

JOHNNY GAMBRELL, JR.

Interview 203a

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Patsy Colbert, Interviewer

Patsy Colbert, Transcriber

ABSTRACT: In this interview with Patsy Colbert, Diboll native Johnny Gambrell reminisces about growing up in Diboll as an African American and experiencing segregation and then integration. He started school at the segregated H.G. Temple School and then graduated from the integrated Diboll High School in 1970. Mr. Gambrell talks about race relations before and after integration, high school sports, Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Massey, Diboll Day, and Juneteenth.

Patsy Colbert (hereafter PC): Today's date is June 26, 2010. I'm Patsy Colbert and I'm here at The History Center with Reverend Johnny Gambrell, Jr. Mr. Gambrell attended H. G. Temple School and was on the last H. G. Temple Tiger football team. So we are going to talk about H. G. Temple School and this is part of our ongoing project of integration history of the Diboll school system. So Mr. Gambrell if you could, just tell me when and where you were born.

Johnny Gambrell (hereafter JG): I was born in Diboll, Texas in 1950.

PC: Okay, and who are your parents?

JG: Johnny and Sammie Gambrell.

PC: Okay, and what did your father do for a living?

JG: He worked at the sawmill.

PC: Did your mother work?

JG: Yes, she worked at the chicken poultry in Lufkin.

PC: Okay, and can you share with me your educational background.

JG: Well my educational background I started elementary school at H. G. Temple and then I went to the tenth grade and the eleventh and twelfth year I went to Diboll High School and I got my diploma in 1970.

PC: And what year did you graduate?

JG: In 1970.

PC: 1970 okay, and you graduated from Diboll High School you said?

JG: Right.

PC: So you were actually attending H. G. Temple School during the time of integration?

JG: First integration, yes.

PC: You mentioned to me earlier that you had played on the last Temple Tiger football team, so what activities did you participate in at H. G. Temple?

JG: Football, just football and track.

PC: Football and track, okay. And, so you were under Mr. Massey?

JG: Right.

PC: What do you remember about him?

JG: We would call him Professor. He was a great man. I never forget he told me...I had a bad habit of going in and trying to mock him when he wasn't in his class. One day he said, "Young man you are going to find out that there is someone in the world look just like you and have your same name." And, it was true. And, what I loved about Mr. Massey he always wanted us to strive to do better. He was a brilliant man, he was smart, he was intelligent, he wasn't in a hurry about doing a lot of stuff but, he took his time. I learned from Mr. Massey that patience, patience. Then I was young in school but I wanted to get in a hurry but the older I got the wiser I got. I learned a lot from Mr. Massey, Willie Massey. As a matter of fact during the summer months when we was out of school we bailed hay for Mr. Willie Massey. Charles Smith, and Bobby Jones, and the gentleman we called June Bug Hunt, we bailed hay for Mr. Massey during the summer on his farm in Nigton.

PC: Make a little summer money?

JG: Right, right.

PC: Well I understand he was from Nigton and spent a lot of time over there as well.

JG: Right, he had a farm there.

PC: Like I said earlier, our focus of this oral history project particularly is the integration history and the desegregation history of H. G. Temple School and the Diboll Schools. So, to get to that could you tell me what race relations you experienced in Diboll?

JG: Well, at first the first thing we experienced coming over is that it was hard for us to adjust sitting in an environment where you was in a classroom. Now, you have a setting where you have a white teacher, it's not like playing with them. Because see, I grew up

playing with Mr. Sammy Drake. I don't know if you know Mr. Drake. He had a little store over there across from the track and I grew up playing with his son. Well, when you are sitting in a classroom it was a lot different. It was a lot of negative on both sides and when you coming to school people look at you and say wow, you are different. Yes, we are different in color but inside we are not different. And, that had a bearing for a minute but it didn't last long.

PC: So once you started attending school at the Diboll High School did you have any fears of going to the white school and being integrated?

JG: Well not exactly fear, I wouldn't say fear but, you didn't know what to expect.

PC: Okay. How were you treated when you started attending the Diboll High School?

JG: Well some of the, some of the young people that I went to school with, some of them was kind of harsh but, then after they found out who we really was and what we were all about and Mr. Ramsey, I want to take my hat off to that man. I know he is no longer here but, Mr. Ramsey is the reason I graduated from school.

PC: Oh, that is wonderful.

JG: I was going to quit school. I was really going to quit but, Mr. Ramsey insist Gambrell you get your diploma.

PC: Oh, you don't forget things like that.

JG: No, I don't forget. Mr. Ramsey was the reason why I got my diploma.

PC: Well that is good.

JG: Because I was going to quit school.

PC: Do you think after, like you mentioned after a little while they realized you were just a normal person that you made new friends?

JG: Yes I did. As a matter of fact one of my good friends was David Wimp, Arthur Temple's stepson. I was able to ride in the car with David. I would go to David's house and sit down and eat dinner with Mr. Arthur Temple.

PC: And, you were treated well?

JG: I was treated well.

PC: Good, well you know, Diboll being a unique town the Temple family has always been very gracious and always been fair from what we understand.

JG: From what I experienced, from what I experienced.

PC: Most of the experiences that we have heard are that they were good to both communities and really worked hard to make it one unique community. Which, I think they succeeded at that. What was your first knowledge of integration going to take place, do you remember?

JG: My first knowledge...well to be honest and tell you the truth we didn't know what to expect. We didn't know why we was being integrated. Nobody really sat down and explained to us why this integration was taking place. All we knew was hey, they going to shut this school down and we are going to integrate.

PC: Okay.

JG: Nobody really just sit down and told us why we doing this for what purpose.

PC: Okay, so you just come to know about it through the talk within the community.

JG: Well, I mean, they had said that they was going to integrate the schools. But, as far as us having a town hall meeting bringing everybody together saying this is what we want to do, no they never did. If they did I wasn't aware of it.

PC: Okay, and how did your parents feel about the integration process? Do you recall?

JG: Well, they didn't make a big fuss about it. They just said go to school and do what you supposed to do and if there's any problem then we have to address those problems.

PC: I'm sure they encouraged you I guess to make the best of the situation.

JG: Yes, they did.

PC: Were you completely opposed to the integration?

JG: At first because I was going to say hey, if you look at this we were a knit family. We loved our coaches, we loved our teachers, the players we grew up together.

PC: Right.

JG: And, you know by us losing those coaches we say what is going to happen now, you know.

PC: Right. Now we know you were on the Temple Tigers football team and we are looking at a photograph here now of 1966 H. G. Temple Tigers [65-66]. This was the last football team?

JG: Right.

PC: And we also know from the records that in '65 they had freedom of choice and there was one student to go to the elementary school. We also know that in '66 the school board voted to end the athletic program of the H. G. Temple High School. Do you recall anything about that situation?

JG: I remember Coach Seal calling us all in, you know, calling all the football players in and had a meeting and said that this is going to be the last year for us as a group of football; they are fixing to integrate the school. I can't remember all the details but I remember him calling all the football players in a meeting. What was all said in the meeting, but I do remember that he said this is the last year for the football team.

PC: And then the male seniors were...attended the Diboll High School in '66. The seniors went over to play football...

JG: Right.

PC: ...because they had ended the athletic program. We also found in the newspaper articles that the coaches actually had resigned and were leaving and so Mr. Massey approached the school board about integrating the football team because he was concerned if they didn't offer football some of the students wouldn't stay in school. That was their motivation, they loved to play sports and he didn't want to lose them. So, he actually approached the school board about that. Then the seniors attended that year in '66.

JG: Right the seniors attended and then also...

PC: Just for the record though, the seniors went even though you played football for the Temple Tigers you did not go to the white school in 66-67 to play football.

JG: No, but we played football. We played on the B team.

PC: Okay, tell me about that.

JG: It was...I believe the man's name was Mr. Greer, it's in history. I don't know where about, but we enjoyed it. We would come over and practice with them and we would go on games but my sophomore year I was still going to school there but I played on the B Team.

PC: Okay, okay. So, you were a sophomore at H. G. Temple but you came and played sports with the B team...

JG: Yes, Roy Levias...

PC: Under Mr. Greer.

JG: Yes, Roy Levias, Bobby Jones, Jessie James and myself.

PC: Okay.

JG: Willie Smith...

PC: Okay, and then the next year...

JG: Ervin Moses, we came over and played.

PC: And played on the b team?

JG: Right.

PC: But, just the senior boys from H. G. Temple came over to Diboll High School and attended school and played.

JG: Right, right.

PC: The rest of the football team stayed at H.G. Temple and just played sports.

JG: Just played sports.

PC: Okay, I didn't know that. That is great.

JG: Yes.

PC: And we know that in the fall of '67 they integrated all of the high school. So, that would have been the year you came to Diboll High School?

JG: Right.

PC: Okay, how was that transition? You talked a little bit about it earlier but, anything else you want to share about that first year of coming to Diboll High School?

JG: Well the first year I guess the first, I guess it wasn't so bad because we was playing on the football team. But then, you know, we wasn't in the classroom we was on a football field. But, now we are into the classroom and the first three or four months we had to get adjusted.

PC: Right, right.

JG: We had to get adjusted to what we were accustomed to over there we weren't accustomed to over here. So, you know, you are going into a transition.

PC: You had a little bit of a transition because you were around the white community playing sports with the white boys so that was a little bit of a change but it was still in a different setting than the structured classroom setting.

JG: Right because now, you know, you are coming from being under Mr. Massey to being under Mr. Ramsey, you know. So now the setting is different.

PC: Okay, how about the teachers, were there any teachers that you had that first year that you remember that you want to share anything about?

JG: You know what? The only teacher that I really, really, really liked was Mr. Foster Wood, he was over what you called Building and Trades.

PC: What was his name again?

JG: I believe it was Mr. Frost or Forest.

PC: Oh, Mr. Forest, Hogue Forest.

JG: Yes, that is him. He, now that gentleman there he didn't mind going that extra mile to help us. Now, some of the other teachers were fine, but that gentleman right there I learned a lot from him.

PC: Okay, well that is wonderful. He was a great man.

JG: He didn't mind going the extra mile.

PC: Now as far as the H. G. Temple School and then the Diboll High School could you compare the facilities for me and what you remember specific about the building? Was there anything that stood out to you?

JG: Yes, I'm going to be honest and tell you the truth. See, when I was at the black school we would get things from the white school what the white children had had. Like the leftovers.

PC: Like used books and things?

JG: Right, right because when I got a book it would be like forty names done been in that book already. But, then when we get over here everything is new. Where over there you got something new but it was far and few between but over here everything was new. Go back to when we was playing sports, we were amazed at all of the things we was getting here that we didn't get there.

PC: Okay, name something particular.

JG: You know like you getting brand new shoes, football shoes. Every year you get brand new this and that and when we was at the black school a lot of times we didn't get all that new. We had to get what was left and handed down.

PC: Right, okay. That was quite a change then.

JG: It was a big change.

PC: What about like other equipment say...what other equipment did y'all have on the school grounds? Did y'all have like in elementary school your playground equipment?

JG: We had swings but it wasn't ninety percent like that came over here. Everything...we had the swings and see-saws and all but it wasn't like over here.

PC: Okay.

JG: See, they didn't build the gym at the black school until I was about in the eighth grade.

PC: '60 or '61.

JG: Okay, I knew it was something like that. I was about ten years old when they built that gym.

PC: Yes, that would be about right. And did you participate in basketball at H. G. Temple?

JG: No, just football and I ran a little track. No basketball.

PC: Oh that is right, okay. What do you remember as a good experience concerning integration?

JG: A good experience, a good experience concerning integration? The good experience that I learned in integration is when Mr. Ramsey took his arms around me and said "young man you can make it." Those two gentlemen Mr. Hogue and Mr. Ramsey I take my hat off to them.

PC: That is wonderful. We love Mr. Ramsey; he has a special place in my heart too.

JG: Did you go to school here?

PC: I went to school in Diboll, yes I sure did.

JG: What year?

PC: 1976, I would have graduated in '76.

JG: Okay, well Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Hogue.

PC: I loved Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Massey, I had Mr. Massey, “Fess,” we called him “Fess.”

JG: Yes, we called him “Fess”, that is what we called him “Fess”.

PC: I have great admiration for both gentlemen.

JG: They were very intelligent, you know, they didn’t believe in a whole lot of nonsense. They believed in you doing what you are supposed to do. And, I want to say this about Diboll, I can’t speak for other towns but, I can say this, I grew up here and I brought some people here from other towns to Diboll Day one time and they was amazed, they was shocked and overwhelmed to see how the black and whites was working together. I said, “Son, this ain’t something that just happened. This started when I was going to school here.”

PC: Right, right. Like I said earlier about the Temples and the community structure everybody really got along.

JG: You might not got along with everybody, but the majority of the people they come together.

PC: That is right. Now, did you ever hear or know of any incidents that were race related at school?

JG: The only time I was a junior. We had put in the high school, which was this high school back here, we had put on...we was going to have a dance that night and some white boys went and took the sign down and wrote on the back of it “KKK come get us.” And, we had a fight that day.

PC: Yes, I’m sure.

JG: We did, we had a fight that day. They called in the police and we had a fight that day.

PC: And that was your junior year which would have been in about ’69 I guess. You graduated in ’70, ’69 or ’68.

JG: Yes.

PC: How did the administration or the principals handle that?

JG: Well, they just called in the police, you know, because we were upset. That is the only incident that I can remember is when they did that. As a matter of fact that is when Martin Luther King had gotten killed.

PC: Oh okay, that same time frame.

JG: Right, right.

PC: What about any incidents that were race related in the community, non school related?

JG: I don't remember, you know, nobody came in the community and done nothing that I know of race related, if it was I didn't know anything about it.

PC: Okay.

JG: The big incident I had was when that happened. But, after that then it was, you know.

PC: What did you learn from the integration experience that may be long lasting that you've taken with you all these years?

JG: Well, I learned that no matter what color you are you can sit down and break bread with people, might not be your same color, but you can sit down and share ideas with them and break bread with them. You can learn from them and they can learn from you. And, that is what I learned, you know. I was able to mingle with a different culture of people who grew up on one side of the track and I grew up on the other side of the track. But, after awhile the track didn't make a difference. What I've learned, I've learned that no matter where you go in life no matter what you do in life the key is treating people right.

PC: That is right, that is wonderful. You probably had some good role models as well.

JG: I did, Mr. Willie Massey, Mr. Jeffero, Coach Seals, Coach Overstreet, Joe Wyatt and like I said a lot of times I didn't want to listen but, I did. And, when we had that reunion a couple of years ago, our class reunion, Coach Wyatt and Coach Simmons say "I'm proud of you."

PC: That is wonderful.

JG: But, it all starts at home what your parents instill in you.

PC: Well I couldn't help but think of your parents, as you were, you know, saying what you were sharing there with me. You know, you had good role models at home as parents that encouraged you to make the best of the situation. Seems like they weren't opposed to it, they just knew it was going to happen and they encouraged you to make the best of it. So, you had good role models as parents as well. What...how did your...back to the athletics for just a second, how did your other teammates feel about the integration

process of the athletic program or school in general? Do you remember anything about how they felt?

JG: Now, I can only speak for the ones I played with and like I said the senior boys that came over they told us said “man y’all come over and play ball.” Because we wasn’t...the senior boys, Johnny and Harold Phipps they mostly was, you know, we looked up to them because they was the leaders for us and we followed Johnny Jones and Harold Phipps. They was mostly the spokesman.

PC: Okay, and they really encouraged y’all to come on and play and give it a chance?

JG: Yes the sophomores, right, right.

PC: Would you say y’all were opposed to it at first and not really wanting to participate and then they encouraged you or...not to put thoughts or words into your...but...

JG: Well at first we probably wasn’t but, then they talked to us and we came over. We talked to the coaches and we came over.

PC: Good. Did you...do you remember anything about Juneteenth celebrations in Diboll?

JG: Yes, we had them down in Walter Allen Park. I remember we had the Ferris wheel and all that. It was real good. Back what they had the gentleman they called Big Jim Hall, he would D.J. and stuff like that right before integration.

PC: I haven’t heard of a Ferris wheel so that is kind of neat.

JG: Yes, I remember the Ferris wheel.

PC: Well good. You were just a kid?

JG: Right, yes, I remember we used to have the Juneteenth.

PC: Okay, what about Diboll Day, do you remember?

JG: Yes, I remember when I was in elementary school I rode in the parade.

PC: Okay, in elementary?

