

Beatrice Burkhalter
Interview 4b
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ABSTRACT: Long-time Diboll resident and educator Beatrice Burkhalter reminisces for Sherri Sheridan about her school days in early Diboll. She recalls the separation of boys and girls, the 2 person desks, and that many of the wealthier families sent their children away for the last several years of their education. Mrs. Burkhalter recalled some of the pranks boys would play on the teachers and the long school days with long recesses. She was in the Diboll High School graduating class of 1922, the first class to graduate from Diboll.

This is an interview by Sherri Sheridan with Mrs. Beatrice Burkhalter. December 10, 1986. The tape is about early school days in Diboll.

Beatrice Burkhalter (hereafter BB): You know back when I was going to school in Diboll, it was a very small school. We only had 8 grades and then as the children got older, they were sent away to school. They went somewhere else if they wanted to finish their education. Not very many children from Diboll finished their education. They just quit and went to work at the mill. My class, after we got to the eighth grade, every year they would add a grade for us. That group would stay together and the next year they would add another grade. We started in the ninth grade trying to affiliate our school. We worked in the ninth and tenth grade and we finished in the eleventh grade. We were the first graduating class in Diboll. My group was. There were eight of us. That was in 1922.

There was a lot of funny things that happened in school. One family had a boy there that was misbehaving and the principal was going to whip him. The principal made a grab for the boy and he ran and jumped out the window. The window was way up high. The principal jumped out the window to catch him and the Principal broke his leg. That was one of the funny things that happened.

Back in the grades, the children who lived in the country brought their lunch. Everybody that lived there in town went home for lunch. We had an hour off and we all went home because it was not very far. Diboll was very small. Everybody went home for lunch and the children who came in from the country brought their lunch. They would put their lunches in the cloakroom. Do you know what a cloakroom is? It is a closet and you would take off your coats in the morning and put them in there. It had a shelf in it and the country children put their lunches on the shelf. If the boys misbehaved, the teacher would make them sit in the closet and shut the door. There were two boys in our group would always start misbehaving about 10:30. The teacher got provoked with them and put them in the closet. Well, they ate up the lunches in there. Well, the country kids didn't have a lunch to eat. It went on that way for several times and the kids were afraid to tell on them.

The boys were kinda bullies. Finally one of the kids did tell the teacher that they were doing that every day. Kids have always been kids. Even back in my days they were kids.

Sherri Sheridan (hereafter SS): Did they get punished?

BB: The next time they did it, they got a spanking. You know teachers used to really spank. They kept a paddle there and really spanked.

We always separated the boys and girls. The boys and girls didn't play together at all on the campus there. The campus was where the elementary campus is today. The building had just four rooms. We just had school in three rooms and the fourth room was the band. The town had a band. They met there and practiced several nights a week. They left the instruments in the school and the school was never locked. We left our books and they left their instruments and no body ever bothered them. Can you imagine that now? We never did go in there during the day. We didn't go in there and bother them either. The men in town practiced there. They would give a concert and we would get to go and hear it.

The boys and girls were separated. The boys played on one side of the school building and the girls on the other side. One day the boys had a bad habit of chunking or throwing things. They would get out there and throw--I guess they were playing war. There was one boy the boys really teased and one day, they kept teasing and he picked up something and threw it and missed that boy and hit me right there. I still have the scar. He laid my head wide open. I was on the other side of the campus. This boy came running down by me. He laid my head open right there.

We always set two together in our desks. Did you ever see those desks where two sat together? We always had a desk mate. We sat together and we didn't talk during the day. And you were not supposed to look on her work. If she was doing some work, you better not look over there and copy. Sometime she would slip it over just a little bit and let you look at it. I had some real nice friends that I grew up with. One of them, she and I were desk mates from the second grade on for two or three years. She moved to Lufkin and she started teaching in Lufkin and she taught in Lufkin all those years and she just died last year. She was a real good friend of mine and we were desk mates back in the early years of my schooling.

SS: Did you have many desk mates?

BB: I had this one all the time until she moved away. When you got one, you kept them all that year. If the teacher thought you were not compatible, she would move you. Usually, we just got along real well, though.

SS: Did you get to choose your desk mate?

BB: Yeah. There wasn't very many of us and we were all good friends. We could choose who we wanted.

SS: How long during the day did you go to school?

BB: We had a long day. But we had long recesses. We had an hour off in the morning to play and an hour in the afternoon. We usually went until about four o'clock in the afternoon. We went from eight until twelve, had an hour for lunch, came back at one and had a long recess. We had to carry our water. There wasn't any water on the campus. It was the boys' job to carry the water. We had water buckets. We had 2 water buckets. Four boys would go off and bring back 2 water buckets full of water. Everybody had to carry their own cup. I don't know if you have ever seen those little folding cups. They would close up and you put a top on it, fold it up and carry it in your pocket. You didn't have a public drinking cup. They had one there for anyone who wanted to drink out of it.

In the hall, we had 2 rooms this way and 2 rooms that way, and in the hall we had a piano. One of the teachers would play a march. We had to line up outside when the bell rang and we would all march in. When the boys brought the water in, they would spill water on the bench. Evidently, she wouldn't look and she would go and sit down in that water every time. Every day she would sit down in that water. The boys would get a big kick out of the teacher sitting down in the water. We had some mean boys back in our days. Mischievous, I guess you would say.

SS: Did you have a lot of homework?

BB: Yes. We had a lot of homework. And you know what we didn't have any electric lights in Diboll back in my early years. When they did put in electric lights, they just hung from the ceiling, you know. It was very dim, but it looked awfully bright to us because we had those old lamps before. We had to study at night. There were three of us children and we studied around this big round dining table. Me, being the oldest I had to help those two younger ones get their lessons—math or whatever they had. We had school every night at home. We would get our math, English or history or whatever.

SS: Did you have a lot of different subjects in school?

BB: About the same--well, we didn't have as many as you have now. We had arithmetic, English, reading and geography and science. I guess we had nearly every thing you do, basically.

SS: Did all the kids go to one classroom to have class?

BB: Everybody in one grade. Sometimes there would be different age groups. Each grade stayed together. There would be 15 to 20 in a grade. All the way from seven year olds to ten in the first grade. We didn't start until 7. I went to kindergarten. My birthday was in December and I could not start that year. Mama sent me to private kindergarten.

SS: Was the grading system harder? Did they grade harder than they do now?

BB: Well, it seemed they did. Seemed like they expected more out of us than they do children today. Our lives revolved around the school, you know. In that little town there was nothing but the church and school. Our activities were either at the church or the school. There wasn't anything else to do.

SS: Were there any extra-curricular activities at the school? Did they have ball games?

BB: They started that about my tenth grade. They started volleyball and basketball. I was on the basketball team. We wore big bloomers that bloused way down here. Do you know what bloomers are?

SS: No, I don't think so.

BB: They were big, blousy pants with elastic in them and you pulled them up to your knees.

SS: Did you compete with other schools?

BB: Burke. Play day sometime. Usually we just played. We didn't have anything back in my younger days. We were just beginning to as we grew up. The kids who could afford it, went away to school, anyway when they got old enough. In this graduating class of mine, the Superintendent had two children. The man who had the jewelry store had a son in it. The lady who ran the boarding house had a daughter in it. They were pretty well-to-do people. The rest of our fathers were just laborers. We couldn't afford to go to school anyway.

SS: Where would they go when they went to school?

BB: Well, just different places. Some of them went to San Antonio, whatever that school is out there. There was a Hockaday School somewhere that a girl went to.

SS: I really do thank you for talking to me.

END OF INTERVIEW