

Interview

with

WILLA V. ROBINSON

January 14, 2004

by Malinda Maynor

Transcribed by Sharon Caughill

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

Index and tape on deposit at
The Southern Historical Collection
Louis Round Wilson Library

Citation of this interview should be as follows:
"Southern Oral History Program,
in the Southern Historical Collection Manuscripts Department,
Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill"

Copyright © 2005 The University of North Carolina

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

WILLA V. ROBINSON
January 14, 2004

MALINDA MAYNOR: This is tape 01.14.04-WR, an interview with Miss Willa Robinson at the Center for Community Action in Lumberton, North Carolina. The interviewer is Malinda Maynor. This is for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement Series. Okay, so Miss Willa, if you could just start out telling us where you were born and a little bit about your family, and your early life, and school.

WILLA ROBINSON: I was born in Maxton, North Carolina in Scotland County, which as everyone knows Maxton covers two counties. It straddles it, but I was born in Scotland County in 1930. That was during the Depression when everybody was equal, really, because there was no little me's and big you's. Everybody was struggling just to survive.

MM: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

WR: I don't have any brothers or sisters. I'm the only child. I have a couple of half-sisters from my father, but my mother, I'm the only child.

MM: So were you raised with both your father and your mother?

WR: No, I was raised by my grandparents.

MM: By your grandparents. Okay. Tell us a little bit about what going to school was like for you when you were a child.

WR: Well, I didn't realize until in later years how bad off we were for at that time it was great.

[BOTH CHUCKLE.]

WR: Because, as I say, everybody took care of everybody. I'll put it that way. In the communities there was more of a togetherness than there is nowadays. All the grown ups that were old enough to be your parents were allowed to chastise you for whatever. Also, we all lived in houses that was inadequate, they say now, but at that time they were. We called them air conditioned in the wintertime because you could feed the chickens through the cracks in the floor in the kitchen. You'd wake up in the morning and take the dipper and break the ice in the water bucket. That's just how cold it would be in your kitchen, and you had to make a fire in order to heat up. In the winter there'd be one big heater where you made a fire in there, and you banked it at night so it wouldn't just completely go out. In the morning you would stoke it up, and add more to it, and that's where everybody came in to wash up and get dressed. You didn't walk around in house coat, house shoes and all of this kind of thing because the house wasn't that comfortable. You hurried up and got your clothes on.

Everyone had their own garden. They had their own chickens. A few had a cow, and everybody had hogs. You didn't buy a lot of things from the store, so that's why I say we were poor, but we didn't realize it. As a matter of fact, I didn't even know that I was black and I was poor until it was told to me in high school.

MM: Wow.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

WR: I didn't, because those things we didn't think about.

MM: Everybody around you was black?

WR: No.

MM: No.

WR: There was Indian and white.

MM: And everybody.

WR: But nobody ever talked about what color you were, and we all visited each other's homes. We played with each other's children, and nobody said anything about the race thing. It just wasn't talked about, and nobody made you feel inferior in my neighborhood. But as I say, once I got to high school is when I found out that I was poor and I was black.

MM: So what elementary school did you go to?

WR: I went to Maxton, it was called Robeson County Training School.

MM: And it was an all black school?

WR: Um-hum.

MM: Okay. So then where did you go to high school? Maxton?

WR: Same school.

MM: Okay. So, right. Well it says here—.

WR: At that time they called it primer grade. Now they've got kindergarten, but it was primer grades through eleven, the whole school.

MM: Right, okay.

WR: You didn't go from one school to the next school like they do now.

MM: Right.

WR: In the same place that R. B. Dean Elementary School is now, that was where what they called it, the colored school.

MM: Did that ever occur to you that you didn't go to school with these Indian and white children that you played with or that your family visited with? Did that occur to you?

WR: No, it just seemed the way things were, that you played together, and you helped each other as far as what you needed in the home, or if someone got sick you went to their house and you'd sit with them, and like that, but when it came to school and church, you went to your church, and I went to mine. You went to your school, and I went to mine.

MM: So when you say you were born in Scotland County, did you sort of grow up sort of on the outskirts of Maxton or was it in town that your grandparents were?

WR: No. Do you know anything about Maxton?

MM: Not really.

WR: Well, anyway, when you leave Lumberton, Highway 74 and you get almost to Maxton. Now that they got a bypass going around. It goes right straight down through Maxton. The stop light's here, and about a block and a half from the stop light on the other side is Scotland County, and about a half a mile from there I was born.

MM: Okay.

WR: In Scotland County. So it really was just as close into town as—

MM: As any place, any place in Robeson County.

WR: Right.

MM: Right.

WR: That's the way it's situated, the town is situated.

MM: Did you run into differences that you remember between some of the people that grew up in the county and grew up in the town? Were there, I don't know, economic differences or attitude differences that you remember?

WR: Yeah, cause even though I was just, we call it blocks now, but maybe about a mile from the main part of the town, I was considered country. And the kids that was within the city limits, I'll say, yeah, that made a difference when it came to school. But the only difference was they had less than we did.

MM: Hum.

WR: I found that out later though, because I used to trade my sausage biscuit for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with stale bread, so you know I was a little stupid.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

WR: But my grandmother didn't buy bread.

MM: She made it.

WR: She made corn bread and she made biscuits. Those was the two breads that you got, one or the other, for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. That's what you got. But the city kids, they had their own light bread as we called it back then, and peanut butter and jelly. That's what they'd have for lunch. And I'd have a nice juicy sausage biscuit. Well, I got it all the time so it wasn't no great big deal to me, so I'd trade my sausage biscuit for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

MM: That's interesting.

WR: And we even brought milk to school, a little pint of milk. We'd bring our own milk to drink. The first tooth I remember losing, I drank it with my milk for lunch. I

was so afraid I wouldn't let nobody pull it. That day at lunch time after I'd finished eating and drank my milk I realized my tooth was gone.

MM: So in the colored schools as they called it, the county and the city children went to the same school?

WR: Yeah, um-hum.

MM: Was that true of the white schools and the Indian schools that you remember?

WR: Well, it's according to how far out in the country you lived.

MM: Okay.

WR: Because they had little schools out in different areas that did not come to this main school until they was in eighth grade. Once they completed eighth grade then they came. This was the school that everybody came to. But we had schools out at Floral College. We had schools in Shannon. We had schools in Wakulla. We had schools in Piney Grove, Alma, Evans Crossing, and all these little different places around Maxton. Midway was another one that had the one room schools that took care of them first grade all the way through the eighth grade. Then when you go to eighth grade you came to Robeson County Training School or had buses. Buses brought them in from the country. See, by me only living like maybe a mile from the town I was like a go between, and I didn't have to go to those smaller schools to begin with.

MM: I see.

WR: I went to the main schools from the beginning.

MM: So talk about high school then when you first realized that you were black and poor. What was it that—?

WR: Well, at one time I had a pretty good voice, at least they said I did. I always sang alto, and we had a glee club. I know you've heard of glee clubs.

MM: I used to sing in one.

WR: We had a glee club, and we was very excited about it. This white girl—backing up on the story a bit. This white girl that had played with me all my life in my neighborhood, her daddy had a store in my neighborhood. Played with me, even spent nights at my house. I spent nights at her house when we were growing up. She's the one that made me realize that I was different.

What happened was, we were invited over to the white school to sing a program. Well, we got there maybe thirty minutes before time, and we all was in the back, in the auditorium behind the curtains. She was standing there talking to a friend of hers, a white friend. I walked up to her and tapped her like that, "Hey Sarah Lib," because her name was Sarah Elizabeth, but we called her Sarah Lib. She didn't say anything. So I tapped her. I said, "What's wrong, you don't know nobody anymore?" I said, "This is Willa." I said, "Hey Sarah Lib." She said, "Come here a minute."

She excused herself from this other girl, and she called me over in the corner. I was thinking there was some juicy gossip that she wants to tell me, because you know, when you're thirteen, fourteen that's all you know is gossip. I said, "What's the matter?" She said, "I've got something to tell you." I said, "What is it?" She said, "My daddy say I can't play with you no more, and I can't go to your house no more. I cannot associate with you no more because you're black, and he don't want me to associate with no black people." I says, "Oh, really? I done changed colors." I said, "I was this color all the time." She said, "I know." She said, "It ain't my fault." She said, "I don't want you to

be angry with me, but I have to do what my father says." I says, "Fine with me," but it broke my heart. But I said to her, I said, "Fine with me." So that's when I realized that I was black, and she was white, and we could not be friends any longer because her parent's wouldn't allow it.

MM: How did that affect you after that?

WR: It put a stigma on me, really, it did. But I guess my grandmother carried me though at lot of the bad things that was said and done to you as I was growing up because my grandmother was white. She carried me through a lot of things. She always told me, "Don't ever let anybody make you feel inferior," she said, "because they can't do it without your consent." I've never forgotten that. She says, "You've got to consent to it." She said, "So, her daddy don't want her to deal with you any longer. That doesn't make you any different. That doesn't make you be any less, and it doesn't make her be any more, but it's just one of the lessons that you have to learn as you're going on, that there are always going to be prejudice people."

Then she started telling me stories about how she used to have to sit on the porch at night with the gun to protect my grandfather from the Ku Klux Klan because he was black. They wouldn't bother her, but they wanted him. And they'd tell her, "Why are you always sitting on the porch? We came after Emanuel. We don't want you." She'd tell them, "Well, you have to come by me first." Then one got smart and says, "You can't kill us all." She said, "No, but I got two shells in this double barrel shotgun, and at least two of them will be down when it's over." They never bothered her, but he had to work on the farm during the day so he couldn't sit up all night dealing with Ku Klux Klan coming over.

MM: She sounds like an amazing person.

WR: She was to me.

MM: She was a strong influence on you.

WR: Yeah, very, very.

MM: Was she raised in Robeson County here, too, or the Scotland Robeson area?

WR: Um-hum. Yeah.

MM: And your grandfather as well?

WR: He was from South Carolina.

MM: Okay. That's like a lot of our people, Indian people, too, came to this area from South Carolina. Well, tell us about the rest of your high school education. I saw on there that you had gotten a GED.

WR: Well, I did like a lot of young girls. I thought I was in love, and I got married when I was in the eleventh grade, and I did not get my diploma. I wasn't pregnant, but in those days if a young lady got pregnant or got married before she got her diploma, you didn't get it. They cut it off. Now days if you're pregnant you can go back and get your diploma. You can even get married and finish your schooling, but back then you couldn't. So that's what kept me from getting a diploma from the school. I decided I wanted to get married. Big mistake, but we all make them, don't we?

MM: We sure do.

WR: Then again, this wasn't such a great one because the two children that I have came from that marriage. That's the only two that I ever had.

MM: Is your son the oldest?

WR: Um-hum.

WR: When was he born?

WR: Where?

MM: When.

WR: Oh, forty-seven.

MM: Nineteen forty-seven. Okay. So then you got involved in the school system in the 1950s then, pretty early. Tell us then some of the early things you remember about working with your children in the schools.

WR: Well, both of my kids graduated from a segregated school. They had not integrated the schools yet, because my son had graduated in sixty-seven, and my daughter she graduated in sixty-nine. As a matter of fact my daughter's class was the last all black class from—and they had changed their name from Robeson County Training School to R. B. Dean, because I didn't tell you that part. When they integrated the schools the white people in Maxton burned down the black school, and they had to rebuild another school. After that last class, as I say, of blacks went out in sixty-nine, then that's when they changed it to an elementary school, and they built Townsend Middle School.

MM: Right.

WR: For, I guess around four years, blacks and whites went to the all-white high school

MM: Which is Maxton High School.

WR: Yeah, Maxton High School. They all went to that school.

MM: Do you remember what year that was when they started going there?

WR: They integrated in, I believe it was 1970. I think it was until seventy-five they all went to this Maxton High School. Then they claimed that this high school was

too old, and it was too dilapidated. You know what I'm saying. They were saying that it was outdated, and that's when they all come together with this business about putting the school out here in the middle of nowhere, Purnell Swett.

MM: Purnell Swett.

WR: Yeah.

MM: It was West Robeson at that time.

WR: Yeah, um-hum, I wasn't able to understand that, because it was the first time in my life that I'd heard of a school they'd named after a person, and they're still living. I thought you did it after death, but I got a wake up call.

MM: Not in Robeson County.

WR: Anyway, there was a big discrepancy on that because from the beginning—Maxton held out for quite a while. They wanted their school on [Highway] 130 like going towards Rowland. There was a big area out there owned by Buddy Dunn that he had said he would donate for a high school. But our officials, I don't know what happened, but they gave in because they was asking all the different towns to come together for this big school. Just my opinion—it was the worst mistake they ever made because Lumberton held out. Red Springs held out, so they got their own high school, but the other towns that didn't go to Purnell Swett is going to South Robeson, as you know. And it's just too many kids in one place.

MM: Yeah. Let's go back a little bit to when the first sort of rumblings, I guess, about having to desegregate the schools began. When was that in Maxton? When did people first talk about it? Do you remember?

WR: The biggest talk about it was like in maybe sixty-seven.

MM: What brought it on?

WR: They started to talk about it. They were having meetings, really, about this. There were, some diehards, prejudice white people in Maxton, that would rather die than see it happen.

It's a funny thing. A sad story. It's true, but it's sad. We had a teacher, a white teacher, Mr.—I won't give his name—in Maxton that had two children going to school. In a public town meeting he said he'd rather see his kids dead than to see them in school with a nigger. That's the way he said it. And the sad part about this, when they got out for Christmas holidays, guess what? Both of his kids got killed in an accident, and he was driving the car.

MM: Oh, gosh.

WR: His wife, she just completely lost it, became a mental case. But you have to be real careful what you say out your mouth, because I wouldn't have wished that on him in no kind of way even though he was saying it against my people. I wouldn't have wished that on him. But he said it, and this happened, and then people say there's no God. There is a God. There is a God.

It's terrible. We had quite a few, I'll say prominent folk in Maxton, that we didn't even know or had no thoughts that they were members of Ku Klux Klan until the riot that they had. What was it, in 1957?

MM: Um-hum.

WR: That's when we found out a lot of them, we call them the bigwigs of Maxton, was really Ku Klux Klansmen because they ran so hard they ran right out of their white sheets, and everybody knew who they were.

MM: That's right. How did African-Americans feel about that?

WR: We loved it. We loved it.

MM: This time I'm just going to say for the tape recorder that we're talking about the 1957, or eight, or I guess, of the Klan.

WR: Yeah. It was a Klan rally they was proposing to have, and this prejudiced man, as I said, let them have this area around here, Gaddy's Mill, and the word got around. They wasn't out in the open, but a lot of black folk contributed to that clash that went on because they kept the Indian people in Pembroke aware of what was going on, and when it was going on, and how it was planned, and got it all together. And on that big night it exploded, so everybody was happy.

MM: Um-hum. It did seem to benefit everybody, but African-Americans have never gotten credit.

WR: No, but there were a lot of them in the background that really helped with the communications, letting them know what's going on, and who's doing what, and where they're going to be, and what time they're going to be there, and nobody paid them any attention because they felt like, "Hey, we don't have to worry about them."

But, as I told you earlier, up until I'll say the last thirty years blacks and Indians were together. After Martin Luther King—it's like I tell a lot of them now—Martin Luther King didn't just help black folk, he helped all poor folk, Indian and white, whether people want to realize it or not. With the integration that he talked about, it helped them, too, as well as us, and that's when the white man started putting the wedge between the blacks and the Indians saying, "You don't deal with them because you are better than them."

MM: Saying that to the Indians?

WR: Yes. Because they felt like if we stayed together as we were back in the 30s and the 40s we could take over because we'd be so strong. There's strength in numbers, so what is their motto? Divide and conquer.

MM: Right. Would you go back a little bit and talk about the 30s and the 40s and how Indians and blacks were, what kinds of things they were doing together, what it really meant?

WR: Well, we worked on the farms together. We nourished each other's children together. We took care of each other's sick folk. We visited each other's homes. We were just, we were a community. It wasn't them Indian people stay over there, and those black folks stay over there, and they never come together, but we all came together on everything.

I remember Miss Edith Locklear. She had some boys. They liked to drink. On Saturday afternoon they would come by our house. You're a young lady so you don't know. They called it a Hoover buggy. It was a little buggy. It had two wheels on it like car wheels on it, but it was a little seat up on the top. The horse pulled it. They called it a Hoover buggy. Just as they'd get by our house there was the railroad tracks. And when they'd go across the railroad tracks they'd be so high that when they hit the railroad track they'd fall off the Hoover buggy and this horse would go on home which wasn't too far up from our house. My grandpa and my grandma would go out there and help them out of the ditch, bring them home to our house, give them black coffee and all kinds of things to try to get them together before they'd send them home. Then my grandpapa, he'd go home with them. He said, "Let me take these boys on up to Edith because I know she's

wondering. I've seen the mule up there for I don't know how long, and they's sitting down here," and take them home.

MM: So there was a lot of collaboration and cooperation?

WR: Yeah, yeah. As I say, it was like a community should be. You were concerned about what happens to me. I'm concerned about what happens to you. If there was anything going wrong at your house, hey, I'm hurting too. You know, that's the way things were, really. We didn't have too many white neighbors. As I say, the only white family we had in our neighborhood at that time was this child I was talking about. Her father had a little store where he sold little groceries which wasn't a lot because most people raised their own. The only things we bought from the store was coffee, sugar, and rice.

MM: So your grandparents ran a farm? That was their main occupation?

WR: Yeah, and my grandma would put things—at that time we didn't have freezers. They canned everything. She canned a lot of vegetables during the summer, and then they'd kill hogs in the fall, and they had a smoke house full of meat. They had chickens on the yard. A few turkeys, and plenty of hogs.

MM: So what do you think made you want to get so involved in your children's education and the school system?

WR: I just had a feeling that I needed to be there. You know, from the very beginning because my grandmother, she had a stroke when I was like seven, eight years old. She didn't come to the school, but she'd always ask the teacher or the principal to stop by to see her so she could find out first hand what was going on with me at the school house, if you know what I mean. When I grew up my thoughts were, "I jumped up

and got married just before graduating. I didn't get a college education, but I'm going to do my best to see that my children get everything that they are capable of." And I learned a saying, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Well, my motto was, "If you hold his head under water long enough he'll either drink it or drown."

MM: Right. That sounds like my parents.

WR: So the only way that I could see that this happened was to be right there, to find out how much homework you got. Let me see your homework. If you need me to help you, you can holler, you know, be available. And as they got older, like I tell everybody now, "Don't drop your child when it gets in middle school. That's when they need you most." Because the peer pressure in middle school is horrendous. Nobody knows but the child. So don't drop them off, and forget them, and feel like they can make it. You need to stay right with that child from the first day of school until the graduation from the high school through the graduation of the college. You need to be there. If the child goes away from home for college you still can be a part of what goes on with them. You can visit the college, and you can let them know that you are behind them and what you expect of them. And you'd be surprised. They usually come through for you, but it takes a lot from you. You can't just expect it to happen by doing nothing. You have a part to do also.

MM: What kinds of conditions did you find your children in during their elementary, and middle school, and high school years? What was the school like, and how did it compare with the other schools in the area?

WR: Well it was just the normal things that I felt like that happened in school is there were some teachers that really was concerned, and there was some that was just

there for the job. There were bullies that would be picking on your children, and then there were others that you would love for your child to be friends with because they wanted to do something in life, and that's what you wanted your child to do also. But you had to be like a steering committee in the background. You couldn't just come out and say, "I don't want you dealing with so, and so, and so. I want you to deal with so and so." You couldn't say that, but you were like a little steering committee in the back, you know. You don't force them, you just nudge them a little bit. Nudge them a little bit until you get them to where you want them to be. And I never let my children hang out in the street. My mother didn't let me hang out in the street. I didn't let mine either. Nuh-huh.

We always had chores. When I was growing up you had chores. When you come from school you had to get in wood. You had to get in coal, water, maybe even sweep the yards or whatever. Feed the chickens. Feed the hogs, but there was something that you had to do. Once it got dark you come inside. You ate your dinner. We called it supper at that time. You got out your homework, and you went to bed. That was your day. So when my kids came along things were a little better, and they didn't have as many chores as I had when I was growing up, but I made sure that they had enough that they didn't have a lot of idle time because grandma said, "Idle mind is the devil's workshop," so you have to keep them busy.

I think that's what happens to a lot of our children today. They don't have enough to keep them occupied. The parents buy all the conveniences for them, and they're out there working trying to pay for all of this, and what the child really wants is the mama, not what she can buy for him. Because, you know, you think about it. Come home from school, you have a lot of latchkey kids we call them. They come home from school.

There's nobody there but the television, so whatever's on there, they watch it. You buy HBO. They watch HBO. You watch Cinemax. They can watch Cinemax. And the same thing with the computer. There is a lot of pornography on the computer. You don't want them to see these things, don't have it there available for them.

MM: Yeah. Was it all black teachers at the school when your kids were going there?

WR: Yeah, and the principal, too.

MM: Um-hum. Did you find yourself looking around and saying, "Well, we don't have such and such that the white school has, or this other thing that the white school has?" Or was that not even really an issue?

WR: I heard the teachers talking about the different things that we did not have, but if it was the children we just made do with what we had. We didn't get to visit the other schools to make a comparison.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

WR: But the teachers did because they'd have the teacher's meeting, or whatever. They'd have to go over there for one reason or another, and they would see what was going on, but we, as children, we didn't see that.

MM: In the 1960s it sounds like white parents were organizing against integration.

WR: They were.

MM: What were black parents doing or thinking about as all these issues came up?

WR: Praying a lot.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

WR: Because first of all, in the town of Maxton what they started doing automatically even before the integration got there was some of them didn't have cash money. They were selling parts of their land and properties to get cash money to send their child to a private school.

MM: These are white parents?

WR: And them that had money automatically started investigating the nearest private school they could send their child to. So by the time that schools was really integrated and they started going to school together, the only people mostly at school was Indian and black. They had done weeded their children out beforehand. You might find one, two, or maybe three white kids in the elementary school. But by the time they got to middle school or high school they was in a private school. They was not in the public schools any longer.

MM: What were some of the private schools around here?

WR: The closest one was Flora McDonald.

MM: In Red Springs?

WR: In Red Springs.

MM: Did Rowland have one or Fairmont?

WR: If it did, I don't know about it.

MM: Okay. So the black parents were praying for it to happen.

WR: Um-hum.

MM: Were there any blacks that you remember that resisted it, that didn't want it to happen?

WR: No, not really. Not really. Because their hopes was everybody would be on an equal scale as far as education was concerned because we knew that we were on the bottom rung when it came to materials for education, so they felt like if it was integrated my child would get the same quality education as your child would get because we'd have the same tools. But we find out now that the schools are integrated they're still not giving us the tools we need.

MM: Are those tools still kept for schools like Lumberton High School and—?

WR: Yeah.

MM: —and predominantly white schools?

WR: Um-hum.

MM: And how does that system work?

WR: The public schools just is not getting it. It's not getting it. I'm not a gambling person of any sort, but I just feel like our legislators are keeping us down to a point because you've got the lottery in Virginia. You've got it in South Carolina, and they just finally got it in Tennessee. We are surrounded, and the great things that they're doing in South Carolina with the lottery as far as education is concerned is tremendous. They're talking about it all the time. And then they're talking about how poor Robeson County schools are. They don't have this, and they don't have that, and they can't get the money from the government, because they don't have it to give to us. So why not? There are people who are going to gamble no matter what. Instead of those that live in North Carolina going to South Carolina, or going to Tennessee, or going to Virginia, leave it here, and let it help our children because they really need it. But they don't see it like that. Who was that? Somebody told me, "Well, we'll never get a lottery because you

know this is the Bible Belt.” I says, “The Bible Belt has got nothing to do with it. It has nothing to do with your religion. There are people that live maybe next door to you that don’t ever pick up a bible or even go to a church, and don’t even care one way or the other, but they will go and play the lottery. So you have to use these tools, whatever ones you can get, to better the situation for your children.”

MM: Not everybody wants to better it, it sounds like.

WR: No, no. I think they want us to stay in a rut. You get too many smart people you might root them out of their little spot.

MM: When they start demanding higher wages, and benefits, and things like that.

WR: Yeah. Yeah.

MM: Well, let’s go back a little bit to the 60s again, and tell me about some of the things that you were doing in Maxton to push this issue forward. Did you have meetings? Was it a formal sense of being organized in that way, or what kinds of things were happening?

WR: Well, we were having meetings at our church, at the church, about the situation. The meeting we had at the church was mainly about getting—once they were into school integrated already—was getting a high school in Maxton instead of having to come all the way down, be bused down to Pembroke to school. But as I say, it was like mainly among the citizens of Maxton and the city officials of Maxton because at that time all our city officials was white. We only got integrated here in the last few years. They all was white. And, as I told you before, they all had sent their children to private schools. So they wasn’t interested in having a high school in Maxton. It was okay with them if they build one big school, and herd them all around in one place. It didn’t matter.

So it really was a time of feeling hopeless. I wouldn't say hopeless, helpless to a certain extent.

MM: Fighting against the system.

WR: Right, because we didn't have anybody in our stead to speak up, that, "Yeah, we need this, and we need that." It seemed like it was just a time of turmoil and stress with everybody.

MM: And so at that time was there still a Maxton City administrative unit for the schools? Were there still Maxton City Schools as opposed to the Robeson County public schools?

WR: Um-hum, but they were all white.

MM: Um-hum. So the Maxton City Schools were all white.

WR: The Maxton City Schools committee was all white.

MM: I see. The board was all white.

WR: Um-hum.

MM: Okay. Go back and tell us about when they burned down the black high school because I mentioned that to somebody that I work with on this project a couple of weeks ago, and they were like, "What?" They hadn't really heard of anything like that happening in North Carolina.

WR: Oh, really?

MM: Yeah. So tell us from what you remember, kind of from beginning to end, who was involved with that, why it got to that level?

WR: Well, as you know, the riot was in fifty-seven.

MM: Which riot, the KKK?

WR: Yeah, right. The schools were burned down in, I think it was sixty-nine. Nope, it wasn't sixty-nine. I'm getting old. These things kind of get to my head. Now see, my daughter's class was the last class at the black school. That was in sixty-nine. She graduated in 1969. Yeah. No. She graduated in sixty-nine or sixty-eight. I can't remember.

MM: That's okay. We're dealing with that time. It was after she graduated.

WR: That the schools were burned down.

MM: That the schools were burned down.

WR: Yeah, and they said it—.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

MM: Okay, tell us again. You think it was after your daughter graduated.

WR: Yeah.

MM: So they had decided to integrate the schools at that point.

WR: Yeah.

MM: So where did the next class of high schools go, the next class of high school students?

WR: Went to the white high school.

MM: In Maxton.

WR: Yeah. That was the only high school after they had burned down R. B. Dean. I mean Robeson County Training School.

MM: Do you remember what time of year it happened?

WR: It was like in July or August. It was just before school started. At that time school used to start right after Labor Day, but it was either July or August that they burned the school down. They said it was a bunch of young white boys, but they never was persecuted [prosecuted] for it.

MM: Okay. So they had already decided to close the school and have students begin attending the white high school?

WR: No, they really hadn't gotten into the particulars about how they was going to do it, and why. It was a puzzle to me and a lot of other black folk. Why would they burn the school down if they were against integration? Leave the school there, and you've got a better opportunity of keeping them over there. But for some uncanny reason they burned it down. They could have just been frustrated. The young teenagers didn't know what to do with themselves, and listening to all this integration stuff from their parents in their home, with their parents talking, and not ever being exposed to having to sit in a classroom with other colors of children, or whatever, and they could have just got all mixed up and confused, and said, "Well, we'll fix it. We'll go burn the school down." You never know, and we'll never know, I guess, what really went through their minds at the time. The logical thinking to me was, "You don't want me at your school, why are you going to burn down mine? Let me keep it." I don't know. I really don't know.

MM: Well tell me, because part of what we're trying to do is get a chronology, sort of, of the events in each place, did anybody in Maxton that you remember participate in the freedom of choice program that Robeson County had in the mid 60s, I guess, sixty-five, sixty-six. That's when I'm talking about this freedom of choice program. Is that something you remember?

WR: If they did, I don't know anything about it.

MM: Okay. Okay. So what we're taking about then is basically something that occurs in the Maxton City School System.

WR: Um-hum.

MM: And you did have black students from the county technically who were attending the city schools?

WR: Yeah.

MM: So these decisions about integration affected the county students as well as the city students?

WR: Right. Right.

MM: Did the whites in Maxton try to take the case to court, or just—what exactly did they try to do to stop it?

WR: No, they didn't go to take it to court. They just started moving their children out. They didn't move themselves, but they'd moved their children to private schools.

MM: So they saw it, and said, "We're going to—."

WR: Like an undercurrent, you know. "Well, we can't stop this. It's going to happen anyway. We killed Martin Luther King. That didn't help. We killed Kennedy. That didn't help. Then we come back and got Robert. That didn't help, so we're just going to move all the kids out to private schools."

MM: Right.

WR: Then they didn't have to worry about it. To me I feel like they gave up on the public schools, but they figured, "Well, our kids are not going to be in there anyway,

so we're not going to worry about it. Let the Indians and the blacks fight it out. That will be their school." So in a way it's still segregation because I don't think there's not one white child at Purnell Swett, is there?.

MM: Not many.

WR: Is there some?

MM: Well, there must be some, but not many.

WR: I don't know of any from Maxton that went there.

MM: There may not be. There may not be. I know there's some at Red Springs.

WR: Unless they're to an inter-marriage couple or something, where one parent is white and one is black, or one parent is Indian and one is white, like that.

MM: Children with white parents. Yeah, I don't know. That would be a good thing to find out though.

WR: That would be good to find out. In my thoughts, because I'm thinking, I could be wrong, but there are none there.

MM: Well, that certainly seems consistent with what the county schools were doing. They were trying to leave the issue to fight between Indians and Blacks, to fight it out essentially. And that seems to have been the logic behind setting up Purnell Swett where it was and the schools that fed into it, Pembroke, and Prospect, and Maxton. You're going to have a definite minority of white kids coming from those three high schools.

WR: Right.

MM: I find it interesting though that as of 1969 when your daughter graduated, they really hadn't sorted out where these kids were going to go. The just knew that they

had to go somewhere, and then burning down the black high school meant that they had to go to the white high school.

WR: Yeah. What' I'm saying, I don't know, it just sounds kind of confusing.

MM: Yeah, sure. Sure. Crazy.

WR: If you don't want me over at your house, why burn down my house? That was my point.

MM: What do you remember about how the black community felt when the school was burned down?

WR: Well, they were devastated because really, I think, a lot of the prominent blacks in the town was hoping that they could include that school in the process. You know what I'm saying?

MM: Um-hum.

WR: Instead of having to build the middle school over there, Townsend Middle School, in some way or another they could use that building for one of the schools. They knew already there was going to be a elementary school, a middle school, and a high school and a lot of them thought because really the white high school, the building part, and the black high school, the building part, the black school really was bigger because we had from first grade all the way through twelfth grade. The white high school only had from eighth grade through eleven. So their school really wasn't as big, the size wasn't as big. I think they was just still in the process of trying to decide if we can at least include this school in it. Use it. Put it to use. I don't know if you ever heard of the Rosenwalds? They built all of those black schools back in the 30s, and Robeson County Training School was one of them.

MM: Oh, is that right?

WR: Um-hum.

MM: Okay. What about some of the differences. It's interesting that you mentioned some of the leadership in the black community in Maxton. Did you find economic differences or other things that caused disagreements, differences of opinion, maybe, in the black community about how these things should be handled and what should happen with integration?

WR: No, as I said, the ones that I knew, that I got any feedback from was willing for the integration, but they wanted it to be on an even basis. You know what I'm saying.

MM: Right.

WR: They felt that it would be better, it would make it better for the black children if the school was integrated so that they could get the equal opportunity in education.

MM: So it makes sense for that to happen, for the new unified school to be the Training School.

WR: I was one of those that believed that for the simple reason—. My son graduated from the all black school, and he wanted to be a doctor. Well, first of all they wouldn't let him in at, I think it was a college up in Charlotte. I can't think of the name now. But anyway, what they did to him, they accepted him without him going there. They didn't see him. Two weeks before time for school to open I took him for his interview. When they realized he was black they cut him off just like that. Now, it's two weeks before college is opening up to start. This lady, I'll always remember her, Miss McDuffie. You might have heard about Laurinburg Institute?

MM: Um-hum.

WR: Well, Miss McDuffie was one of the founders. She helped me by her being an educator and knowing people to get my son in Howard University in two weeks. She made a few phone calls to a few prominent people at that school, and three days before the school was opened she called me. She says, "Get Fred ready and have him at Howard University," at such-and-such a time, at such-and-such a place. "He has been accepted." He was accepted, because he told me, "Mama, if you just get me in there I won't let you down. I won't let you down." He even talks about it now because he does a lot of public speaking, how far back in time our schools were from the modern schools of that day because he was in school with kids from all parts of the country, even some came from other countries to this medical school. He said, the things that he had to learn and catch up to in college, they already did it in high school.

MM: Wow.

WR: They already did it in high school, so while they were out enjoying themselves he was burning the midnight oil trying to keep up. He said it was like he didn't go to school. But, yet, when he graduated from Robeson County Training School he was an honor student. He was what they call a *cum laude* something or other. You know what those two things are. He was all A's, an all A student. He said he went to Howard University and it was like he was the dumbest thing in the world because a lot of things that those children that was there with him had already done in high school, they didn't even give it to him when he was in high school.

MM: Right.

WR: They didn't have, I guess, the tools or the financial facilities. He said he really had to work his butt off just to stay even. He says, "Not ahead of the class, mama, just even." He said when the other kids had time to go out and party and enjoy themselves on the weekend, he says, "I was burning the midnight oil. I was catching up to make sure because I had promised you if you got me there, I wasn't going to get thrown out." So that was another thing to let me know that our schools was below par, that they needed a lot of improvement, because that's a devastating thing for a child to feel like, "Hey, I'm smart. I'm getting all A's," and you go to the next level, and they say, "All A's for what? Did you do so-and-so, or did you do such-and-such." "We didn't do that at our school." "Well, you gotta get it."

MM: That's right. Did a number of blacks from Maxton go to college? Was that a common experience?

WR: No, not a lot.

MM: So people weren't bringing back—

WR: They wasn't giving any feedback.

MM: Yeah.

WR: At least to where I didn't know about it until my children started going to college. That's when I got the feedback from what was going on, that our schools wasn't what I thought they was. Even with my staying out there, practically, at school, and trying to keep up with what was going on, and this, that, and the other, our schools still was below par. They wasn't up to snuff.

MM: So how do you feel about integration now looking back on it? Is it a success? Is it a failure? What would you say about it?

WR: I feel like integration is a success, but I feel like our educational system has deteriorated because during my time teachers were dedicated. I mean they were dedicated. They would go to all kinds of lengths to make sure that that child succeeded, and I'm sure that we still have some with that same frame of mind, but the majority is, it's a job. Like I got to work this morning. I do so, and so, and so. When I get off, forget it. I'm done with it. And you can't do that if you want to really be an educator. An educator's got to be with it 24/7. That's my thought. But, yeah, I don't see anything that went wrong with the integration, it's just the attitudes of the faculties that we have nowadays.

MM: That's something that affects you no matter what race you are or class.

WR: It doesn't matter because if that teacher is dedicated she's going to let you know if something's going on with your child. The reason I said that, it wasn't me but a couple of folk that lived in back of me had children in school at Purnell Swett, and they didn't even know their child had been in-school suspension for two long weeks. And they didn't even know it, and the child failed. That was how they found out.

And what happened is, they didn't send her a note home. The child's in high school so they figured the child is supposed to go home and tell the parents. Now, you know, any child that knows that their parent is on their case is not going to go home and tell them bad news. What's wrong with making a phone call? If you can't travel make a phone call to that parent, and tell them, "Your child is suspended. They're coming to school every day, but they're in in-school suspension for the next two weeks." What's wrong with that? But they don't do that. You child can be in in-school suspension and

out, and you don't know nothing about it unless that child so desires to tell you. And I feel like that's up to the faculty to let the parent know.

And that's the difference in the new school and the old school. The old school, the teacher came to your house. The principal came to your house, bar none. And if you did something wrong in school, you know who brought you home? The principal.

MM: They caught you.

WR: He brought you home. But now they leave too much to the child. They give the child too much leeway, because even in elementary they send a note home to the parent. Well, some parents gets it and some parents, some of them don't. It's according to what the note is about. The child might deliver it, and they might not deliver it, because my grandson did that to his mom.

When he was in third or fourth grade the teacher sent a note home. He claimed he forgot it, but you know, it was bad news. He never gave it to his mother, but at least the teacher made back up and called her. That's how she knew, but a lot of times they don't. They just send a note, and the kids that need the most is the ones that the parents do less.

The teacher used to tell me that. She says, "Every time I look around I'm looking at you." She said, "On top of that, you're at every PTA meeting and everything else that's going on." She said, "But the parents that we really need to see, they don't come." She said, "We send them letters to come, but we never see them. They drop the kid off at the beginning of school and don't see them no more." Maybe the () that something's going on. You need to be visible at least twice a week. You don't have to go to the classroom, but just be visible around the school because the other kids are going to tell your kids, "Boy, you'd better be careful because there's () mama down the hall. Your

mama's down there." Not that you're down there, but that's the way they put it. It lets the child know, "I'd better stay on my P's and Q's because if I don't she's going to find out."

MM: Right. Well, the other children that you raised, the other six that you raised were younger than the two that graduated in sixty-eight, sixty-nine in that era so you've brought up children through the post-integration school system as well.

WR: Yeah.

MM: Yeah.

WR: And all of them was in the integrated schools.

MM: Tell me before we have to leave this, tell me about how you and some of the other members of the black community reacted to what Indians were doing in the early '70s to fight integration. What do you feel like motivated that, and how did you react to it at the time?

WR: Well, to me—you want me to be honest, don't you?

MM: Yeah, well sure. If you're comfortable being honest.

WR: Most of those around Maxton really they did not want the integration. They felt that what schools they had, they had done it on their own without the help of the state, and that they should not have to deal with whites or blacks. That was their thoughts, that, "they didn't care whether we had an education or not. Up to a point we worked together and built us a school here or a school there. Now they want to take our school and put everybody in it." They didn't feel like it was fair. My question to them was, "Well, it can't be integrated unless we include everybody. Why do you want to stick

out there like a sore thumb? If we're going to do it we need to all do it." But they thought no. They didn't think they should.

MM: They didn't think they should have to.

WR: Nuh-huh.

MM: Was it just racism, do you think, or was there something else behind it?

WR: I wouldn't say it was a lot of racism. I think it was, "You're invading my territory." Like with the college when North Carolina came in and says, "You're going to be a part of the system so we're going to make you North Carolina College at Pembroke," North Carolina University at Pembroke. "They're taking over our schools, and I don't think it's fair." There was a lot of kind of feedback on that.

And as I say, it wasn't to a point of really going at each other's throat. It was just mostly conversation. How do you feel about it? How do I feel about it. Then you tell me how you feel, and I tell you how I feel. That was it.

MM: Well, it's interesting. It seems like I notice a theme as I interview people that mostly people accepted that integration was going to happen.

WR: Um-hum.

MM: One way or the other. Maybe that's because it had been really delayed here for such a long time.

WR: Yeah.

MM: People kept trying not to make it an issue, and then finally, well, it's got to be an issue, and there's really nothing we can do about it. But since everybody knew it was coming they had conversations, and back and forth about how it was going to happen, or how is it best going to benefit me? But then in the Indian community, as you

know, there was sort of a core group of people that did everything they could to really stop it.

WR: Yeah.

MM: But even then, they couldn't. It couldn't happen. Was there a lot of violence, racial violence in Maxton during this time period that you remember, either white/black, Indian/white, Indian/black?

WR: No. Nuh-huh.

MM: I must ask because I read a newspaper article the other day about Red Springs. There was a fight. I think it was 1969 or 68 maybe, a fight between black and white boys, and some window smashing, and things like that. It seemed pretty isolated.

WR: Yeah. There wasn't a lot of fighting and tearing up things. The major thing that happened in Maxton, they just burned the school down, and nobody ever figured out why.

[BOTH LAUGH.]

MM: Well, right. When you put it that way it's like, "What on earth?" But when people's passions are aroused, as you said, they can do all kinds of crazy things.

WR: When you think about it, as I said before, my thoughts was the child is sitting around listening to mom and dad talk about this, that, blah, blah, blah, you know. And they may be all het up about the integration, that they really don't want it, and blah, blah, blah, so they figures, "Well, what the heck. If that's how they feel we'll just go burn down the school." Maybe their thoughts was, "Then they won't have nowhere to go."

MM: Right.

WR: "If they're not happy where they're going, then we'll fix it so they won't have nowhere to go." That's just thoughts, you know.

MM: It backfired on them.

WR: Because kids usually get the wrong idea when parents say a lot of things around them. I feel like that, even today, causes a lot of our young people to still have prejudices because their parents are prejudiced, and they talk about these things before these children, and maybe they don't even mean it in the sense, but a child sees it in a different light.

MM: Sure.

WR: Or, they could be just angry with a person in another race for some other reason, but they call them out of their name, and the child right away says, "Oh, he don't like so-and-so. They're against my father. They're against my mother," and get the wrong idea. So it's not always racism. Sometimes it's just misunderstanding.

MM: Yeah. It's amazing how it gets transferred from generation to generation.

WR: That's true. That's true.

MM: Is there anything that I've not asked you about that you feel like you want to say, or any particular thing that you feel like you helped accomplish during this time period that you want to talk about?

WR: No, I can't at this moment think of anything. I'll tell you what, if I do think of something else I'll call you.

MM: Please do. This has been really—.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED BY SHARON CAUGHILL,

FEBRUARY 23 AND 24, 2004