

BURLON WILKERSON

Interview 194a

May 11, 2010 at The History Center, Diboll, Texas

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Patsy Colbert, Burlon Wilkerson reminisces about growing up in Diboll, going to school during the racial integration process, and teaching at Diboll High School during times of racial tension. He mentions that there were no incidents during the integration process, and that while his parents and others in the white community may not have fully supported the idea, they knew it was going to happen and accepted it as inevitable. Mr. Wilkerson mentions several students and teachers from his time as a DHS student, including Zenova Scott, Johnny Jones, Mr. Massey, Mr. Ramsey, Bob McCurry, and Fred Douglas. He also mentions the heightened racial tensions after he became a Speech and English teacher at Diboll High School, particularly in the mid-1970's.

Patsy Colbert (hereafter PC): Today's date is May 11th, I'm Patsy Colbert and I'm at The History Center with Burlon Wilkerson. I'm going to interview Mr. Wilkerson today about integration at Diboll Public Schools. Mr. Wilkerson, just to get us started, if you will just tell me when and where you were born.

Burlon Wilkerson (hereafter BW): I was born in Houston in 1950.

PC: Okay and when did you come to Diboll?

BW: We moved here when I was six years old.

PC: Okay.

BW: That was before I was old enough to go to school, but I was six.

PC: And so did you attend...so you started to school in Diboll?

BW: Yes, I started first grade in Diboll.

PC: Okay. I saw in the annual where you graduated in 1969.

BW: Right.

PC: Tell me about going to school here. And our main focus today is about integration of Diboll Schools. And just for the record, 1965 was the year of Freedom of Choice.

BW: I couldn't remember what year that started.

PC: Yeah, in '65. In 1966 they ended the athletic program at H. G. Temple High School and the male seniors came over to the Diboll white school. 1967 the high school was fully integrated and Fall of '68 was full integration.

BW: Okay.

PC: So, tell me when you were in school and what grade you were in when integration took place and how you come to know about integration.

BW: Well, with those years I guess I would have been a freshman when we started. I didn't remember it being...I thought I was a junior because I really don't remember many of the students coming over to our school until I was a junior. I guess maybe they weren't in my classes or I wasn't associated with those that had come in '66-67 until early '68 and then '69.

PC: So really until your junior year. I did look back at the annuals to see how many students were there your senior year, and according to the annuals there were 16 black students your senior year. Your freshman year would have been the first year of Freedom of Choice and there were no black students at the high school. They only had one black student, Valerie Anderson, to go to first grade in the first year of Freedom of Choice. And then, your sophomore year, '66-67, there were two black students, boys I believe, at the campus.

BW: At the high school?

PC: Yes sir, at the high school. Then, your junior year '67-68 was the year they integrated the high school. Do you remember anything about that year, your junior year when the blacks would have come over?

BW: I really don't remember very much except that everybody that I associated with was very nice. I had never met any of those students, and they were extremely easy to get along with and respectful to everybody as far as I could tell. So that is the main thing that I remember I guess from my junior and senior year was that we just seemed to have a really good group.

PC: Good. Had you been around black children or students of the black race before integration?

BW: No, no black children. My daddy had a barber shop and he had a man who shined shoes for him, a black man. He was an older man. I had been around him some, and other than that I really didn't have much contact with black folks.

PC: Okay. What about your first knowledge of integration going to take place?

BW: Well, I guess we talked about it at home. I'm sure we had. I don't remember specific conversations and I'm sure that my parents probably were opposed to it in

general. Because they are from the south and they're from East Texas, and that was something you didn't do. The races stayed separate and I don't remember anything ever derogatory ever being said, but it seems that the atmosphere in my home was that this was not the thing to do.

PC: So you just knew from overhearing conversation that was how your parents felt about it. Was there any conversation of what you should or shouldn't do at school?

BW: I don't remember anything, no. I don't even remember even discussing integration with my parents as far as school is concerned. I guess I came in and talked about the new students that were there, but I don't remember any specific conversations about it. So, I suppose it was just fairly mundane.

PC: Right. Is that how you learned about integration going to take place? Or, do you remember how you became aware that it was going to happen?

BW: I don't remember specifically. I know we talked about it at school because we did current events and those kinds of things. We had our history classes and I'm sure we discussed it, but I really don't remember a specific time when there was a discussion about the concept.

PC: So at home you don't really remember your parents having a discussion about integration and do's or don'ts?

BW: No, not really.

PC: Or thoughts or instructions?

BW: No, the general idea was that they would not be in favor of it.

PC: Right. How did your parents react to integration actually taking place?

BW: I don't remember any specific reactions. I don't know that I ever heard them be vehemently opposed to anything or say anything particular about any particular person. I think it was just the concept was that they had grown up with separation and they just weren't ready for integration.

PC: Right, and that is just the way they were raised and it doesn't mean...

BW: That is all they knew.

PC: That is all they knew. That is right. And how did you feel personally about integration?

BW: As far as a personal feeling I don't know that I had a specific stand or position on it. I'm guessing, now it's been a long time ago, (laughter) but I'm guessing that probably

I felt the same way as my parents did. Because my parents and I always got along pretty well together and we still see things about the same way and I suspect that I probably felt about the same way they did as far as that it wasn't the thing that I would be in favor of. Also, I felt like it was something that I probably could not stop and I didn't try to, and I didn't try to express that view as far as I can remember. It was just, 'this is going to happen and okay we will live with it'.

PC: You just accepted it and made the best of it. Well, it's pretty common that as children we are molded by our parents, so we tend to have the same views on a lot of things growing up especially, as our parents had. Can you remember having class in those first years, especially your junior year and senior year, and having class with black students and how the classroom was – if everybody got along?

BW: I don't ever remember any problems in those years. Now later on after I became a teacher I do, and we might want to get to that later.

PC: Okay.

BW: As far as while I was in school I don't remember particular problems. I'm sure there were times when there were individual problems. I can't tell you a name but I know there were times when a white and a black boy got in a fight together. It wasn't so much of an integration color thing it was just two boys got in a fight and that is kind of the way we saw it.

PC: Just a typical school day, two boys get in a fight, didn't mean it was a racial issue.

BW: I don't remember it being.

PC: Did you make new friends with the black students?

BW: Yes, not close friends. I never did associate closely with any of the students. Many of them were involved in sports and I was not.

PC: Okay.

BW: So that kept me from being closely associated with them. I did FFA and I did some UIL one act play and that kind of thing and we had very few blacks involved in those activities that I was involved in. So, it was mainly just class and I really didn't get to be close friends with anybody.

PC: Just your circle of friends was in different activities.

BW: I guess when I was a senior I worked on the yearbook. It seems like that we had one black girl who worked on the yearbook also. I don't remember if that is the case or not. We would have to go back and look in the yearbook and see.

PC: I believe you're referring to Zenova Scott.

BW: That could be it.

PC: I looked in the yearbook this morning actually.

BW: If she was on that staff then we worked together some and I would probably...

PC: I believe she was. She actually was very involved.

BW: I would probably been more...closer to her than any of the others.

PC: She was the fourth ranking senior for '68-69, class of '69, your graduating class. I saw where you actually were valedictorian for the senior class and she was the fourth ranking student. So, she was very smart and you might have had dealings with her in certain classes due to your interest and everything. I believe she was on the annual staff.

BW: I think that is probably right.

PC: Your senior year, there were four black students to graduate, the first year of full integration that year. Now prior to that, your junior year, '67-68 which would have been the first year of high school integration, which included the girls and the boys, not just the athletic program but the girls and the boys, there were a total of 16 black students your junior year. But, then your senior year there were only four. Do you recall anything about what happened to those students? Did they just quit or was there any reason?

BW: No idea.

PC: No idea.

BW: I didn't even know that.

PC: I thought that was very interesting statistics there.

BW: I just remember Zenova and there was another girl, was her name Darlene?

PC: Yes.

BW: And Roy I believe was one of the boys and Johnny Jones.

PC: Yes.

BW: That is about all I remember. There was one more boy. What was his name? Was his last name Scott? But, those are the ones I remember. That is really all I remember.

PC: Okay. Do you have any recollection of how your fellow students or your friends felt about integration?

BW: No, I can't remember any discussions or conversations with any specific person.

PC: Well, that is good. It probably means that it didn't really happen or if it did it wasn't a big issue.

BW: It wasn't a big thing.

PC: It wasn't anything that left a lasting impression.

BW: It didn't on me anyhow. I can remember three or four guys in my class that we had gone to school together quite a few years. And, I can remember, now I would say they were prejudice. And I don't know that I remember any specific conversations or anything it was just looking back now I would think 'they really had a lot of prejudice in those days.' But, I don't remember, you know, any kind of problems or stirring up anything. I don't remember anything like that.

PC: You don't remember any incidents that happened at school, good or bad, due to integration?

BW: I don't remember it.

PC: Okay.

BW: I told you I was old and I couldn't remember. (laughing)

PC: Do you know how the blacks reacted to integration those first years that they came over to the high school? Do you have recollection of how they reacted to the situation?

BW: The thing that I remember the most I guess was that I felt like the ones who came first had been picked on purpose. I believe Mr. Massey, who was the principal at the Temple School had chosen certain ones to come first. And, I always got the impression that he had chosen people who had personalities that would be easy to get along with and it seemed to go very well. I think that Mr. Massey and Mr. Ramsey had worked together on deciding who was going to come first and how it was going to go. Because they took it slow and they didn't just throw us all in the pond and say sink or swim it seemed to work very well.

PC: Okay. That could have been the reason for maybe doing it a little bit at a time. You know, the Freedom of Choice; but with the high school and bringing the athletic boys and they really integrated that athletic program.

BW: That is the way I understood that it happened. Now, I don't know where I got my information. But, I always understood it was Freedom of Choice, but we are going to choose you!

PC: Okay. Do you remember anything specific about the football team that year? It seems they did have a good year. Do you recall just the sports itself, how it was...?

BW: I was not involved in sports at all. I had friends that were, but I wasn't and I didn't pay attention. I didn't go to the games.

PC: Okay. Before integration what was your experiences as far as being around the black race or the black community?

BW: I was scared! My daddy, like I said, had the guy that worked for him at the barber shop. But I can remember times when we would go to the Quarters. One of the times I remember most was that he had killed some hogs. He was hunting and he had killed some hogs and he had dressed and saved what all he wanted and he took the heads to the Quarters where the black folks lived to give to someone who might want them over there. I remember going with him to do that. I must have been eight, nine, ten, probably less than twelve anyhow, when that happened. And anytime we drove over to that part of town it was always kind of scary because we didn't associate. You heard stories about other races and what they might do and so it was always with a little bit of apprehension that I went into that part of town. That day I remember we drove the pickup over there and I was sitting in the back of the pickup and we had the hog heads that we were going to give to a lady over there. I believe it was the lady that the shoe shine guy lived with, I think. I have no idea what her name was or anything. But I believe he roomed at her house. And I remember taking them and she was just tickled to death. She loved getting those hog heads because she was going to use them. And, as far as the most vivid impression, that was the most vivid impressions of associations with black folks.

PC: Well that is neat. They were probably grateful to get the hog heads.

BW: In fact, that story we still use it in my family. The lady, one of her friends, came over from across the street or next door. She looked and she said, "Oh looks like we got some hog heads." And this lady said, "Yes I'm going to use them to make" whatever she was going to make. And, the friend said, "You going to share with me?" And she said, "No I'm not going to share with you." She said, "Well I'm your friend." And she said, "Friends is friends but meat is meat." (laughter) And she acted like she was not going to share with her.

PC: So, as far as your fears as a child and being around the black race, was probably just...would you say just due to an unknown territory?

BW: Exactly. It was just an unknown. I did not know how to associate with them because I didn't. And I heard adults talk about how bad other races were. Not my parents

necessarily, but other adults around that we associated with and I can remember them saying some mean things about other races.

PC: And, of course that would cause you to have some fears. Did the fears get better after integration and you were around black students?

BW: Oh yes, yes.

PC: Did you become comfortable with going to the Quarters? Did you go to the Quarters after that?

BW: I don't know if comfortable would be the word, (laughter) but less apprehensive.

PC: Okay. (laughter) So, what was a typical school day like in your high school days and let's say particularly during integration time? Was it any different than before integration?

BW: I can't think of any differences at all. We had six classes, they were fifty-five minutes apiece. We went fifty-five minutes, five minute break, fifty-five minutes. I don't remember any changes.

