

MARY JANE CHRISTIAN
Interview 067b
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Elvia Esteves, Interviewer
Rebecca Donahoe, Transcriber

ABSTRACT: In this interview with student Elvia Esteves, Mary Jane Christian recalls racial relations in the Diboll schools throughout her life. She grew up in Diboll when the schools were segregated and also began teaching before integration. Mrs. Christian remembers integration from the perspective of a teacher in the elementary school grades.

Elvia Esteves (hereafter EE): This is Elvia Esteves, English Honors, Fourth hour, September 29, 1987. I'm interviewing Mary Jane Christian who is 66 years old and her views on segregated schools. What year did you go to school?

Mary Jane Christian (hereafter MJC): I started school in 1928 and finished in 1939 in Diboll.

EE: In Diboll, so you were born here?

MJC: I was born here in what is now 102 Ballenger Street.

EE: Do you remember any of your teachers?

MJC: Oh yes, I remember lots of teachers. I taught with one of them, Mrs. Adams.

EE: Did you have any black friends?

MJC: Our schools were segregated then. I didn't go to school with blacks.

EE: So you didn't know any?

MJC: I didn't know any. I didn't go to school with any.

EE: Was the black school considered just a totally different school?

MJC: It was a different school, they had their – through high school they graduated, they had their own football team and we had ours.

EE: Did you ever play against them, you know, in football?

MJC: No, we never did play them, of course. I was very athletic when I was younger, I played volleyball and tennis, but we didn't have any sports between the two schools.

EE: You taught in the segregated school?

MJC: When I first started teaching it was segregated and then they integrated later.

EE: What was it like? Was it different?

MJC: I really couldn't tell any difference, the children at first, would look and would think to themselves, you know, "You're different," but after all when you are put in a school situation, the teacher dominates so much, in the lower grades especially, and they started off with the little ones and can work up. They were accepted. They accepted each other, very little was different.

EE: You taught the lower grades? What grades did you teach?

MJC: The third grade. To me a child is a child and they have to be taught, you even.

EE: About – the Spanish were already going to school with you?

MJC: They were. We had some Spanish children even when I started teaching. We had Spanish children in school.

EE: What were they like, were they just...

MJC: They didn't know the difference. They didn't know that they were supposed – the children did not know they were supposed to have feelings against each other.

EE: What about when you went to school?

MJC: I never did think about it either. They weren't there and I never thought about it being different. I was accustomed to it and I just accepted it.

EE: You mentioned earlier there were upper and middle –

MJC: When I was growing up there was – Diboll was very, very small at that time. There were an upper crust who were the most important people in the company and then there were the people who worked day to day and they were just workers and there was a difference in classes of people, in the white people. I wasn't an upper crust, by the way.

EE: How did they treat you?

MJC: They just, there were no mean things done, there was nothing done to hurt us. We were just not included in their social life or the other things. They just did things together and we did things together.

EE: So you had some friends that were –

MJC: I had some friends and the children didn't know the difference because there, again, you had the thoughts of children. They don't know the difference, if you would let them alone.

EE: Diboll, since it was so small, what was it like?

MJC: Well, the children didn't know the difference, the adults might have. I never did hear any from my mother and daddy, they were very open people. I think all of your bad things came from your families, I think all of your bad thoughts against another race come from your family. That's the reason it is so important – I never did think anything about it. I had a very good friend when I was very, very young who was black. I had a very good friend, her mother worked for my mother and she would come over and we played and we had the greatest time in the world.

EE: When you started school, did you miss her?

MJC: I missed her, but then she – and by the way, I don't even remember her name, I don't even know who she is. She may be someone who has passed away or is still living over there. I don't really remember her name. So I don't know who she is now, but I do know we were very good friends and I didn't know the difference.

EE: Where did she live, I mean, where did the black people live?

MJC: The school now, the two schools, the two white schools were on the east side of the railroad track and they had their school one through eleven, all of them at that time was eleven grades. Their school was west of the tracks and they lived around their school and we lived around our school. Now there were some people who lived down the road. I don't even know what road it is down toward the river over there from the swimming pool. There were always some white people down there, but I never did visit over there. I never did go over there. She would come to the house and we would play.

EE: So the whites and blacks were separated by the tracks.

MJC: They were separated by the tracks, yes, but now the store and the sawmill were all over there. There was an old box factory behind where the mill is now and they eventually, what they called "Red Town", built it over there, I guess it would be called northwest of the box factory. The box factory, of course, made boxes and it has been out of business now for I don't know how many years. But even the building has been town down, or burned down, I think. I don't remember. But the box factory had a lot of people on the other side of it and most of them were white.

EE: Where did the blacks work?

MJC: They worked in the mill, all the different parts of the mill. At that time my daddy worked for the company, and by the way, it was called "the company" then and he had black men that worked for him. In fact, he had as many blacks that worked for him as he

did whites and he liked them as well. I never did hear my daddy say anything about them. That is another reason, I never did hear any of the conflicts that, apparently there was a lot of, in my home because daddy liked his workers and he didn't say anything bad about any of them. I never heard anything bad about the black people.

EE: Was there any kind of demonstrations by the blacks that they didn't like the idea?

MJC: No, I don't remember anything. I don't remember anything ever.

EE: So they more or less accepted it.

MJC: It was just a way of live (life), it was the way life was to them and to us. I never knew the difference.

EE: So while you were growing up you just thought they were on the other side of the tracks and you were on this side and that's just how things were?

MJC: Yes, that's just how things were and I never questioned it.

EE: What about the churches? Did the blacks go to the same churches?

MJC: No, we had two churches at that time, we had the Methodist and Baptist and later on we began to get a lot more denominations here, but we had our churches, but I'm not sure about theirs. I don't know what their churches were at that time, but that was a long time ago. This is over 50 years ago I am talking about now. You can say that when you get as old as I am.

EE: You never had any kind of communication with the blacks?

MJC: No, never had any until they started school, and when they started to school I still didn't see them. They were ill at ease, the little ones, having to come over, but still, they were children and they were to be taught and what difference was it to me what color they were? There was no difference at all; they were children for me to teach.

EE: How big was the school?

MJC: At that time we had, I'll say, two or three sections of each grade. Of course, there were about four first grades, then we had three sections of second, third and fourth. Then it would go to fifths and two sixths. At the time I think six classes were on our campus.

EE: Where were the rest of them?

MJC: They were over at the high school. No, when I first started everything was on one campus. Now this was in '43 and then they built the High School, which took nine through twelve over there – eight through twelve, I'm sorry, and that left seven and we kept seven grades until the integration and that's when they created the junior school, the

Junior High, and that's when they took the sixth and seventh over there first and then moved the eighth grade from High School and then later they took the fifth grade over, our campus got crowded. I'm talking as a teacher now. They are even more crowded now than they were then.

EE: Around about what time do you think the blacks and the whites got used to each other?

MJC: Well, it took a little while. I know the first year of integration, it was voluntary and there was only one little girl in the first grade. She had a great time. Everybody was always saying how cute she was, speaking to her when she passed and then the next year, they went to the first and second grades, I think I'm right about this. I can't remember it that well, but the children were ill at ease at first, but it didn't take them long to get used to it. They made friends just as they had on their own campus with their own color. When children have the same interests, they soon have the same friends.

EE: Okay – thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW