noise, Mr. Byers would have probably escorted them out. As compared to the graduations I've attended recently, but it was very dignified, very quiet. You got to hear everything that was going on. So that was great.

PV: Now did you wear a cap and gown?

PC: Yes, we had cap and gown.

PV: And you walked across the front when they gave you a diploma, when they called your name?

PC: Yes, when they gave our diploma.

PV: So what did you do after high school then?

PC: I attended North Carolina Central University in Durham. Got a degree in social work, a degree in sociology, and became a social worker. My first job was at Central Children's Home in Oxford. I was their first social worker. I worked there about seven years. And I've also

worked in Franklin County as a social worker for about three years. And I've been at Wake County in Human Services in Raleigh since 1985, '88.

PV: That's a good long career.

PC: Yes, my one and only career, just about. I've done other jobs in between, but always came back to social work.

PV: So can you recall things about life growing up in this area, or life in this area either before desegregation, or afterwards?

PC: Well, basically growing up in this area, it was a close knit – all of us came from close knit communities. Everybody knew everybody, and that was prior to a lot of people moving from the north. So we would go to different churches and we knew everybody in the church. We just, one of those things that we knew people. If one community had an event, or a community activity, we would go. Other schools would have their junior and senior proms and we would get invited. We would go. So it was just a lot of fun growing up. After segregation, I don't recall it being really much different, because at that time West Cary closed and we went off to college.

PV: So you weren't in the primary grade schools anymore. So it changed with you.

PC: Exactly. We still keep in contact with some of our teachers. They look just like they did when we were in high school. Some of them now are deceased, but we still have some contact with the ones that are left.

PV: Do you remember their names?

PC: Oh sure. It was a very small school. Mary G. Cotter.

PV: What did she teach?

PC: English. Mrs. Doris Holloway was our librarian, Lilly Pearl Jones, science and chemistry. Maybe just science. Jocelyn Archer, at the time I think her last name is, chemistry.

PV: What was her last name?

PC: She was Jocelyn Archer. () I'm trying to stick with West Cary because my mind keeps going back to Berry O'Kelly. Some of them transferred to West Cary. Quite a few are deceased now. () Oh, they did have a class thing in '76, here it is. We didn't have one [a year book.] () I'm not sure about Mrs. E.M. Thomas. She was history and I think she relocated to Charlotte and we've lost contact with her. Mr. Lockemoore was auto mechanics. () Mrs. Smith, our French teacher. We were not really nice to her. It was her first year teaching, and I think we just took advantage of that and laughed and acted really silly in class. So at one of our reunions, Paul Pope always was the master of ceremony at our class reunions. He had all of us to stand up and apologize to Mrs. Smith. Mr. James Joyner was our basketball coach. () Mrs. Ella Smith.

PV: Now she was the French teacher, Ella Smith?

PC: Yes, she taught us French at West Cary. I don't want to get the two schools confused. I think I've named the West Cary teachers that are still living. () What I did at the reunions, I would make copies and make a display, and that's why these are loose. We used to autograph them. Of course we didn't have a yearbook, as I said. You were asking about activities. We had our pep squad, student council, Crown and Scepter Club. We had French I and French II, home economics, agricultural, and we always had homecoming.

PV: Now what did you do for homecoming?

PC: We saw a basketball game. There was a queen and king crowned at the basketball game. And then we would invite the queen and king from the other, from the rival high school as well.

PV: Now did you have a prom?

PC: Yes, we always proms.

PC: Did you have a junior and senior prom?

PC: Junior and senior prom, yes.

PV: Did you have a live band, or...

PC: No, we didn't have a live band.

PV: It was like a D.J.?

PC: Like a D.J. Those are of our activities, those that I remember.

PV: Were they in the high school gym usually? All decorated?

PC: Yes, they were in the high school gym. We hadn't moved into the hotels like they do now. They were in the gym. We had a very active PTA. I think I've mentioned that, a very active PTA.

PV: It sounds like it was a really good experience for you.

