

Interview

with

ROBERT M. EARLE

December 27, 1990

By Goldie F. Wells

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Goldie: I'm at the home of Mr. Bob Earle in Burlington, North Carolina. The date is December 27, 1990. Mr. Earle, if you could tell your name and tell that you know that this is being recorded.

Mr. Earle: My name is R.M. Earle and this conversation will be recorded the 27th of December at 3:30 p.m.

Goldie: All right, I 'm doing some research on Black high school principals that were principals in 1964, and I want you to tell me how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Earle: Well, in the early '30's I was an elementary school principal before teacher and I moved from there to teaching science because that wasn't what I wanted to do and that wasn't what I was equipped to do. I moved to Nash County in 1935, and taught science and coached basketball. After that the Superintendent in Northampton County had an opening in the Garysburg High School that was supported by the county and he gave me that job in 1938. From that job I have been in the principal's position ever since.

Goldie: And you were a principal for all those years?

Mr. Earle: I began in 1938. Previous to that time when I went to Nash County I became a science teacher and then I moved over to Brick School which was supported by the county and I started football over there and stayed there until 1938. Then I moved back to Northampton County because he sent for me then and I went over and became the principal of Garysburg High School.

Goldie: When did you retire from principalship?

Mr. Earle: 1969.

Goldie: Well, you saw lots of changes, didn't you?

Mr. Earle: I've seen a lot of changes.

Goldie: I want you to tell me about your school. I'm trying to focus in on 1964. I'm going to talk to principals who were principals in 1964, and principals who were principals last year just to see if they looked at their role any different and see if their responsibilities are any different than what they were from the principals in 1964. I want you to tell me about your school and your responsibilities. First, when you talk about your school then

I want you to tell me how you selected your personnel and how you supervised the teachers. Tell something about that school.

Mr. Earle: Well, first of all during those years the Superintendent of schools more or less had the say so as to who you would hire. If someone in that particular vicinity who wanted a job they would have someone in the community that knew them that had influence with the Superintendent to tell him and he would say: Earle, I have a good teacher for you and I don't know how he knew but that is what he would tell you.

Goldie: Were some of them not so good?

Mr. Earle: That is right.

Goldie: But he would tell you that they were good and you had to take them.

Mr. Earle: Yes.

Goldie: How many teachers did you have at your school back in '54?

Mr. Earle: I had thirty-eight.

Goldie: All Black.

Mr. Earle: That is right.

Goldie: How much input did you have into the instruction and curriculum at school?

Mr. Earle: Well, I was totally responsible for the instruction and the curriculum. They didn't check on us so much as to what you taught.

Goldie: Oh, they didn't?

Mr. Earle: Not too much.

Goldie: You could use the State Guidelines and then variate if you wanted to.

Mr. Earle: Yes, that is right. The Black supervisor was the one who, I guess she is the one who came out of the office with the information as to what you should do.

Goldie: Was she the only one that checked on you?

Mr. Earle: That's right as far as the curriculum is concerned.

Goldie: What about discipline?

Mr. Earle: Well, you didn't have as much discipline problems then as we do now but it was funny at times. I usually tried to keep them there as long as I could. If the person didn't interrupt the classroom and if they got to the point where they couldn't abide by the rules I would let them go home and stay awhile until they cooled off and learn how to act.

Goldie: Well, did you have a big problem with the discipline the way it is now. If something happened, could you just spank the child and that would probably be the end of it?

Mr. Earle: Most of the time that was the end of it cause that was coming over from way back and you could discipline children way back better and the farther up the ladder we would go the worse it was.

Goldie: What about transportation, Mr. Earle. Did you have any buses?

Mr. Earle: Yes, we had several buses in my last school. But they were in Clinton and we had seven buses there and we didn't go all around through the county and so therefore it made the number of buses smaller.

Goldie: Were you in charge of the buses or did you have an assistant to help you?

Mr. Earle: Well, I designated that responsibility to somebody but there is no reward for the responsibility that you had as a bus person.

Goldie: But did you have an assistant assigned to your school?

Mr. Earle: No.

Goldie: Oh, you were just the main one. Did you have a secretary?

Mr. Earle: Yes, I did.

Goldie: What about utilization of funds? Did you get much money and what did you do with it. Who told you what to do with it if you got it?

Mr. Earle: The funds that we were able to get was what we raised from basketball, football, and what have you. We didn't have much funds.

Goldie: Now how did you raise that money? Just basketball, football, did the PTA help?

Mr. Earle: No, no one helped. In 1952-53, when I was here sometimes we didn't have enough money to pay the referee when the game was over. Because the first thing we had to do was to pay the city schools \$125 for the use of the stadium.

Goldie: Oh, you had to pay the schools.

Mr. Earle: You paid that to the Superintendent for the lights.

Goldie: Were the White schools paying?

Mr. Earle: That is what he said.

Goldie: What about your books? Who bought the books or where did you get your books?

Mr. Earle: The State provided the books.

Goldie: One of the principals told me that they received used books. Did you get used books and used seats. I lot of things that they received were passed on.

Mr. Earle: Yes, that has always been a problem. Used books, used seats; in fact in 1952, when I came to Burlington I had just left a situation where you didn't have any funds at all. And I wanted to start kids taking typing and I went to Raleigh bought a 16mm film machine and carried film around on Saturday and sent it back by Thursday and I would carry it all around into teacher's schools in rural communities because some people had never had an opportunity to see a movie and they would go out to the school to see it and that is the way I paid for the film machine. And I used some of that money to help pay for the typing too. Plus I charged the students \$10 per semester to take typing.

Goldie: Who taught it for you?

Mr. Earle: During that time there was one lady there in school that could teach typing. She could type so I took one of her classes and gave it to another teacher and she used that one and I rearranged the schedule so the kids that were taking typing would be vacant at that time and could take typing.

Goldie: Did anybody check on how you were using your funds? Did the Superintendent say anything about you going around and raising funds or did he just say anyway that you wanted to get the money was all right with him?

Mr. Earle: He didn't bother about it--not until the State started checking up on principals. You know you had to keep books on your funds and that was the only time they checked on us.

Goldie: What about the cafeteria management?

Mr. Earle: Well, we had a cafeteria manager when I moved here. Before I came here we didn't have a cafeteria manager but when I came here that was kind of separate from the rest of the school and they sent out a lot of the food from that place but that lunchroom thing goes back a long way. I started that lunchroom thing in 1932.

Goldie: You started your own program? How did you do it?

Mr. Earle: What in 1932? Well, that is a long story but I can make it short. I was in a rural community and the children and people needed it in Northampton County, one of the poorest counties in the state and we needed a lunchroom and the Superintendent had food to give and I knew it and so I asked him one day, one cold Saturday, I talked to him on Friday about it. He seemed to have liked me--I don't know why, but it was a tough place but he seemed to think a lot of me. His daughter was his secretary and she thought a lot of me because I always tried to treat them nice and so I ask him if he wouldn't let me use a truck one Saturday to go get a little lumber to make a lunchroom. He said, how are you going to do it Mr. Earle. I said, well, I'm going to draw up the classroom a little bit, cut off a place back there to cook in and then make a door with a shelf to it so the kids can go up there and get the food and go back to the classroom with it. So, he said, I'll let you have the truck and at that time the White schools were being consolidated in Northampton County. They were tearing those buildings down so we went down there and got this lumber and this man that I lived with, he was a carpenter and his wife was home, so I gave her the job of cooking. So that is how we started.

Goldie: The buildings and the grounds. Who took care of that?

Mr. Earle: When I came here, I had just started living. The farther up the road you go the better you live.

Goldie: In 1964 at that school, were you in charge of buildings and grounds?

Mr. Earle: I was in charge of everything. When they came to inspect, they inspected you, me and the eating places and we had a man who carried along a flashlight so he could see everything.

Goldie: He had a flashlight when it came to inspect?

Mr. Earle: Oh yes, and he would give you a once over. He checked every little corner.

Goldie: How do you think your school fit it with the community at that time?

Mr. Earle: It's hard to tell. In a community where you find people who are kind of intelligent, it fit in but I remember the first school I ever worked in and I had just finished college and I used some of my money and bought some second-hand basketball uniforms. That didn't fit in with the parent because none of them had ever seen me before and the only thing they say they hear this man come in here with all these children with no clothes on. It didn't fit in but now they are glorifying that.

Goldie: Did the people see the school as a place to have functions and a place to come. You know you said when you went to the two-teacher schools everybody came out. Did they use it as a place for recreation.

Mr. Earle: Any rural place, that's about the only place that they had to glorify was the school and what functions they had in the school. Nothing else.

Goldie: I talked with Mr. Creecy yesterday and he was saying that he thought that the school was second to the church in the communities.

Mr. Earle: You were down at Rich Square? You saw Buddy Creecy? Well, his brother worked for me. Hollis. Have you seen him?

Goldie: Hollis Creecy. Haven't seen him yet. He's on my list but I haven't gotten to talk to him yet.

Mr. Earle: I'll show you some pictures that was before your time from what you are thinking about now but it will give you some insight as to what has been happening. During that time when I was in Northampton County we, and I have pictures and a write up about it, had to buy the school bus. We had to raise the funds.

Goldie: That's what he told me yesterday.

Mr. Earle: What did he say?

Goldie: He said we had to give the Superintendent a down payment on our yellow buses and then he said the activity bus, the PTA bought but if any windows got broken out on the buses the children had to pay for everything.

Mr. Earle: Yes, but during that time I was at Garysburg and Creecy's daddy was living there at the time and Mr. Hipps was down in Greenville and here come these little up starts just out of college and they were looking for different things and so in 1938, we raised \$950. That is what the school bus cost. Mr. Newbold had told me cause I was going to Raleigh, back and forward along there. Bill Green, have you heard of him, used to be head of the Black Teacher's

Association. He had done the same thing over in Nash County and when I worked for him in 1936 and '37 I learned a lot from him and he would tell me how he would do it. So when I went back to Northampton County, that is the message I carried back with me when I went there. They told me, said, professor, we're going to let you register but don't you go tell anybody else. I said, okay. And just as soon as I left there I went and told everybody I could find because they had just fired my classmate, Joe McCallie from that same school because he had participated in getting people to register to vote and so after we got started on that then that is where the buses came from. We paid the lawyer over in Burlington \$400 and then we still gave the county \$400 on that \$950 bus and they didn't want us to have it then.

Goldie: You had to go through a lawyer to get a bus to carry the children?

Mr. Earle: Yes, I have the picture of the bus. I had a very smart man, they should have named one of those schools after.

Goldie: Who was that?

Mr. Earle: Paul Buffalo, a Black man. He had about 500 acres of land and he had several children and he was a man I could trust. He was the President of my PTA and during that time we didn't even have a telephone in school.

Goldie: Well, Mr. Creecy said that he didn't have a phone. He said the Ag people bought one for the Ag Building and he would go over to the Ag Building and use their phone.

Mr. Earle: Well, that was the only school in the county that had agriculture and he would not have had it but his daddy was in with all the big wigs and Rich Square was the leading school around there and Creecy came in possession of what his daddy had laid out.

Goldie: That's what he told me. He said that he just took over. His daddy was a preacher and principal. We have come a long ways. How much administrative power and control did you have over your school site?

Mr. Earle: Well, we had quite a bit of control over that part that we controlled there. I don't remember anybody going down to the Superintendent and saying that he had treated them wrong or given them the wrong information.

Goldie: As long as you kept things going well, the Superintendent didn't bother you. How often did you see the Superintendent?

Mr. Earle: At least once a month or more.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your role as a principal? Were you still a principal when schools were desegregated?

Mr. Earle: I sure was.

Goldie: Well, how did it change your role as a principal?

Mr. Earle: I was in Clinton, Sampson High School, and they put four White teachers there and I had problems with one of them but the others were very nice. I never had any problem with the others but this one, I had problems with him coming to school on time.

Goldie: Did you say something to him about it?

Mr. Earle: Yes, I had to talk to him about it because of the kids. I couldn't go back on my word and I had talked to all the teachers when I first went there about coming to school on time and they knew how I was about that so, if I let him do that it would start other things. We never had any White students and when I retired we didn't have any White students.

Goldie: All you had was just the four White teachers?

Mr. Earle: That's right.

Goldie: Did you find that you could administrate with them just like you could Blacks, was supervising the same?

Mr. Earle: Well, at one time it was a little difficult because sometimes you'd wonder how is he going to react cause I felt like that the Superintendent had sent me somebody over there that he could talk to and so I was always trying to be exactly right in whatever I told him. I always kept something to back it up with because if it had come back I could refer to what I had once said.

Goldie: Did you enjoy your job?

Mr. Earle: Yes and no.

Goldie: Explain that.

Mr. Earle: Here is what I mean. If you work with somebody and you figure here is somebody sent over here to look over you, you kind of be a little careful about it and since integration hadn't taken place good I didn't exactly know what the rules were. I was trying to be very careful every step I made.

Goldie: So it became a little difficult for you because you felt like you were being scrutinized and observed.

Mr. Earle: Yes, I felt like that he would have somebody to come back here and say how is he doing over there. The people that he sent me were from that area and I didn't know what ties they had and it always kept you on your toes.

Goldie: Before that happened, did you really enjoy being a principal?

Mr. Earle: Yes, I did. I enjoyed it.

Goldie: What was the most rewarding thing about being a principal.

Mr. Earle: Well, I love people and I love kids and it is always a new challenge everyday. I started teaching in 1930 and I didn't miss but four days for 39 years.

Goldie: Four days!!!

Mr. Earle: That is right!

Goldie: You must have been really sick those four days. What happened?

Mr. Earle: Well, I was sick. I had a cold--not only that two of those days my mother died and the other two my aunt died. I didn't feel good every day but I would go.

Goldie: That is remarkable. Really remarkable!!!

Mr. Earle: See, I worked over in Northampton County with Creecy for 15 years.

Goldie: Some good people down that way too.

Mr. Earle: There are some fine people there.

Mr. Earle: Let me tell you something about Garysburg where I worked. I want to show you those pictures. All the boys in that community got together, I spearheaded it, got the teachers and we signed the note in the bank to get the money to help buy the lumber and we built the gymnasium.

Goldie: Built a gym!!!!!!

Mr. Earle: That is right and I have a picture upstairs I want to show you.

Goldie: You like sports so you wanted to see some sports there.

Mr. Earle: It wasn't a gymnasium between Petersburg and Rocky Mount. No where to play basketball. No recreation at all and we had played outdoors, we had played in old cotton

seed house. Where they gin cotton they would leave a crack in the floor and we'd play in there and finally when we found out they were going to tear down one of those White schools well we built that gymnasium over there.

Goldie: That's something. What kind of floor did you have in it?

Mr. Earle: We took all the wood out of that building we could and made the floor. There was one man in the community that was really my friend, Aninise Rice who was a carpenter, one of those old fashioned carpenters. He didn't use his rule. When he got ready to put his window in he cut a stick as high as he wanted that window and everyone of those windows would come out right because he would fix it by that stick. We built this gymnasium and the Superintendent did not give us not one penny to help with it. He wouldn't even pay for the tin that went on top of it. Along then schools in Northampton County were starting in July and August and go up to sometime in September when the cotton opened and we had to close school and the kids picked cotton and then when picking cotton time was over than they came back to school again and the principals asked that they pay us for that time. He was charging that to the state and they finally caught up with him and they said he killed himself and nobody has never seen him since. They were about to convict him, they were trying him and lived in Rich Square and they let him go home at 12:00 when the court recessed and they said he killed himself.

Goldie: Did they have a funeral or anything?

Mr. Earle: They sent him back to Mississippi where he came from. That is what they said.

Goldie: What was his name?

Mr. Earle: Turner. N.L. Turner. He would not let us work those extra days I'm telling you. He would send it in to the state and when the money came back he took it. And he had it in the paper saying that the solicitor said, that N.L. Turner had robbed unborn children and he left a note saying that the solicitor had said that I robbed unborn children and I do not care to live anymore.

Goldie: Nobody had seen the remains?

Mr. Earle: Nobody had seen the remains.

Goldie: He left town, that's all.

Mr. Earle: He left town and they sent a casket away. That is what people are saying. This has been a rough road.

Goldie: Well, if you knew of some young person or Black person, well back in the sixties there were a lot of Black high schools so a lot of Black principals. In 1964 there were over 200. Last year there were 41 Black high school principals and I found out that some of those were principals of alternative schools so that is a big difference in the number and if you had to give advice to a young Black person who wanted to be a principal in North Carolina what would you tell them? Especially the high school.

Mr. Earle: That is a hard question. I don't know. It would be hard for me to answer that because when things are out of balance then you know. You don't have to think about it. You've got to be exactly right. I think about this fellow that followed Johnny here. I haven't met him yet. Johnny and McIntyre and myself are supposed to take him out to breakfast but something has been happening every time and we couldn't do it to see what we could do. But before we get into that this coach came here and messed up.