PC: Did you have any black teachers in high school?

BW: No, no. Now, Mr. Massey who came over from the Temple School when we went to full integration became the assistant principal.

PC: Right.

BW: He was the only one.

PC: How did you get along with him?

BW: Fine, he was real laid back and real quite.

PC: Yes, I always liked him and respected him a lot.

BW: He was still there when I started teaching.

PC: Okay. And tell me about as a teacher how things might have changed from being a student and dealing with black students and being a teacher and dealing with the black race.

BW: I felt a lot more...I don't know what you'd call it, not responsibility but a lot more pressure maybe after I became teacher. Because, then I was the one who had to referee these tensions. And, it seemed to me that there were more tensions after I began teaching than there was when I was a student. I started teaching in Diboll in '73, Sept of '73 I

believe, and about the next three years, three or four years after that, '74, '75, '76, we had some pretty tough times. And, a lot of it had to do with race.

PC: Okay. Let's back up just a second and tell me about, you graduated in 1969, tell me about your college education and your educational level.

BW: Okay, I went to SFA. I stayed at home and lived with my parents here in Diboll and drove back and forth to SFA for four years and got my bachelors degree. And before I even got my degree, before I graduated, I had already been hired at Diboll.

PC: Okay.

BW: I was doing student teaching in Lufkin and Frank Latimar told me there was an opening for a speech teacher in Diboll. And I didn't intend to be a teacher. I was just getting my certificate just in case I ever changed my mind. And I knew if I didn't check on the job he was going to ask me and he was giving me my grade so I came and asked them about it and they interviewed me, called me back for a second interview and hired me, actually before I got my diploma. And so, I came here immediately after I graduated with my bachelor's degree.

PC: That is great, so September '73.

BW: I believe it was September '73.

PC: You graduated and began teaching that fall at Diboll ISD as a speech teacher?

BW: Speech and English.

PC: Speech and English okay. And, how long did you work for Diboll ISD?

BW: Twenty-six years.

PC: Okay. And, where do you work now?

BW: Angelina College.

PC: Okay. Tell me about those years that you referred to after you became a teacher at Diboll, the years '73, '74, and '76. What do remember about that time that you think was due to some racial issues?

BW: We had some pretty dangerous times. There were some people in school at that time and I don't know if it had to do with the difference in society or if it was just who was there. I don't know. But we had some people, boys and girls, who were very outspoken and very confrontational and very prejudiced. There were some pretty scary times. I can remember after my first year, I was moved out of the main building out to a portable classroom outside to just a single classroom which had been an Ag classroom.

They moved me out there because I was teaching a drama class and I was making too much noise up by the principal's office so they moved me out there by myself. And I can remember watching out the window and seeing groups around on the campus making pretty scary...there were fights. I can remember one day being able to see the parking lot and a guy went to his pick up and got his rifle out and took it in the school. I had students in my room at that point and there was a white guy that had the gun. There were some black students in my room ready to go get him. And I stood in the door and I said, "You are not leaving this room." And there were more of them than me and they were bigger and tougher than me but, I was able to bluff them and say, "You can't get out of here; you're going to have to come over me to get out of this door." There was only one door to get out of the room.

PC: Right.

BW: But I was able to keep them from leaving the room. As soon as the class was over with and they were dismissed they took off and were headed to where all the commotion was but, I was able to keep them through the class period.

PC: I actually remember that particular incident that you are speaking of. I was in the high school at Diboll during that time. I believe it was '74 or '75 because I was out of school by '75. I don't remember what it stemmed from.

BW: I don't either.

PC: But, I just remember it being more like a riot type situation and it was the blacks against the whites, but I don't remember what it started from. It was a pretty scary day. You're the first person that I've interviewed that has remembered anything close to it. Like I say, I don't know what it stirred from either.

BW: I don't either but, it seemed like, there for several days there had been unrest.

PC: Yes.

BW: Again, I don't know what caused it or what started it. I really think it was individuals who just were biased, prejudiced and mouthy and stirred up some things and got more people involved in it. It wasn't a very comfortable time.

PC: Right, yes I'm sure.

BW: In fact, I really think that is the reason we started having spring breaks.

PC: Oh really.

BW: Because, that was close to spring time and they wanted everybody to have some time to cool off. And they let us out for spring break and it caught on and they started doing it every year.

PC: Oh, really. That is interesting.

BW: Now I can't prove that, if I'm not mistaken. I would like to go back and look and see when spring break started, when we started having spring breaks. Because we always had a day for Easter and that was it. But at some point we started having a week and I'm not...if I'm not mistaken, it was about that time when we started doing that.

PC: Well that is interesting.

BW: You might look up the history on that and see when Diboll schools started having a week off for spring break.

PC: I do remember, you're right, I do remember a couple of days there that there was a lot of concern. And I remember coming to school being fearful of what was going to take place that day.

BW: And there were parents that wouldn't let their children come to school.

PC: Yes, that is right. There was a lot of absenteeism going on, that is for sure. Do you remember any experiences that you had in the community going to the grocery store, or the Dairy Kream, or the picture show, or anything like that during your high school years, during those integration years? Any problems outside of school?

BW: No, I don't remember any problems. Now, you're talking about when I was a student again right?

PC: Yes.

BW: No, I don't remember because we didn't have blacks at the Dairy Kream. I can remember one time when the owner of the Dairy Kream pistol whipped a black man. And I don't know why. I don't remember the details about it but, I remember the stories about how he had beaten the guy.

PC: Stories that you heard from adults.

BW: Yes. I don't know if he had come up into town or if it was somewhere else I don't remember that part. But I don't remember much association because very few of the black folks came to the grocery store or Dairy Kream or something like that.

PC: Right.

BW: I'm sure they did, but I just don't remember it.

PC: Do you think that your high school years as a student and the integration years from '65 through '69 were...that it was a pretty easy transition overall?

BW: It was for me, yes. I guess my parents, when they realized what was going on, that they wanted to emphasize the Christian viewpoint, or stand point. They knew that you shouldn't mistreat anybody and I guess after they realized that integration was going to become the norm, they didn't want to do anything that would be wrong. And I'm suspecting that is why I felt like it was fairly easy to transition. It wasn't like they were constantly griping and mouthing...

PC: Okay.

BW: ...and saying this should have been done and carrying on and on. I knew where they stood, but after it became a reality they didn't want to cause trouble and they realized it was just part of life.

PC: And you saw them take a positive attitude toward it and respect the situation and move on.

BW: Yes, and I never saw them disrespect anybody before integration. Don't tell them I said this, but I suspect that they probably, I don't know if this is right, but looked down on other races. That might not be a good word, but they...because of their upbringing. Again, it goes back to when they were kids.

PC: Right, it's just the way they were brought up.

BW: You know when they were brought up that is, what they were taught. And when they got to be adults I'm sure it was hard to quit feeling those things because they had been taught that way for 25 years or more.

PC: That is right.

BW: And so, I don't think that they ever did mistreat anybody, but I do think that they probably were biased against other races. But after we did find out that integration was going to be a reality I think they wanted to do the right thing.

PC: And you know that goes both ways for the black race as well. They were taught that way, that is what they were used to and it was a very difficult transition for them and the younger generation that is just all they knew, what their parents had taught them. And the same way with the white children, whatever your parents had taught you that is what you knew. And that is what makes it what it is, and everybody's experience is unique to their own and we can't change that. That is what it is. Did you have a favorite teacher in school?

BW: In high school? Oh, I don't know. Bob McCurry was always great in Ag you know. I learned a lot from him because I wasn't a farm person. I didn't really like messing with the animals and all that much, but he taught me a lot. I felt like that I really learned a lot from him about life and not just Ag. I think that he did that on purpose because he saw the need for a lot of students to get some teaching and training other than just how to

work with cows or how to work with wood, whatever. So, I enjoyed being around him. Fred Douglas was a good teacher and of course they were both still teaching when I started teaching. And so, I really kind of looked to them to mentor me and to help me through that getting started because that is rough.

PC: Those first years.

BW: In those first years. I don't know if you call them favorite teachers or not, but I really respected them because of what they could do.

PC: Especially as mentors and maybe just left that lasting impression of their teaching skills on you. Well I've heard that Mr. McCurry and of course, he was there when I was in high school as well, but with the boys he was quite a disciplinary.

BW: Very much! I still use him as an example for not letting people sleep in class. (laughter) He would slam a book beside their ear.

PC: Is it working for you? (laughter)

BW: I can't do that now. I wish I could. (laughter)

PC: Did you ever have any experience of going to the H.G. Temple campus before integration?

BW: I don't remember it. I don't think so.

PC: Okay. As far as Diboll Day is concerned we know from the records that the H.G. Temple School and the black community had their own Diboll Day activities and had Diboll Day queens. We have a '62 and '64 photo of the Diboll Day queens for the black community. Do you remember anything about that process and how they went about having their own Diboll Day events?

BW: I just remember they had their activities over in the Walter Allen Park and the whites had theirs in Whispering Pines or whatever it was.

PC: Was it the same event, Diboll Day in the same day?

BW: Yes, but I don't think that the black community chose queens the same way. I don't know. But, I got the idea it was the same celebration, the same...I think it was the same day. I could be wrong about that. But I always thought it was that they just had their activities in the other part of town.

PC: Okay, because we do have those photographs, a couple of photos in the early sixties of the black queens and what division they were and who was representing them, you know. But, we've never been able to find out much information about their celebration.

BW: I don't know if it was like a money celebration thing like ours was or not. I really don't know.

PC: Did you have any dealings with any of these other students your junior or senior year besides Zenova, any student that you had class with? I don't remember if we discussed that.

BW: Johnny Jones, I want to say Roy Levias, but I'm not sure his last name was Levias. I can't remember.

PC: There was a Roy Levias.

BW: I believe they were in my class. I remember being in class with them, English class or whatever, and that is all I remember.

PC: Were there ever any incidents with the teachers and the black students in any problem area?

BW: I don't remember any, not when I was in school, I don't remember any.

PC: Okay. You were at the school as a teacher here for Diboll ISD for twenty-six years. What was your reason for leaving?

BW: Oh, several reasons. My youngest daughter graduated and there had been several changes in administration just before that. I was very unhappy with the administration at that point.

PC: Okay.

BW: And, at that time when my daughter graduated, and that was my last one here. At the same time somebody from Hudson called me and said, "We wish you would come over here." I knew the lady and she said, "We've got an English position over here and we would like for you to come." And she said, "I think you'll like it over here." And so, because of the other problems, I think if I hadn't had the other problems I never would have considered it, but because I was pretty unhappy doing what I was and having to deal with the people I was having to deal with I considered it. And, I went over there and they hired me and I went over there for two years. I was at Hudson for two years. While I was there the full time position came open at AC [Angelina College]. I was doing part time nights and summers while I was at Hudson. I was teaching nights and summer classes at AC and enjoying it, and really liking it up there.

PC: Well good.

BW: Then when the full time position came available I applied for it and was able to go there and I've loved it.

PC: Good, that is great. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us today about your high school days as a student or your teaching days at Diboll ISD?

BW: No, I don't guess. I've always thought Diboll schools were some of the best. I didn't leave because I thought they were bad schools. I'm not necessarily sad that I left because where I am now I love it!

PC: That is great.

BW: But, I've always felt like we had good schools and I felt like in general, all except those few years I was telling you about, the administrators and the teachers have had the best interest of the students at heart. They have always tried to do what was best. I think that was what happened during integration. I think the teachers wanted to do what was best for students, and because of that I think they really tried to make everything work. They didn't play people against one another and they didn't treat people differently. From what I can remember all the teachers when I was a high school student were very fair and consistent in the way they taught everybody. I never saw any difference and I never saw anybody letting the black students slide and I didn't see them trying to make it harder on them either.

PC: Right.

BW: I just felt like that the teachers did a good job of saying students are students. And I felt like that was a real plus and I think that was one of the things that made it all work easily.

PC: Great. Well it seems overall that it was a very smooth process and there just wasn't any big problems in those first years like some other schools had.

BW: From what I can remember, and hearing news reports and reading things and hearing people talk about other schools, we were real smooth compared to a lot of places.

PC: Right, just some later years some tension and things going on. Well, Mr. Wilkerson I thank you today for joining us and helping us on this part of our history here at The History Center.

BW: Well, I hope it helped some.

PC: Thank you again.

BW: Don't know if you'll get much out of it or not.

PC: Oh we will.

END OF INTERVIEW