PC: It was a very good experience. I'm glad I didn't miss it.

PV: I'm surprised that, Cary High School was beginning to be integrated from 1963 with those six students you mentioned.

PC: I said six. I think it was about six, because I know there were I think three from this community. It was around six.

PV: And then West Cary opened two years later, but it opened as an integrated all-black school even though they were already desegregating other schools.

PC: It opened as a segregated school.

PV: I know, and I'm surprised that it did, given that they were trying to integrate all the schools at that point. Do you know anything about why that was? They were just going to close Berry O'Kelly and needed another school, it sounds like.

PC: No, I don't. Berry O'Kelly, I never understood why the school couldn't have been remodeled. Maybe they looked at the cost of it, but it was a very old school. As I said, it was the same school my parents graduated from. So I guess the decision was made it would be better to build another school. But they didn't keep it. ()

PV: Can you think of anything else that... () Do you know of any kids that were bused a really long way that caused problems for them, or upset parents or anything?

PC: No. That's why when they talk about busing now, I laugh. We were bused all over the place, but I never heard of any problems.

PV: So you don't know of anyone who had real hardship over that?

PC: No. It was just a given at that time. There weren't any community schools like they'd start having community schools at one point. But we didn't have that, so we all went to the same school. I had a friend, so funny, I went to Central with her, North Carolina Central. She was from Murfreesboro. She ended up dating one of my classmates who was just like a brother to me. So we would go out on Sundays and ride around. One day we were riding, she said, "I don't understand this." I said, "What?" She said, "David lived in Jefferies Grove, you lived in Asbury, Paul lived in Nazarus." I forgot the Nazarus community over by WRAL. And she said, "How did all you all end up going to the same school?" Because she was from a small town, Murfreesboro. And everybody went, I said, "Linda, you were from a very small town." We were from all these different communities." She thought that was the funniest thing, because we were bused all, from all over the place, going to one school. So it was kind of normal for us.

PV: I don't think there were that many kids, so they had to go all over to fill up one school.

PC: We were much closer to Cary High School, but. Years ago when the school was downtown. () What is your deadline?

PV: I'm getting close. I think I told you on the phone, I'm working on a book on desegregating the schools in Cary. I think this is my last interview, so I'm real close to having it finished.

PC: () Let me give a couple of my other friends a call, and see what stands out with them. ()

PV: Thank you so much for taking your time and for doing this. This is great.

PC: I wish I could think of more, but it's been a long time and I'm sixty years old now so my memory isn't what it used to be.

PV: I understand. I graduated from high school the same year you did. So, I'd be hard-pressed to remember teachers and everything else.

PC: I wish I had stuff more together. But, the only thing that's missing is the newspaper that I thought I had.

PV: You had that one article and that was great. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

PC: Thank you. I look forward to your book. What is the title of your book?

PV: It's going to be called *Desegregating Cary*. I'll let you know when it comes out.

PC: I'm glad you didn't forget us.

PV: I just was trying to get some of everybody. ()

PC: A lot of people would have, if they didn't know the history of Cary, they wouldn't have known that was to be an all-black high school.

PV: Right, exactly. And as I was researching the history of the schools in and around Cary and in Wake County, and came up with that short little two-year period of time for West Cary. I had saved that article from your reunion from... () That must have been your thirty-fifth reunion or something. () So I hung onto it and that's how I found you, through that article. So I really appreciate this. This was great. Thank you.

The next day Phyllis called me back to give me more information. She had called some classmates and this is the message that she left me.

PC: () Peggy, this is Phyllis Cain that you interviewed yesterday. I have some additional information to share. The old Berry O'Kelly High School, the city took over that property. Then it became a middle school and now it's a park and recreation center still owned by the city. Also my classmates inform me there were two or three white students that were bused over to our high school to take auto mechanics and carpentry. And also, there was one white teacher that taught (). So I wanted to pass that information. And then I omitted some teachers' names that I would really feel bad if they were not included.

PV: [Phyllis never called back to give the additional information.]

END OF INTERVIEW