

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: Patricia Bryant and Ruby Jewel Hamilton

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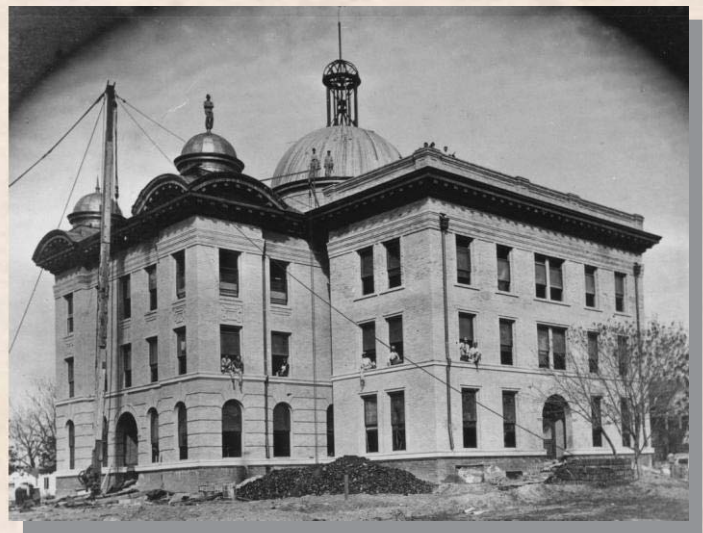
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Transcript

WARE: I'm going to start with just some basic biographical information. I'm going to start with Miss Bryant. When and where were you born?

BRYANT: I was born in Eagle Lake, Texas, in 1949, on the 10th of May.

WARE: And Miss Hamilton?

HAMILTON: I was born in Four Corners, which is on the outskirts of Sugar Land, on October 30, 1948.

WARE: So Miss Hamilton is born in the area but Miss Bryant, you were born in Eagle Lake. What brought you to Sugar Land?

BRYANT: My father. Dad found a job there in Sugar Land. Really, he was my step-father. So that's how we ended up in Sugar Land. He started working for Imperial Sugar Company.

WARE: What was his job at Imperial?

BRYANT: I don't know, because he was a barber, also. He was the only barber there in Sugar Land. So he did both.

WARE: Oh, he had a barber shop in Sugar Land.

BRYANT: Yes, he did. It was on Guyer Street, right off of Oyster Creek. He started out with an old guy, Mr. Bro Joe. And then he got his own shop once he finished school.

WARE: Miss Hamilton, did you have brothers and sisters?

HAMILTON: I have one brother and two sisters. I'm the oldest of the four.

WARE: And Miss Bryant?

BRYANT: I have one sister and one brother, and I'm the oldest.

WARE: Let's talk about school. Miss Bryant, what years did you attend M. R. Wood School?

BRYANT: I started in 1955 or 1956, started there in the first grade. And of course every black kid was bused in to that particular school. I lived in Sugar Land.

WARE: Miss Hamilton, did you still live in Four Corners?

HAMILTON: Right.

WARE: Tell me how you got to school in the morning.

HAMILTON: In the yellow bus! (Laughter)

The band director at that time was one of the bus drivers. He would pick us up about 7:15 every morning, run his route and take us to M. R. Wood.

WARE: What was his name?

HAMILTON: Harlan W. Moore.

WARE: How many students would you say, Miss Bryant, was in an average size class?

BRYANT: About 20-something. 25 or 28. It wasn't that many.

WARE: Would you say you got a lot of personal attention?

BRYANT: I think so, because between church and school in those little black communities, [teachers] were our rocks, along with our parents. Everybody knew everybody and everybody kind of disciplined everybody. I think I got a lot of attention. And I think that attributes to who I am now. They were part of my life so I give them credit for a lot of things, Sunday School teachers, all of them.

WARE: Miss Hamilton?

HAMILTON: Yes, because the teachers in that day and time were a lot more involved with us being the best that we could be. So we tried harder for the teachers than sometimes we did for ourselves. And that made us much better people because we were always striving to be what they wanted us to be.

BRYANT: The kids now know a lot of different things. We didn't get that. We got the basics. But what we knew, they made sure we knew it.

WARE: So what types of books or learning materials did you have?

BRYANT: We had regular torn school books. (Laughter) I'm being honest. They were! I used to come home many a day and wonder where Spot was because part of the page was missing. (Laughter) Where did he go? So I'm really funny about books now. I will NOT throw away a book.

HAMILTON: We had the basics: reading, writing, arithmetic, social studies, math, biology I think when we got to high school. Science with Mr. Bridges.

WARE: Do either of you remember Principal [Charles] Jingles?

BOTH: Yes, of course. (Laughter)

HAMILTON: He was there from the day that we got there until the day that we left. His wife was also a teacher there.

WARE: Did you have her for classes?

HAMILTON: No, she taught in high school and once we got to high school, she was no longer teaching.

WARE: Describe Mr. Jingles to me.

HAMILTON: Short, chubby, always walked down the halls with a gin strap. It's like a strap that went across a wheel in a gin mill. He had it cut to a certain length and he would walk down the hallway, popping. And that meant you better be in your classroom or somewhere. He'd better not catch you in the hallway when you were supposed to be in class. And this was an everyday thing.

BRYANT: And the board.

HAMILTON: He also had a board.

BRYANT: For the boys.

WARE: Did you ever see him use the strap or the board?

BRYANT: Yes. Back there, in the day, that's what they did! (Laughter)

HAMILTON: Many times, many times.

WARE: So now we're going to get personal. Did either of you ever get the strap?

BRYANT: He tried to one time, but my mom came and stopped him because it wasn't my fault. And one time some girls had hidden my books, and George Woodhull stepped in for me and he took the licks.

HAMILTON: But I never did! I was a good girl. (Laughter)

WARE: And there it is!

I know you spoke about his earlier, but for the record, how long have you been friends?

HAMILTON: Since first grade, 1955. And here we are, what. . .?

BRYANT: (Laughter) Don't mention it!

WARE: Describe an average day at school for me. I'll start with Miss Hamilton.

HAMILTON: First grade was just get to class. The first thing we did was the Pledge of Allegiance. I think we said a prayer. Then we got into our books and somewhere during the morning, we had a break where we'd go outside for recess. We came back for a little while and then we had lunch in the cafeteria down the hallway. We came back to class and had more studies. Did we have a second recess?

BRYANT: We did.

HAMILTON: Then we'd come back for a little bit more class and then the bell would ring and it was time to get on the bus to go home.

WARE: Miss Bryant, you walked to school, right?

BRYANT: Yes.

WARE: Did any of the children who walked to school go home for lunch?

BRYANT: I did after a while. When we moved to Mayfield Park, I did, because we lived right in the back of the school, so I could just run out the gate and into the house.

WARE: You mentioned the cafeteria. Describe how the school was laid out.

HAMILTON: It was like an L shape. The south end was elementary. Then the middle was where Mr. Jingles' office was, and a water fountain and the front door. Past that front door was high school. Then you went through a door to the cafeteria which was part of the bottom of the L shape. You either bought a lunch in the cafeteria or you ate the lunch you brought from home. Most people ate there in the cafeteria. We did have a little café across in front of the school that sold hamburgers and that type of thing. So you could go out the gate, if you had money to go buy a hamburger.

BRYANT: And remember the meals.

HAMILTON: Right. She started cooking after a while so you could buy a meal there.

BRYANT: We didn't buy the meals. The teacher's bought them. We couldn't afford it.

HAMILTON: We couldn't afford it.

WARE: So mainly the teachers did that.

BRYANT: And then the band room was further down. And agriculture was before the band room, and then a breezeway and then the gym. And then that little white house that we used.

HAMILTON: It was for commercial use, like typing and shorthand for the high school.

WARE: So more vocational teaching?

HAMILTON: Yes, ma'am.

WARE: And it was the little white house?

HAMILTON: A white building.

WARE: I think that might have been the original school.

HAMILTON: It might have been, before our time.

WARE: Miss Bryant, favorite classes? Favorite teachers?

BRYANT: One of my favorites was my first grade teacher, Miss [L.J.] Allen. And I think that's because she was the first teacher I had. She was tough but she was nice. And then, I guess would be Miss Zenobia Ward. She taught English.

HAMILTON: Maybe Miss Allen. Like Pat said, she was the first teacher. But we all had a fear of her because our cousins and aunts went to school ahead of us and they told us how mean she was. Once we got there, we were already afraid, so we did exactly what she said to do.

I guess next would be Miss Pitts. She was the P. E. teacher and we did a lot of different things with her. May Day programs and a lot of things there on campus. And next would be Mr. Moore, the band director.

WARE: Let's go back a little bit. You mentioned a May Day program. Describe it to me.

BRYANT: Every class had to have a different colored dress. I remember we wore

purple one year and yellow one year, and then we had to wrap these ribbons around the May pole.

HAMILTON: Like crepe paper.

BRYANT: Yes, crepe paper.

HAMILTON: And each class had something to do for that event.

WARE: Describe a program that you remember.

HAMILTON: That was a long time ago!

WARE: We'll let that one percolate a little while.

So you're talking about Miss Pitts' programs. What did you do for her?

HAMILTON: [Miss Pitts] always had different programs. Toward the end of the year we had a school program. The one year I remember most where I was involved in it, she had a saloon type thing built on stage, with the swinging doors. I was the entertainment: Mary Wells, singing "My Guy". I came out through the swinging doors, pushing them open and I lip-sync'd the song. Some of the kids told me they could hear me singing it. My mom had gotten me this frilly, frilly pink gown. Of course she got it from one of the ladies she worked for, and it was cut across here, and then had this long train on it. She took some shoes I had and had them dyed to match the dress. So I was the belle of the ball! (Laughter) That's the one I remember the most. And I remember it so vividly because my mom, two days before that, had had a terrible car accident on Westheimer. Her car was hit so hard it jumped a ditch and she barely missed the pole at a service station. I remember she was so worried about getting my outfit ready for that event.

And the next day [after the program], she went to the hospital and stayed there 14 days because of her injuries! I remember that program very well.

WARE: [To Miss Bryant:] Did you ever get to participate in one of those programs?

BRYANT: That was my favorite because Miss Pitts came up with such incredible ideas for us to do. I was in the Foreign Legion and we had to learn how to tap dance. I had to have tap shoes and she had made wooden rifles and things. We had the white shorts on and the black tie around the waist. That was my favorite. Remember Ella Mae when she had to go under the limbo stick?

One of my other favorite things was--and that you just don't see anymore--when the bell rang for us to go home. A lot of the mothers in Sugar Land didn't work and you could see them standing in the back doors, waiting for us to come home, making sure we came home. And you could smell dinner all over the Quarters. We called it the

Quarters. You could smell where they were cooking supper. And that's a fond memory.

WARE: Are there any pictures that exist of any of those programs?

BRYANT: We don't know where they are.

HAMILTON: When we integrated, everything that we had was left at the [M.R. Wood] school. The band uniforms, the instruments, the trophies, everything. And I don't know what happened after that.

BRYANT: And another favorite of ours was the band. We were both in the band.

HAMILTON: From 4th grade all the way up.

WARE: And what instruments did you play?

HAMILTON & BRYANT: Clarinet.

BRYANT: And I was a majorette.

WARE: And the majorette costume?

BRYANT: We don't know where they are.

HAMILTON: Everything was owned by the school or the [Sugar Land Independent School] district. Our parents purchased our instruments so we would take them home every day. But the other instruments that were owned by the school had to be left there at the school.

WARE: You mentioned band and some other things. Some schools are renowned for their football, or their band. What was M. R. Wood renowned for?

BRYANT: Football. And the band.

HAMILTON: People came to see the band and watch the football team. I worked with a lady who told me that she remembered people used to come see the band and the football team.

BRYANT: I think we were really ahead of ourselves.

WARE: Did the band do formations?

BRYANT: Oh, yes. We participated at regional competition at Prairie View.

HAMILTON: Once we went to Austin to compete.

WARE: Did you place?

HAMILTON: Yes, we did.

WARE: And did you take it?

HAMILTON: Yes, we did! (Laughter) I think each week the band had a new routine. We did not sit on our duffs. Mr. Moore was very creative and the songs that were on the radio? We played those songs. And we'd have to practice and practice and practice so we got our parts down. But if you didn't get the part, he would sit right next to you and make sure that you got your part. We had section leaders and he made sure the section leaders had their part and then everybody else in their section would be taught. And when we hit the field, we were doing it right. We danced and everything.

BRYANT: And we were so young, he made us sit up at the front of the bus because we both started in the 4th grade. He made the babies sit up at the front. Another thing I remember, we were so young our parents were so worried about us. They gave us too much money back at that time, and made these big lunches. Fried chicken, everything you could think of. He used to go into my bag and your bag and eat the food.

HAMILTON: They would pack enough for him because they knew he was going to be with us all day.

BRYANT: Sometimes they didn't pack and he just went in it! He would tease us when we would come back because he'd be sitting there, picking his teeth. And we knew he had been in the bags! (Laughter)

WARE: Sounds like he was a great teacher.

HAMILTON & BRYANT: He was!

WARE: There was a recording group who came out of M. R. Wood, The Four Tempos. What do you remember about The Four Tempos and the four gentlemen who were part of it?

BRYANT: I don't remember anybody but Milton and the Foy boy. I know my uncle, Andrew Spates, was with them for a while. I don't remember the other two.

HAMILTON: Benny Reed, Al Foy, Milton Davis, Herman Bean. Herman was one of the ones on the [publicity] picture. Billy Joe Beal was a part of it, but I think at the time they made the record, I'm not sure he was still with them. They really got their start while we were there in school, because we would perform for PTA meetings. We would be their entertainment. Actually there was a girl's group but we didn't go any further than the PTA meetings. (Laughter)

WARE: You didn't go to L. A.?

HAMILTON: No, we didn't go to L. A.

BRYANT: Another thing that was fun was homemaking with Miss Dewpoint.

HAMILTON: There was another lady too. . . .

BRYANT: Miss Clifton.

WARE: Let's finish up with The Four Tempos. Did they perform as a group?

HAMILTON: Yes, at the PTA meetings.

WARE: So, they were a group before they went off.

HAMILTON: I think they were classmates or close in age. I know Al, Herman and Benny Reed were from Four Corners. And the other guys were from Sugar Land. They were in the same class or close to each other. They had only the one record. I'll try to find that record at the house. I have it somewhere. They sent me one.

WARE: That would be an important part of our display [at the Landmark Community Center museum].

HAMILTON: I have their picture too.

WARE: Those would be important pieces.

Let's go back to homemaking. You liked homemaking. Describe homemaking to me.

BRYANT: The sewing! We loved the sewing.

HAMILTON: Yes, in 8th grade we were sewing everything.

BRYANT: And we had a fashion show. I remember Miss Dewpoint telling my mom that I was making too many things. We loved it and we were just sewing, sewing, sewing all these outfits. And then we got the chance to cook, too.

HAMILTON: Fabric was only 4 yards for a dollar. The patterns themselves now are about \$20.

WARE: So your teacher complained that you were doing too much?

BRYANT: She wasn't complaining. She was teasing my mom. Just like Christmas speeches, Easter speeches, they would tell us, she's taking too many speeches. But I liked learning the speeches so I would just learn them.

WARE: Give me an example of some of the speeches you gave.

BRYANT: It was just a Biblical speech, from scripture. Miss Lou Willy, I don't know where she got them from, but she cut them out and gave them to all the kids in the neighborhood. On Easter, that night, you had to come in and say your speech. You'd sing a song, and it was a lot of fun.

They did a lot of things for us; we have a lot of memories. I can't remember the speeches verbatim but I remember one of them was "I am that I am". My uncle lived with us and I think that was his speech. I kept saying his speech; I couldn't get mine. But we were real young then. Then when I got up to say it Easter night, I said his. And he jumped up and said, "That's MINE." (Laughter)

WARE: What was your uncle's name?

BRYANT: Andrew Spates. A lot of memories.

WARE: Did you ever attend any events at the Missouri City gym?

HAMILTON: Not that I remember.

BRYANT: I don't remember doing that either.

HAMILTON: This probably is all prior to integration.

WARE: Give me some examples of some racial segregation issues. Did you have any issues that you recall?

(Laughter)

HAMILTON: Many. The year prior to our going to Dulles, which was my junior year. And I remember the speech teacher from Dulles coming to M. R. Wood and telling us

what was going to happen when we went to Dulles. I remember to this day--it was like she just said it--she said, "You people, we love your singing, but we just can't understand anything that you say."

BRYANT: And she said, "And you'll never be anything". She said what y'all would probably be.

HAMILTON: I probably got stuck on that. I know that we had our own dialect. I remember once I graduated and I started my first job with Schlumberger, I would be talking and I would say, "Oh, I'm just so hongry." And they would say, "What?" I said, "I'm hongry." And they said, "Oh, you mean hungry." And I said, "Oh, yeah, hungry." And "What time is it?" "It's eleven fawty." "Eleven forty?" And I would say, "Yes, eleven forty." Then I started taking notice of the way that I talked.

But the first thing that [the Dulles speech teacher] said was they couldn't understand what we were saying. And I couldn't understand that. That stayed in my head. How could you not understand what we say? If you understand the singing, you should understand the talking. But that was a different time.

WARE: Back to M. R. Wood. It sounds like it was a very nurturing place. Tell me some ways that it didn't nurture enough. Were there any ways?

BRYANT: For me, I think it was. There was a group of kids who were there, girls, who bullied a lot and I was one of the ones that they bullied all the time. That's why I ended up going home for lunch. I didn't want to stay on campus. And I don't think the teachers did enough. I kept telling them that they were bothering me. The bell would ring and I would try to go my class and they would push me in the class. They took all my books. That's when the guy took the licks for me. Things like that were not nurturing. I remember when Mr. Jingles wanted to whip me about that. That's when my mom came. The girl had cut me. And my mom told him that he was not going to whip me, because I had been telling everybody and nobody would do anything. But I think they were afraid of them. So bullying is not new to me. Everybody goes on and on about it now, but it's nothing new. It's been there. Like she said, it was a different time.

But I think those things pushed us to be something, to do something with our lives. I can remember working for this lady and I washed the corduroy pants. I knew how to wash corduroy because we washed everything. We didn't take things to the cleaners. And [her husband] said, "That maid washed my pants." That never left my head. And I said to myself, "I am not being a maid!" So I kept pushing and pushing until I became a nurse.

WARE: So it became a positive reinforcement?

BRYANT: Right.

WARE: I have heard that some celebrities came and visited M. R. Wood school. Do you remember any celebrities coming in to visit M. R. Wood?

HAMILTON: Not while I was there. It was probably a few years before we actually started school. I heard that James Brown had been to M. R. Wood, and this came from people who were high school folks when he came through. Little Stevie Wonder at the time. Those are the two that I remember the most. I'm not sure if Bobby Bland came?

BRYANT: I remember that a little bit, not much. I know Bobby Bland was in Sugar Land. They used to put everything on those playbills and post them on the light posts in Sugar Land.

WARE: The gymnasium: would you say that was the hub of the school, that everything kind of took place in the gymnasium?

BRYANT & HAMILTON: Exactly.

HAMILTON: We had sock hops. It was like a dance but you had socks on because you couldn't mess up the gymnasium floor with your shoes. So we had to dance in socks. It was just a dance. I think it was around Valentine's Day. It was something for us to do. Buses came to pick us up and brought us there and took us back home.

BRYANT: You paid your 15 cents. It was exciting because it was something to do and most of us liked to dance.

HAMILTON: She did. I didn't! I had no rhythm.

WARE: So let me get this straight. Miss Bryant liked to dance, but Miss Hamilton liked to sing.

BRYANT: Yes, Miss Bryant cannot sing. (Laughter)

WARE: We each have our talents.

I think I mentioned before that we are looking for an original Panthers yearbook and a letterman jacket, because we have nothing for the display, and the Four Tempos album and anything else that you think of. Any original pictures or articles or anything that you have. We are into collecting because we need to put them in exhibits.

HAMILTON: We were the Panthers, but we never had a mascot at any of the games. But I'm a part of the alumni and every two years we have a school reunion. It's an all

school reunion, so if you have ever attended, you are welcome to come. I found some giant stuffed panthers; would that be something we could put on top of one of the displays?

WARE: I'll look at it. I think that might be entirely possible. That might work well.

Is there anything I have forgotten to ask you about?

BRYANT: I can barely remember who was on the football team. I remember they played my hometown and I was hoping they would win. But they lost to Eagle Lake. And Eagle Lake sang, "Hit the Road, Jack." (Laughter)

WARE: But they did have a good team.

BRYANT: They did. And the girls' basketball team. They were fantastic.

WARE: Was that the only sport that was available to girls?

HAMILTON: There was track.

BRYANT: I didn't remember that.

WARE: But neither of you ran track or played basketball?

HAMILTON: I played basketball one year in 8th grade. And once I got hit and knocked down in center court, I said, 'This is it. This is not for me!' (Laughter)

BRYANT: I played no sports, because they were not for me. I tried to play baseball but I couldn't see the ball until it was right in my face. So I said, it was not for me. I didn't wear glasses at the time.

WARE: I'd like to thank you ladies. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

BRYANT: No.

HAMILTON: Other than we thank Commissioner Grady Prestage and his staff for working hard to try to get this to come to fruition.

WARE: Absolutely. Thank you.

BRYANT: There would be no more memories of that and that's why we have the reunion every other year. So many of us have gone on.

WARE: When is the next reunion scheduled?

HAMILTON: It's supposed to be next year. But we haven't had any meetings and I know we won't have one next year.

WARE: If you would, get the word out to folks that this project is at hand. In the Missouri City Gymnasium [Landmark Community Center] Museum we want to have a section on M. R. Wood School. It's very important that we really represent the history of the school.

BRYANT: We've been telling everybody.

WARE: Thank you, ladies.

(Pause)

BRYANT: It cost us 3 cents for the milk and 2 cents for two cookies.

WARE: Tell me again.

BRYANT: It was in the cafeteria. You could get a carton of milk and two sandwich cookies for a nickel.

WARE: This was after a meal?

BRYANT: You could just go in and get it.

HAMILTON: And pickles. Big, giant pickles.

WARE: For a nickel?

BRYANT: I don't remember about the pickles, because I didn't really eat them.

HAMILTON: Everything was really, really cheap back then.

BRYANT: It was probably expensive because back then, no one was making much money. I'm quite sure that to them, that was expensive.

HAMILTON: Lunch was 35 cents. So that was cheap.

BRYANT: I always went home.

WARE: Thank you, ladies.

End of Interview.