JG: In Diboll Day, yes. We had what they called a king and a queen and Mrs. Sibley, I rode on her truck, me and Bobbie Joe Ligon. I was the king and she was the queen.

PC: Do you remember what year that was or how old you were?

JG: No, I know I rode on Mrs. Sibley’s car.

PC: You were elementary age?

JG: Right.

PC: So, that would be around 1958 or '60.

JG: I don't know.

PC: Well we know from some newspaper articles that '62 which your sister, Johnnie Mae, was a queen candidate and then '64 they had black Diboll Day queen candidates. So, we know in those early years they had segregated activities but one parade. And you remember riding in this parade?

JG: Yes, in Mrs. Sibley's car.

PC: And that was the main Diboll Day parade with the whites and the blacks included?

JG: Yes, I don't know how they had it but, I know I was riding in the parade on Mrs. Sibley's car.

PC: Okay, and it wasn't a separate parade? It was one big parade?

JG: I don't know, I don't know it might have...I don't know.

PC: Okay, and what were you representing, king and queen of?

JG: Something like that because I remember Mrs. Sibley saying "you got a suit" you know, "cause we want to put you in" and I remember riding on a car with Bobbie Joe Ligon.

PC: Okay, do you have a photograph or anything?

JG: [shakes head no]

PC: Okay, well that is neat. Anything else you remember about the Diboll Day activities once the parade was over, how y'all celebrated Diboll Day?

JG: Well, after the parade was over with I went back home. (laughter) I don't know what everybody else did. Sometime they would go to the outing or whatever but I mostly went back home.

PC: Okay, well you know, full integration for the school was fall of '68 and at this point we are just assuming that Diboll Day activities were integrated at the same time. Although they had one parade then we know the company and the community was good to both. They had things at Walter Allen Park and Whispering Pines Park and then Old Orchard Park but, we are not really sure when the segregated events stopped.

JG: I don't...I don't know.

PC: Okay.

JG: They ought to have it in history somewhere.

PC: We are trying to find it. Now what businesses do you remember as a child growing up that you went to, businesses in the community, black community or the white community?

JG: Marcellus Jones had a cleaner's, Johnny Jones father, he had a cleaners. And, somebody had a store, Vinson, Doris Vinson had a store. Mack Mitchell had a café and Joe Diamond had a café, you know. Those are the black businesses. Marcellus had a cleaners.

PC: Okay.

JG: And Charlie King had a café, they sold hot meals and dinners.

PC: Now you mentioned Drakes Grocery earlier and this was over in the black community?

JG: No, it was in the white community, Sammy Drakes, but we grew up with his son. Old man Drake we used to go over there and play, you know.

PC: Okay, so you were friends with the Drakes who was a white family and you would go to the business there and grew up with the son and got along fine?

JG: Yes.

PC: Well that is good. And, then there was Tanners Grocery in the black community?

JG: Yes, right, right, Jim Tanner, right.

PC: Did you have other white friends as a young child other than the Drake?

JG: The only one when I was growing up was Sammy Drake, when we was growing up we always played with Sammy Drake. He was our little white friend.

PC: Did you remember going to the commissary store before it closed?

JG: You talking about Mr. Carl Pavlic?

PC: The old commissary, the company store, did you ever...well you were born in fifty and it closed that year or the next year but I was just wondered if you...but I guess you wouldn't remember.

JG: No, I remember going to Mr. Carl Pavlic's and see it was another gentleman had another grocery store. I can't think of his name. But see, when I was growing up I had a bicycle. I used to pick up some of the old ladies' groceries from Mr. Carl Pavlic and deliver them back with my bicycle.

PC: Oh wow, yes his store was in the black community wasn't it?

JG: No, it was right here.

PC: Oh, okay the one right here by Dixon Furniture?

JG: Right.

PC: Oh okay. I know someone had mentioned to me earlier that he had a store a long time ago over in the black community.

JG: Nobody had one there but Jim Tanner that I remember.

PC: In your time frame, yes, okay. What is one of the most memorable experiences growing up that you would like to share with me?

JG: The most memorable experience growing up as a child, Christmas.

PC: That is always a fun time.

JG: Yes, Christmas growing up as a child and I wanted a BB gun. I never forget I wanted a BB gun and my daddy bought me a pump BB gun and I used to go in the woods and hunt by myself and I really enjoyed that BB gun. I mean, I took care of that BB gun. I had a pet dog named Bullet and we would always go in the woods and hunt. I never forget one time a game warden, a white gentleman, I can't remember him, I guess he was a game warden 'cause he was riding a horse with his pistol on him back then he told my father said "Johnny" he called my father Johnny, he said "Johnny why don't you sell me that dog." He said "no I can't do this, this is that boy's dog."

PC: Sell him what?

JG: He wanted to buy my dog.

PC: Your dog, oh.

JG: He wanted to buy my dog because he would see Bullet was mixed. He was sort of like a little...he would hunt birds. And he wanted to buy my dog and my daddy said "no

I'm not going to sell that dog. That is this boy's dog." But, like I say I had that BB gun. I wanted that BB gun and I enjoyed hunting with that BB gun.

PC: Oh that is neat. Now we know that you currently live in Channelview.

JG: Right.

PC: And you are a pastor?

JG: Well I'm an associate minister now.

PC: Associate Minister, okay. Tell me when you graduated from Diboll and you left Diboll what did you do?

JG: I left Diboll and I went to Houston and I left Houston and went to California and stayed out there almost ten years.

PC: Then came back to Texas.

JG: Came back to Houston. You know, like I said, I learned a lot in California, learned a whole lot because when I first went to California I thought California was backwards but I come to find out that we were ten years behind California and I learned a lot. I had to adapt to their ways and their customs and things because it's a lot different growing up in a little town like Diboll then you go to Houston a couple of years then you go to California. Then I came back and worked in Houston Independent School District when I came back to Houston.

PC: How did you get into the ministry work?

JG: Well, I'm going to be honest with you. I never forget, I was still living here and I don't tell a lot of people this but since you asked. I never forget one day I was sitting on a lady's porch, we call her Mrs. Fannie, Mr. Ruby Jackson's wife and she called me Buddy, she said "Buddy you talk like a preacher." So, I went and I looked at Mrs. Fannie and I said this lady is gone crazy, talking about me being a preacher. So I went home and I told my father and I said "Daddy Mrs. Fannie gone crazy." He said "boy what you talking about." I said "she talk like I'm going to be a preacher." So the next week her son was going along with my father so I was visiting him. I was dating a young lady and I stopped by and I was talking to him on the way to see her and he said "Buddy you talk like a preacher." I said "these people gone crazy, something is wrong with them people." So, I left and I didn't know that I was running at the time. I went to Houston and things started changing and I never forget I told a friend one time I said "you know what, you need to try Jesus." He said "I don't see what He's doing for you." And, lo and behold here I am a minister. I didn't know at the time when I was growing up here He was working on me. But, I didn't know this.

PC: She was planting that seed.

JG: The good Lord was planting it but I didn't know it. I didn't know it at the time, you know. I told her I said "these people gone crazy. I ain't going to be no preacher." And, lo and behold here I am.

PC: Well that is wonderful, that is wonderful. Is there anything else you would like to share with me today that I haven't asked you about pertaining to growing up here in Diboll or going to school or, the Temple Tigers or anything that you would want to share?

JG: Well, what I do now is like when I'm having a speaking engagement I don't care where I'm at I always let people know where I'm from. A lot of people are ashamed where they are from but I'm not. I let them know that I am a product of Diboll, Texas. I was born and raised here. I tell people when they are traveling through when you go through Diboll slow down and think about Gambrell because you know, God has been good to me. He have blessed me. Now I teach in the seminary school. I teach preachers and pastors and lay people, you know I teach Basic Training at the Theological Institute which used to be a part of Conroe College but we pulled away from Conroe Bible College and now it's Basic Training of Theological Institute and like I said, God has been good to me.

PC: That is wonderful. Well, Mr. Gambrell that is all of my questions I have today and I really appreciate you making the effort to drive to Diboll today from Channelview to do this interview with me and I really thank you for doing that.

JG: Well I appreciate that you took the time out of your busy schedule to want to sit down and talk to me about things that happened years ago. I'll tell anybody if you don't know your history you don't know where you are going. You have to know history because the country is based off of history.

PC: That is right. That is right. Well, thank you again Mr. Gambrell.

END OF INTERVIEW