FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: Rothwell Ware

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Interviewer: Diane L Ware

Transcriber:

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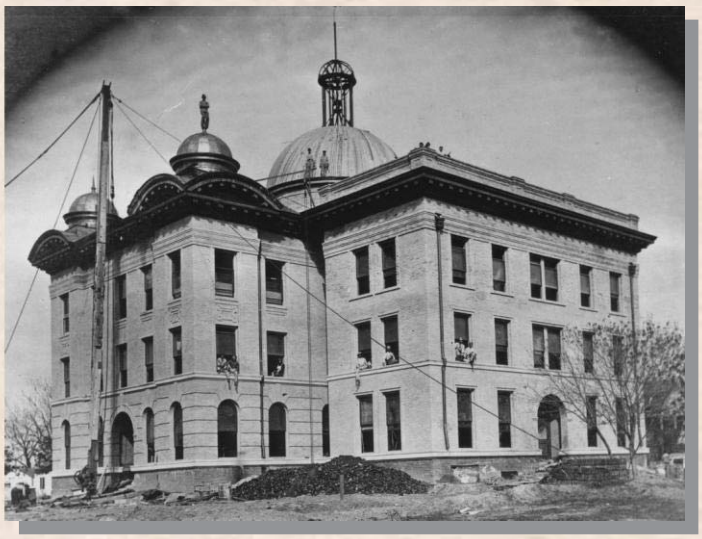
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Transcript

WARE: Let's start with some basic biographical information. Where and when were you born?

WARD: December 13, 1956, in [Laura] Eldridge Hospital in Sugar Land, Texas.

WARE: Did you have any siblings?

WARD: In 1947 there was a stillborn girl. I'm the only other child.

WARE: When and where were your parents born?

WARD: My father [Rayford Ward] was born in Giddings, Texas. Really on the outskirts of Giddings, between Dime Box and Giddings, a little area called Sweet Home. He was born in 1921. My mother [Zenobia Tucker Ward] was born at the old home place, 2311 North Main, Stafford, Texas, on May 23, 1925.

WARE: Do you remember your grandparents?

WARD: Yes, I do.

WARE: Tell me about them.

WARD: I remember my grandfather [James Tucker] in his old age. He was born in December 1872. He had a handlebar mustache. He walked with a cane. I remember him telling me on the back porch, "I'm going to dig up Miss Ella." His first wife died in 1910 and was buried in a cotton field. That was before they had the FIS [Farmers Improvement Society] Cemetery, a Black cemetery. He married Ella Battle and his sister married the Battle brother; there were only two Battle children. But she passed away. Then later on, in 1910, he married my grandmother. There were seventeen years difference in their ages.

WARE: What was your grandmother's name?

WARD: Louise Peel. She was born in DeWalt, Texas.

WARE: When and why did your grandparents move to Fort Bend County?

WARD: They moved because of farming. The land was good. And from the article that I was reading, I think in 1893--with his father--he was in Hempstead. He moved to Sugar Land in 1895, that was located on Oyster Creek, living in the Bottoms. Then he moved to J. C. Florea's place in Stafford, Texas. He remained there eleven years. In

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1906, he said he bought the present place, 2311 North Main. And in 1907 he moved there.

The Florea family had a weekend home in Galveston, and my grandfather told me they wanted to go there. They had a bad storm in 1915 and only one of the girls survived. I remember my Aunt telling me. I was always thinking of the 1900 storm, but this was later on when they had another storm.

WARE: I wanted to focus today primarily on your schooling. Tell me about starting school and where you went.

WARD: Because I was the only child, I was real bashful, I wasn't really responding. So they took me to the Blue Bird Clinic and I put the square pegs in the right place and the round pegs in the right place. Then my mother took me to Dr. Carlos Slaughter.

Dr. Slaughter was a World War I doctor; he was the one who brought me into the world. When he started practicing in 1925, my mother was six years old, so he was like a part of our family. He said that I needed to interact with children. There wasn't a kindergarten for Blacks. Maybe the whites did, but we did not have one. So my Aunt [Sophie] in Beaumont paid a little tuition, maybe $2 or $3 every month and they took me to Braes Bayou in Riceville. I went there for kindergarten. From there I went to first grade at M. R. Wood School. Normally I would have gone to the New Hope School with Mrs. Goodman. She was the Principal there. That was on Staffordshire Road, close to Fifth Street. But my mother drove me back and forth to M.R. Wood. That's how it worked out.

When they got ready to integrate the schools, they did the high school first. They did junior high, and elementary last. The first year we had a little skeleton troop of children at M. R. Wood. I think Miss [Annie M.] Scott had 6th grade and there were only six pupils in there. Some of the parents wanted us to integrate earlier so we would be used to it and be ahead, but some of the parents kept us there for another year.

My mother taught music three days [a week] at M. R. Wood, two days she taught at Oak Lane. I still got to go back in the 4th grade, back and forth, because Mr. Leon Mooring was the Principal at the school. Before that he was the Ag teacher and the Coach. He would drop me off because I lived right there on South Main. There was a nice little Black community. A lot of educated Blacks lived in that area.

For the 5th grade I had to integrate, so I went to E. A. Jones Elementary School. I got to meet the Black kids who lived in Stafford. And all my friends that I still have now--like J. J. Court--we are still like brothers and sisters.

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They had Annie Wilcox Elementary. Steve Perry went to Wilcox, and we were right next door. So we had E. A. Jones and Annie Wilcox. I think we had the cafeteria and Annie Wilcox had the library. They were just right next door to each other. It was weird that we didn't all go to the same school. Those two little schools were together.

And then we all got together en masse in the 6th grade at Dulles Junior High with Mr. L. V. Dugan Hightower. Mr. Hightower had movie time twice a year at the Palms Theater. He was just an all-around good person. You felt good about the school. My mother said she remembers Mr. Hightower surveying property, helping Mr. Jess Pirtle, who was a surveyor for Sugarland Industries. I told Mrs. Hightower--they called her Miss Dot--who lived on 4th Street, about that. Just good memories.

WARE: So you started at M. R. Wood, and your mother taught at M. R. Wood. Tell me what you remember about her teaching there.

WARD: I remember her doing everything. She was librarian, a counselor if you wanted to take different courses, like science. She would get materials if you wanted to take home economics. She also did the numbers to see who would be the Valedictorian and the Salutatorian of the school. Because she could manage the children, she would ride the school buses for the Band. She was over the English department and she took more courses so she could teach English.

Mr. Jingles was the Principal. He came in 1952 and my mother came there in 1952. At the time my mother started teaching at M. R. Wood, she was hired by Mr. [Walton E.] White. He was the Superintendent. At that time, Sugar Land and Missouri City had not consolidated so she was hired in Sugar Land. I think Mr. White passed away in 1956, because my mother said she went to the funeral. She was so proud and she said, "I wasn't even showing. Nobody knew." That was how it was in those days. So that's why I think he passed in 1956 [when I was born].

WARE: Do you remember Mr. Jingles first name?

WARD: Charles L. Jingles. He was from Hempstead. The interesting thing was when my grandparents made that journey from North Carolina, his parents were on that train, too. There were several families of Blacks who came in that time period. They came in 1889. My grandfather was 17 years old and was with his father. His mother, Martha, had already passed away in childbirth. So he came with four sisters and himself. And his daddy up and died. He's buried on Avenue E [in Stafford] close to where Bethel [Missionary Baptist] Church is, under some pecan trees. I think it's homes over there right now.

WARE: So there were a lot of Black families who migrated in 1889? Why did they migrate here?

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WARD: It was after Reconstruction. Just like my father's brother in the 1950s. They all went to Denver because everyone went to Denver. He did well. He had two homes in Denver. I think my Aunt [Magnolia] did some domestic work, but he worked for the post office and made good money. He bought one home, rented it and sold it. Then he bought this house. Now that house in Denver was the historical district and his great-niece sold it for $500,000.

We had people in California the same way. We had one cousin go there because she had a special needs daughter and there were no facilities for the daughter here. So she went to California. It was the need for Blacks to move because of job opportunities.

My Aunt never felt like Colorado was her home. Her dream was to move to Tyler, but she never did. My uncle took care of her for eight years when she had Alzheimer's. I said, "Uncle, I appreciate it." He said, "I love Magnolia."

WARE: Taking care of family is very important.

So you started at M. R. Wood and by the end of elementary school, you transferred over to E. A. Jones Elementary.

WARD: And I knew Mrs. Jones.

WARE: Did you do any extracurricular activities in elementary school?

WARD: My mother took me back and forth for clarinet lessons to Mr. Talbert at Pied Piper Music. All of the Black schools in the area would buy their instruments from him. He taught at TSU [Texas Southern University]. His wife taught at Turner Elementary. They were from South Carolina. First, he played in bands in New York. They didn't have any children. They lived in the Third Ward [in Houston]. His first name was Cameron and her name was Julia.

WARE: So you played the clarinet. With your mother being a music teacher, that makes sense.

WARD: She wanted me to play piano, but I think we did two lessons and that was it. That was not my cup of tea. No regrets.

WARE: Do you remember any special school events, Christmas events or that type of thing in elementary school?

WARD: We had socials and I have pictures of us dancing. They would put records on. I remember that. I can't think of the young man's name; it was in elementary school. The church and the school were right next to each other, Mount Pleasant

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[Missionary Baptist Church] and M. R. Wood. I remember this young man had an inner ear infection and passed away. The funeral was at the gymnasium and the whole school attended.

The first of the year, Mr. Jingles would have a program at the church at 11:00 and the teachers would be there. That pulled our community together. The teachers were in fellowship with the community at the church. I would see my teachers in their hats and everything, and I'd say, "Oh, that's Miss Williams." They looked so different to me! That took place once a year.

My mother got an invitation in the 1950s to march on Avenue H, in the Fort Bend County Fair parade [in Rosenberg]. We took two buses to get the Band there. The Sheriff got there and said, "Where are you going?" And we said, "We're going to march." And he said, "No Colored groups will be marching here." They turned the two buses back.

WARE: So you weren't allowed to march in the 1950s?

WARD: Well, they got the invitation, but I don't think the High Sheriff thought it was going to happen.

My mother took some students to the University of Texas and the kids wanted to eat. They saw some Blacks in there, but they only worked there. They couldn't eat there. My mother told them, "You know, it's going to change one day." That was in the dining hall at the University of Texas.

WARE: Where did your mother attend college?

WARD: The first she attended was St. Philip Junior College in San Antonio. My Aunt was doing domestic work for Lucchese, the boot people. They were an Italian family and she worked for Mrs. Lucchese. I don't know why. I didn't ask her why she made that sojourn to San Antonio. There are some things you don't ask. But she was there and Mrs. Lucchese overheard her saying, "We've got to send our baby sister to school." So Mr. Anderson, who was at the bank in San Antonio, gave my mother a fellowship for one year. Mrs. Artemisia Bowdon was the lady that was the Superintendent of the school. My mother did very well and those courses transferred to Prairie View [A&M University]. She graduated from Prairie View in 1946 and received her Master's in 1952.

WARE: That's interesting.

Did you ever have an occasion to attend an event at the Missouri City gymnasium?

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WARD: No. When I went over to E. A. Jones Elementary, that was by Annie Wilcox Elementary, so I would see the building.

I once heard my mother say, "Now Sister, we could have gone to school right there instead of driving into Houston and living with people." But the curriculum was so poor with Mrs. Charlotte Mayfield [Principal of M. R. Wood, 1923-1944] in Sugar Land. My Aunt knew somebody named Miss Rosie who failed and didn't do well. So she said to my mother, "We're going to Houston and stay with people." They had a rough go staying with different people. Some of my grandmother's family were kind of affluent; they were married to railroad men and were teachers. They were afraid to have young girls staying with them, in case something would happen with them.

But lo and behold, we all came back. My grandfather said, "You come back, you come back as one." And that's what happened. And they only got me, that's one! My Aunt Sophie was valedictorian of her class at Booker T. Washington [High School]. I'm so proud of her. She's the one who named me.

WARE: So in the days when they were growing up, M. R. Wood was really an inferior school?

WARD: I hate to say that, but it was. The administration didn't care enough. Mr. Henry Malone was one of the first black School Board members. My mother said he continued to go to school even though he went to the 7th or 8th grade. He wanted to learn but there was really no school where he could go. And it was a sacrifice to try to live with people in Houston, to try to go to school. But my Aunt was stern and she was like a mother figure to the whole family.

WARE: How many siblings did your mother have?

WARD: She had one half-brother, from her father's first wife. He was born in 1890 and was in World War I. His name was Arthur Tucker. He passed in 1958. He had a wife named Mattie and she passed away in the 1960s, I think maybe 1964. They lived in the Heights and he started a little cab line, called Lone Star Cab Company. When he took sick at the old VA Hospital, they wheeled him to a telephone to talk to me but I was only two years old. I think he had cancer. He was the first of the siblings to pass.

