

JAMES PORTER

Interview 207a

August 10, 2010 at The History Center, Diboll, Texas

Becky Donahoe, Interviewer

Patsy Colbert, Transcriber

ABSTRACT: In this interview with Becky Donahoe, James Porter reminisces about his long career in education. Mr. Porter spent 30 years in Diboll as a teacher, coach, and principal, beginning at H.G. Temple during its last year and continuing through the integration process. He talks about the unique process to integrate Diboll's schools, mentioning Mr. Massey and Mr. Ramsey in particular.

Becky Donahoe (hereafter BD): Okay, Mr. Porter tell me a little bit about your background, when and where you were born and that sort of thing.

James Porter (hereafter JP): I was born September 4, 1936 and I was born in Camp Ruby, Texas.

BD: Okay, I know that name.

JP: Okay, we lived in Camp Ruby. I was probably maybe three years old or something, somewhere between three and four years old and we moved from Camp Ruby to Hillister. And we stayed there until 1942 or '43 and then I moved to Colmesneil and that is where I grew up. I went to school all of my elementary years in Colmesneil and then in high school we transferred to, the black students in high school would transfer to Woodville. So I graduated from the then segregated black high school, Scott High School in Woodville. I graduated from there in 1955.

BD: Okay, did you know you wanted to be in education at that point? Did you pursue a...

JP: When I graduated from high school and got ready to go to college one thing I knew I didn't want to do was be a school teacher. (laughter) I knew I didn't want to be a school teacher. And education...there were a lot of educators in my family. My grandfather in Colmesneil was a medical doctor and he also established the first school for Negroes in Colmesneil. My dad taught school for more than 50 years before he retired.

BD: Oh my!

JP: My dad had some sisters that taught school also. And after I graduated from high school I attended school, college and got my bachelors degree at Texas College in Tyler.

BD: Oh, okay and what was your major?

JP: I had a major in chemistry and a minor in biology and mathematics.

BD: Wow!

JP: I had planned to go into...well I really wanted to go in the army when I graduated from college but I had problems with a knee and when I was examined for enlistment in the army I was rejected and placed in 4F. So, I didn't have a chance to go to the army. I guess I was born at the wrong time. I was too young for Korea and when Vietnam started I had already married and had kids so they didn't really want me in the army at that time.

BD: Well, that is probably a good thing.

JP: And, after I graduated from college I worked at a processing plant in Tyler. I worked as an analytical chemist and later on I started teaching and I taught my first teaching in high school was in 1961. Although I did do some teaching before I graduated. I worked as a laboratory instructor for undergrads at Texas College also.

BD: I guess I never knew that about you. I always just thought you had always been in education and always wanted to be.

JP: I guess the reason I got in education one of my classmates, college classmates, was teaching and he was drafted into the army during the school year of 1961. I was not in education at that time and I let this classmate and the principal of this school, this was in San Augustine at the black school in San Augustine, Lincoln High School, I let them talk me into teaching there, working there until they could find somebody to replace me. So, I ended up with a three year stint at San Augustine. I left San Augustine and I went to Buna.

BD: Okay.

JP: That was still a segregated school at Buna and I taught there for one year. That was the year of '64-65 and at the end of that school year they integrated the schools in Buna and all of the black teachers were fired.

BD: Just not even...didn't look at your...

JP: They said if when compared to the other candidates we were not qualified to teach.

BD: Oh my, now how did that make you feel?

JP: Well, kind of expected.

BD: Just what you would think would happen?

JP: That is just the way things were back at that time, so.

BD: I don't know, we think things now in the context that would make me hopping mad, I don't know. So, how did you end up in Diboll then? You are without a job in '64-65.

JP: Well I went to Chester, I worked in Chester in the school year '65 and '66 and this was at the black high school in Chester. During this time, well my wife started working in Lufkin and teaching in Lufkin in 1964.

BD: Oh, okay.

JP: That was the year that I was in Buna, so after I started working in Chester I worked there the school year of '65 and '66. Then they started the process of integrating the schools there at Chester and so, I left Chester and came to Diboll. I was closer to where my family was at that time.

BD: Sure. So, by this time you had like one, two, three, four, five, six or seven years of experience teaching.

JP: Well I five years in high school when I came here, five years.

BD: Oh okay, already, okay.

JP: Now, when I came here that was the last year, my first year here was the last year of the segregated high school here in Diboll. [Transcriber's Note: 1966-1967]

BD: Was there Freedom of Choice by that time?

JP: There was Freedom of Choice by that time and they had eliminated all of the athletic programs at Temple High School. That was the black school. And all of the students that played varsity sports went to Diboll High School. That included basically all the seniors and a few of the other people under them.

BD: Right.

JP: The athletes that attended Temple School they came and played sports at Diboll High School and they played on the junior varsity level.

BD: Oh, okay so basically, what was it like for H. G. Temple to basically not have any sports? I mean, that is what keeps a high school enthused and going most of the time. Was there a following of these guys over at the white school?

JP: Yes, there was, there was a following and the kids accepted that and we knew at that time that this was really the beginning of integration. You might say the beginning of the end of Temple High School. So, after one year of that the next year all of the black kids, well Temple High School was eliminated and all of the high school ninth grade up went to Diboll High School. But, they still had one through eight at Temple. [Transcriber's Note: 1967-1968].

BD: Now you were high school, let me see I was looking, you were the first black teacher on the campus at Diboll Junior High in '67-68. Were you the only black teacher on that campus?

JP: Yes.

BD: Okay.

JP: But now at that time Diboll Junior High and Diboll High School was on the same campus. It was in the main building here. So, junior high, Diboll Junior High and Diboll High School was all on the same campus.

BD: That was in '66-67?

JP: No, no.

BD: Okay, I'm getting confused, I'll quit.

JP: Okay, '66-67.

BD: That was your first year?

JP: My first year I was at H. G. Temple.

BD: Okay, and then the next year they went to full integration.

JP: The high school went to full integration and I was asked to move to the then white campus and I coached junior high sports. I coached junior high sports and I taught in the junior high.

BD: Okay. Did you have all the sports or football, baseball?

JP: I had football, basketball, at that time we played junior high softball, we had junior high track, tennis.

BD: And you did all of them.

JP: I did all of it, I was the...

BD: The junior high coach!

JP: Yes.

BD: Oh wow! So, when you were hired do you think...who hired you in '66? Would that have been Mr. Pate?

JP: Mr. Pate was superintendent when I was hired here, yes. Mr. Massey, Willie Massey was the principal at H. G. Temple when I was hired here.

BD: Okay, so which one...I mean, I know they both had to hire you but did you apply to Mr. Massey?

JP: Mr. Massey yes.

BD: Okay, I was just kind of in my mind wondering whether or not you were hired on purpose because you were black and they knew they were going into this and you'd be a good teacher is what I was wondering. But, you don't think so, it was just...you just...

JP: Mr. Massey...

BD: Mr. Massey just wanted you for H. G. Temple.

JP: Yes.

BD: Okay, okay.

JP: At the time that I was hired that year they eliminated all of the sports at Temple and the trend back at that time in a lot of cases was integrate the schools and a lot of the black teachers were fired. You know, that is...I guess that is the best way you can put it, or they were moved down into lower positions and all. Several of the teachers that were at H. G. Temple, I guess you might say they saw the writing on the wall or they were afraid or something and they got better jobs. It was kind of a mass exit, all of the...quite a few of the teachers that had been at Temple when they announced Freedom of Choice and eliminating sports well, they kind of took this as a warning, afraid or something so, they left.

BD: So, there were several openings at that point.

JP: There were several openings and at the time that I was hired Mr. Massey was...

BD: Scrambling. (laughing)

JP: Scrambling trying to find teachers.

BD: Not to imply that you were not a good teacher. Well I can understand if...because you went through that same thing then at Buna and could have understood it I guess. So far, well what was it like being the only black on the white campus? I mean teacher wise, did the kids look at you with authority as an authority figure or was there some "I don't have to mind you" kind of thing going on?

JP: Oh no.

BD: No, none of that.

JP: No, oh there were a few but, you know.

BD: There is a few every year huh?

JP: Oh, there is always going to be some. There were some black kids at the all black schools that look at you and “I don’t have to mind you.”

BD: “You’re not my momma” thing.

JP: Yes, ‘you’re not my momma’ you know. And, I guess growing up in a small town and living with people, different races, you learn to live with people and get along with people and mix with people. So, I had...working on the high school with an all white staff I looked at the job as hey I’m not a black coach and I’m not a black teacher, I’m a teacher. I guess I could have found or looked at things and thought of them as being discriminatory but why worry about something like that. I always thought if you have a problem you look at it, you analyze the problem and you try to eliminate it and then if you can’t eliminate it you learn to live with it.

BD: Well, you’ve always had a positive attitude. I know because you hired me.

JP: Well, and during my tenure as a principal I felt that one of the good things that I done, or one of the talents that I had, I guess you might say for one of a better word, I felt that I selected and hired some very, very good teachers and I’m proud of the majority of the staff that I hired.

BD: Well that was back in ’83, so what did you do from ’83 and ’68? Let’s see in ’68 then you went over to junior high, so you only had the one year at the high school here, right, the white high school and then didn’t you teach with Mr. Gartman whenever the junior high and high school split campuses?

JP: No, when I was hired the high school, when the schools were integrated Diboll High school and Diboll Junior High was on the same campus.

BD: Right.

JP: Mr. Ramsey was principal of the high school and Mr. Gartman was principal of the junior high school and so we were in the same building just different wings, same building.

BD: Okay.

JP: And for, I don’t remember exactly, probably about three years I worked as junior high teacher and coach. Then when Temple School, the black school, was eliminated and

they were integrated, the whole system was integrated and Mr. Gartman went to the Temple campus as junior high and I stayed at the high school campus.

BD: Oh, okay, so he didn't get that right.

JP: I was asked to coach on the high school level at that time and I informed them at that time that I wanted to be on the campus with the kids that I was teaching and if I was going to continue teaching at the high school, at the junior high school that's where I was going to coach and if I was going to coach high school kids I wanted to be on high school campus so, I stayed at the high school. I started teaching the high school classes at that time.

BD: Okay, what did you teach?

JP: I taught science courses and math.

BD: That is pretty valuable today. You'd get extra money for that wouldn't you?

JP: Yes, I taught, well I guess some of all the high school courses, physics, chemistry and I did teach some biology and at that time physical science, general science at that time.

BD: Science courses. What did...you went on into administration then, when was that?

JP: Okay, about 1976 I went into administration. I taught classroom and coached for about ten years here and then I was hired as assistant principal of the high school.

BD: Okay.

JP: Okay, and I worked at that position for two years and then I was asked to take the position as principal of the junior high school. So, I worked as a principal of the junior high.

BD: Was that about '78?

JP: About '78 yes, about '78 that I went to the junior high school as principal.

BD: And then how long did you stay there?

JP: Six years I think.

BD: Yes, that would have been right after.

JP: Yes.

BD: Yes, and then things started changing some. Okay, did you do like all the rest of us and go to school at night and go to SFA to get your master's in administration and all?

JP: Yes, yes, well no, I didn't get a master's in administration.

BD: Oh okay.

JP: I got, my master is in composite science and that includes mathematics, biology, physics, chemistry, astronomy and meteorology.

BD: Oh my!

JP: That is what my master was in, but I did and while I was doing my master, I did the courses for my administrative certificate.

BD: Okay, how neat.

JP: After I finished my management or principal certificate I continued at SFA with the superintendency certificate.

BD: Oh, I didn't know that, okay. All these questions that we've been asking folks, you know, we've really focused in on what it was like here in Diboll, but I keep thinking there was a whole world out there and there was a lot of racial tension. There was a lot of marching going on and all that. Did people look at that like that just doesn't work here or were you influenced by what was going on in the bigger world?

JP: Not really, not that much. At time there was some tension with kids and I really don't know whether it was caused that much by race or whether it was really just kids.

BD: Kids stuff, 'cause there is always kid stuff.

JP: There was always kids stuff and I tend to say in a lot of cases that a lot of the things that we might refer to as being racial it was just being kids because here in Diboll when the kids from Burke integrated with the kids from Diboll there was animosity between the Burke kids and Diboll kids.

BD: Oh!

JP: Then when Beulah integrated, you know, there was this division, you know, you're from Beulah and you're from Burke and you're from Diboll. And, then between Lufkin and Diboll, you know, there was tension and animosity between hey, "you're from Diboll and I don't like you and you're from Corrigan." This went on in both races with white and black kids so, when the schools were integrated and you put white kids and black kids together then it was in a lot of cases just somebody to argue with or fuss with. Now, if there were no...if everybody was the same race then you're still going to find these things. You're going to find these things that you got to put up with and argue with.

BD: Right, you're wearing a purple dress today and I don't like purple kind of stuff. (laughter) Oh me.

JP: Or you live on one side of track and I live on the other or you live down on the river and I live in Pine Valley and I don't like you because you live in Beulah.

BD: And all of that. Well, with Anna Laura teaching in Lufkin and you down here were your experiences about the same as far as integration or was there some differences? I know she taught there a long time.

JP: Oh, she taught there for 31 years and she taught more than 20 years in the same classroom.

BD: Oh my!

JP: But she was always on the junior high level and there were some differences. Lufkin is a much larger district than Diboll so, there is always going to be different experiences, you know, with the large school and a small school. And, she was always on junior high level and the majority of the time here I was at high school level, so there is differences in what goes on in high school and junior high. So, but I guess basically probably the same experiences.