Goldie: Which coach?

Mr. Earle: Johnny didn't tell you that he hired a Black coach and a Black principal? And that coach messed. Some kind of mess so he finally resigned. He should have resigned to start with. He was a good student but he was a foolish student. You can't laugh at everything somebody tells you. I went with a lot of people but I kept that on a professional basis. You have to. If you don't then, you run into a lot of roadblocks. And so there is no need to think that people love you. Once I had a teacher here and when she started teaching in an integrated school she told the students that she didn't come over here to love them or what have you I came over here to teach you. If you want to learn, you will have to act like the rest of the folks act in class so I can teach you otherwise you can't stay in here. I don't know what kind of advice I'd give. It would depend more or less on the section I was in what I would say to the young man. In Northampton County I would say one thing and in Burlington I'd say another and in Durham I would say another cause it is amazing to see how well, course they have run all of the White people out of Durham out to the edge but you can go through Nash County and Edgecombe County and find that they are building beautiful places and all of them are White and that is where the White school is being developed so I'd tell him be sure to know that you're right. Study and be sure that that is what you want to do and if you are going to do that then be right. Don't go in there wrong and you will last. If you don't do that, you will lose.

Goldie: The only way that you are going to last is to be right. If you come in fly by night and want to change everything and do things sometimes you don't last.

Mr. Earle: You can't change things overnight. I often think about Dr. Shepherd and Dr. P.W. Moore.

Goldie: He has moved down to Elizabeth City now.

Mr. Earle: I was down there in high school when he was living and those fellows had something that all of us need cause they knew how to get money when there wasn't any for us. They used to stop the pullman car down there and let him get on board to go to Raleigh. That was in the twenties. He would go to Raleigh and ask for money. He had to know how to do it. Dr. Shepherd had to know how to do it. Where is your home?

Mr. Earle: Where is your home?

Goldie: Edenton, down in Chowan County.

Mr. Earle: Where did you finish school?

Goldie: Hampton Institute.

Mr. Earle: My taught in Hampton once. Yes, she was a counselor.

Goldie: My maiden name is Frinks. Golden and Ruth Frinks are my parents down in Edenton.

Mr. Earle: Walker...

Goldie: Yes, D.F. Walker was my principal. He left Garysburg. When he left there Joe Wiley, my classmate, went to Garysburg and he stayed there until 1938.

Goldie: Because he wanted ...

Mr. Earle: And they told me, now Professor we get along fine and we are going to let you register. Just don't tell anybody else and I didn't no quicker than I could get to them. I used to get the Norfolk General Guide to come to the seaboard at night and we would go to two and three teachers schools out there and pile up all those seats up around in there and those lamps you had to hang up and he would make the picture then I would take the telephone directory that I had and mark it and we'd give him some money and he would go back and send all the crackers around there a bunch of them papers with all that stuff in it and upset the apple cart. I don't know how I happen to stay around there so long.

Goldie: I believe you had a little bit of rebel in you. You wanted to see some changes made.

Mr. Earle: Well, you had to have some changes or folks won't

know that you are around.

Goldie: Gotta do something.

Mr. Earle: I told my pastor, Rev. Cobb who is the pastor over in Durham, left here and this man that they have now is a good preacher but he is a poor leader. He doesn't change anything. Rev. Cobb has been gone about twelve years and he hasn't changed anything in church yet hardly.

Goldie: Well you know that is a sad trait cause a leader is supposed to be a change agent.

Mr. Earle: I said Rev. Styles when I went in another office I like to do something even if I take that chair and set it in another corner.

Goldie: You know what. I have told somebody that what I have observed about leaders when they walk in a room if it is no more than rearrange a chair or push something, they do something. It is just something about them that they are going to make some kind of change and it just comes naturally to them.

Mr. Earle: You've got to make a change so they will know that there is a new man in town. That's right.

Goldie: But then you've got to have enough sense not to try to do too many changes...

Mr. Earle: No, do it a little bit at a time.

Goldie: First you've see what the situation is.

Mr. Earle: See where you are and after you find out where you are then you can change a little by degree.

Goldie: Any words of wisdom you want to give me?

Mr. Earle: Well, I'm going upstairs and get some of that mess to show you and let you look at it.