The second one was Edwin. He was born in 1911 and he passed away in 1960. He had had a stroke and I think it was after that he had a wreck in a Model T. Since I've been working in the medical field, I feel like that's what happened to him. But at that time, nobody knew anything about blood thinners and things like that. It was real hard for him to walk but he would still pick cotton. He was paralyzed on one side. He was working at a speakeasy called La Loma Linda. He had a car and some money. A lady said that my grandmother was at church, praying for her son to come

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in. "Lord, bring him in any kind of way you can." And in the next week or two, he had this stroke, so I guess God brought him in, but this wasn't the way that he wanted to.

My grandfather was kind of displeased with the other son going to Houston. Then this one had this stroke. The night before my grandfather passed away, they made amends. He told me while he was dying, "You be good to your Mama."

WARE: So she had the two brothers, the half-brother and the whole brother.

WARD: Yes, and she had two other sisters, Westerfield and Sophie.

WARE: And Westerfield was also a teacher?

WARD: She worked at Prairie View and was the Assistant Dean of Women for years. She went through a real tragic divorce over there and she had to come back here. She got the Chair of the History Department at M. R. Wood so she and my mother taught together at that time.

WARE: What years did your Aunt Westerfield work at M. R. Wood?

WARD: Oh, back in 1961 until integration in 1965. But she didn't get a job. Some teachers didn't get a job when they integrated the schools. And I don't think Mr. [Harlan] Moore, the Band Director, got a job. Several of them weren't hired back into the school.

WARE: Why do you think that was?

WARD: I don't know. One of the stories I heard, one of the persons on the School Board said, "Oh just hire one of the girls." That was that, era over.

Mr. Pat Rodgers was the Superintendent during integration and he told the teachers that integration was something he did not want to happen. But bless his heart, he passed away in front of his television set, watching a football game, so he never got to see integration. Then there was Mr. Edward Mercer as Superintendent, and then Mr. Lawrence Elkins. Mr. Mercer was a good friend of my mother. I talked to his wife in Seguin after he passed. She said, "Edward always spoke highly and lovingly of Zenobia." I had never met Mrs. Mercer.

WARE: Who are some of your classmates from M. R. Wood that you are still close to?

WARD: My friend, Milton Thomas, is like a brother. He's in my will; he gets the $2 that I'll leave. He married a wonderful lady and she is like a sister to me. They live off Highway 6. He worked hard. He was raised by his grandmother and Great-Aunt.

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His parents were divorced. They had a really hard, hard time. He said my mother and father were an inspiration for them to have what he has now.

WARE: Any other classmates that you are still close to?

WARD: Carl Joe Mula, Mula Road. I'm close to him. He's like a brother. J. J. Court, Buster Court's son, and his brother [Charles] and his brother's wife [Jean]. I'm real close to them. Those are the ones that I talk to on a regular basis. Cindy Frierson. Her father was over all the agriculture for years and years for the prison system. Her mother [Mary] was a Spanish teacher and when she was ill, I would go see her. Cindy and I are close. There are a lot of others who have been a part of my life who I don't remember right now.

WARE: Just jot them down when you think of them and we'll add them in.

WARD: Cindi DeLaro, the DeLaro's are another one. Lisa McCune has been Principal at several schools in the area. The teacher I keep up with is Corky [Vernon] Madden. I talk to him more. They named an elementary school for him. I also talk to Mr. [James] Patterson. He is involved with ARC [Association for Retarded Adults] and his sister [Ann Smith] are good friends of mine.

WARE: What are some of your favorite memories from school?

WARD: We had band. Band was good for me because I got to know people who were not in my class, the older ones. There was something about the ones who graduated in 1972-1973 and even 1974, but the 1972 and 1973 classes were different than we were. There was a maturity that I don't understand. I related to them a lot better. There were only those two or three years and I don't know why they seemed different to me, in attitudes and things. I guess two or three years make a difference in life.

WARE: What are some of your least favorite memories?

WARD: Being on the bus with a drafting teacher. He was on the bus and I was standing there. The bus was packed with kids. I was in 6th grade, coming home. And I think he had some cousins that weren't like he was; he was very red-necked. At that time George Wallace was running for President. I was standing close to the gentleman driving the bus and the fellow was talking with me. He said, "My parents say they're going to send all the "n"s back to Africa. The bus driver seemed to condone that. He just tapped on his leg, as if to say, "keep quiet but go on, I'm enjoying it." There were two people, Pam Moncrief and Fred Burnside. He was a year or two ahead of me and he vocally stood up for me. And Pam Moncrief would always say, "You be quiet." But she doesn't remember. I found her and I thanked her a year or two ago.

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WARE: So there were some cases of flagrant racism.

WARD: Just one time. That was just self-evident. But it was the end of the school year, I think as a science fair project, he had to bring it back to me or something. I never saw him in school and it didn't bother me. It never fazed me. And I think that's because I have a good self-worth of who I am. I think about it now, maybe more so now, but it never fazed me during that time period. Never blocked me from feeling anything away from him or anyone else. I found him on Facebook but I didn't want to Friend him! (Laughter)

WARE: What did your Dad do for work?

WARD: My father did not have a lot of formal education, but he was a go-getter. My father was in a CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] Camp. His father had passed away in a Temple [Texas] hospital and my father sent a $17 allotment so my grandmother could save the farm in Giddings. After that he fought in North Africa.

He had a cousin named Mary Curtis and she lived in Schulenburg and taught school there. She also played the music for the Baptist Church. She was my father's first cousin. She said, "Rayford, why don't you go to Prairie View and take a vocational course and meet a nice girl. So he went there and took watch repair and my mother said what drew her to him was he was so clean and so neat, which I'm not. She said you could see her face in his shoes.

Another man wanted to marry her named Joe Cole. He was from Calvert, Texas. He was raised by his grandmother, but he had a mother and father. He looked Anglo; he looked white. My mother told my Aunt, "Rayford is light-skinned but you can tell he is Black. Joe is so light and you know, if he were to say the "n" word to me because he looks so white, what would I do? So she chose to marry my father.

At that time, psychiatry and the type of medication that helps depression was not there for my father, which I understand now. Old medication and a lot of other things. He died in 1986, at my age, maybe a little bit younger. My mother got his Social Security. He always supported the family. I never remember my parents getting into an argument in my life. I never saw them even really kiss each other. They were very reserved in every way that they could be. They wanted me to be respectful. All I can remember is respect in the household. My father was ill quite a bit, but my mother always respected him, and showed me to respect him and to love him.

When my mother passed so quickly, I was looking through her jewelry box and I found a poem that Joe Cole had written her back in 1946. She had never thrown it away. She saved everything! So I just folded it up and threw it away because it was a memory that was hers.

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WARE: What have I forgotten to ask you?

WARD: My mother and them, they all went to school at Booker T. Washington High School. My Aunt [Westerfield] got her Master's in the 1950s, when she was older, from Prairie View. But she had to stay longer years at Booker T. Washington because they didn't give the courses she needed. So she was twenty when she graduated from there. But my Aunt Sophie went to Prairie View and worked there and then graduated from Houston College for Negroes, which is now called TSU [Texas Southern University]. She got her bachelor's. But my mother and her sister [Westerfield] got their Master's. My mother was self-taught on the piano and she got her Master's in music. When she was a girl, to make extra money, she would ride to stay with people on the weekends and she would play piano for two different churches. One was in Crabb and she stayed with my grandmother's half-sister. She stayed with the Ellis family in Sugar Land because there were two churches at that time. They finally merged the two churches together and called it Mount Pleasant. Originally one was called Pleasant Springs and other one was called something else.

WARE: She stayed with the Ellis family in Sugar Land?

WARD: Yes. I think one of the Ellise's. I went to school with the children. Her name was Helen Jackson.

My mother was really self-taught and a lady at the church helped teach. She said, "How about piano lessons?" She didn't have them.

My mother went to Booker T. Washington, and the Principal said she was really too old to be in Algebra I, so they put her in Algebra II. Mother made a B and had not even had Algebra I. She said, "I'm not smart. I just studied hard."

Sophie was the one who had an operatic gift, singing and everything else.

WARE: Sounds like their parents treasured education.

WARD: My grandfather did not push as hard because Guadalupe College [in Seguin] was a college that Arthur went to and he was up there doing well. He got caught in the girls' dormitory or something and my grandfather was very unhappy about it.

I remember my Aunt telling me, "Tell Papa to sell the cow so I have another semester in school." Grandmother said, "Baby, I'm sorry." Papa had sold the cow. But we have to remember what the circumstances were. He might have had to sell it. But she stayed there at the dormitory.

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My Aunt Westerfield had the hardest time in life, but she outlived that whole generation. She bathed my mother and she outlived her. When my mother passed away as quick as she did, she said, "God don't make any errors." She never cried. So I think sometimes with age, wisdom comes too.

WARE: Thank you very much.

WARD: Thank you.

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