BD: Okay, were there any things that you saw that could have been done a little bit differently on the administrative level in the way that they handled it or did you think that integration by doing it in implements like this was the right thing to do? I guess I'm not really asking you to second guess the administration, but... or the school board.

JP: Probably not, in fact I think maybe it might have been very good to implement the integration that way.

BD: As in...because I had never heard, in Livingston we didn't integrate the whole football team over and that sort of thing. That was real different from what some other people had done around.

JP: I guess the way it was done here in Diboll it was a gradual process and where the...I'm trying to think of how to say this... Temple in athletics, H. G. Temple, had had quite a bit of success in athletics and Diboll High School, the white high school, had not had a great deal of success, you know. They were kind of, you know, at that time you played homecoming on Saturdays and you wanted to win homecoming games and we used to kind of half way joke that some people wanted to play their homecomings here in Diboll because they would play in Diboll on that year and they wanted to win homecoming. So, when these kids were told that we want to integrate the school and we want the black kids to come to Diboll High School and that made these kids feel more like 'we are wanted.' And, you know, they were kind of proud there, you know, they wanted to be there.

BD: That that was the case.

JP: So, and then with the junior varsity kids they were coming over in the afternoon for football and basketball and all of this so, they were kind of gradually put into the mix that way. And, you might say this might have been the tune up, you know, rather than just all at once you take two different schools, two different coaches and put them all together and say hey this is it, this is the mix and you got to sink or swim. That is kind of my feelings toward it.

BD: Seemed like a good idea. I don't know, did...at the time was it mainly the school board or did y'all hear any talk about whose ideas these were to do it this way?

JP: I'm not really sure.

BD: Okay.

JP: I'm not really sure who it was. I think a lot of it might have been the fact that you are taking two different schools and you're moving them in together and a lot of it is space, you know, mechanics and you're getting staff and all of this.

BD: Just makes it hard too.

JP: Yes.

BD: Well, one thing I wanted to know is that whenever Freedom of Choice was implemented there weren't very many elementary children who chose to go to the white school. Was anything said when you were working at the other school about kids and either pushing them toward going or not. Their parents didn't feel comfortable with them going to a white school or what?

JP: Well in a lot of cases they didn't feel comfortable. Some of it was uncertainty, you know, about what was going to happen. Some of the parents felt that the black kids weren't wanted there and then a lot of schools were just reluctant, a lot of places were reluctant to eliminate their school. Because when schools were integrated in the majority of the cases the black school was eliminated. So, you are going to move away from that school, all the traditions and everything and all of the things that went on in that school...

BD: To make it a community.

JP: ...well it was just eliminated. That school did not exist anymore and to move from H. G. Temple High School where all of their traditions and state championships and their athletic records and all, you erase that. Then everybody goes to Diboll High School.

BD: Makes it tough.

JP: This was the feeling in a lot of cases and normally when you remove a school from the community you kind of destroy that community. You know, like in the case of Beulah, here in Angelina County, Beulah, Burke, Pine Valley, you move the schools and then the community kind of disappears.

BD: Yes, just goes away. Well, that is all the formal questions I have. Do you have anything else you would like to add? How long did you work for DISD, when did you finally retire? I know you still work for them. (laughter)

JP: Well from the time I started until I retired I worked for 28 years and then after I retired I was gone for 7 years and didn't work and didn't substitute or anything. Then when Coach Baker came back here and the high school principal resigned in January was the year Coach Baker came back as superintendent. And, he called and asked me if I would work as interim principal until he found another principal. So, I ended up working for that semester as interim principal. Then the next year I didn't work any, I didn't substitute any and then the following year I started substituting and that year the biology teacher, Mrs. Bowen, resigned at the end of the first semester and I was asked to teach science for the remainder of that year. So, after that I kept...continued substituting and all of that. So, officially counting the year as interim principal and that would be credit for one year as a teacher and the year that I taught science for a semester that is two years.

BD: That is two years.

JP: So, officially I have 30 years at Diboll High School.

BD: Wow! Well I know you're valuable because they keep calling you back.

JP: Well I enjoy the kids and I feel that I can still give some guidance to kids, you know, and help some of them out. The kids still respect me and we have a lot of fun together. I demand a lot from them and they seem to enjoy having me around. Now, when I sub someplace on one part of the campus maybe in Ag and I'm not seen in other parts some of the kids might asked me "where you been, where you been subbing?" "When you going to come and sub for us in our classroom?" So, they still treat me like I'm a regular teacher there on campus.

BD: Well everybody knows you, that's for sure.

JP: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW