

MARTHA CARSWELL

Interview 216a

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Patsy Colbert, long-time Diboll teacher Martha Carswell reminisces about her years teaching in Diboll, particularly during the racial integration of the schools. Mrs. Carswell taught for 44 years, starting in Lufkin and then moving to Diboll as a 5th and 6th grade teacher. She started in Diboll during Freedom of Choice and then stayed through full integration, with a few years off when her children were young. Mrs. Carswell remembers fellow teachers Mrs. Sibley, Mrs. Stubblefield, Mrs. Pate, and Mrs. Poland. She also remembers her principals Mr. Gartman and Mr. Porter.

Patsy Colbert (hereafter PC): Today's date is January 20, 2011. I am Patsy Colbert and I'm here at the History Center with Mrs. Martha Carswell and we are going to do an oral history interview today. Mrs. Carswell if you can let's begin and just tell me when and where you were born.

Martha Carswell (hereafter MC): I was born in Nacogdoches, Texas June 23, 1939. My mother died having me because she had an infection of the blood stream which was called streptococci and they flew doctors in from Scott and White to Nacogdoches Memorial Hospital. I was born 3 months early and I weighed two pounds and eight ounces.

PC: Oh my goodness. Well what a blessing then that you...

MC: Oh and my grandmother took me at the age of 62 because my daddy had to work to make a living and she saw me through TCU and one year of teaching at Kurth Elementary School. And, she died in June of 1962 and I was married to Ray Carswell June of '63.

PC: Wow, well that is wonderful. That is wonderful. Now, you just shared with me a little bit about your family background but where did you grow up, in Nacogdoches?

MC: No, in Lufkin.

PC: In Lufkin, okay.

MC: Because she lived in Lufkin.

PC: Okay, and what is your educational background?

MC: Well, I went to Central Ward Elementary School and that has been torn down now. But when it was torn down I went over there and was looking through the books and happened to find a reading book with my name in it. And I took it and kept it and I thought well maybe my children or grandchildren will want it someday. It has Martha Ford in it.

PC: Well that is neat. Maybe the History Center will end up with it one day. (laughter)

MC: That is true, that is true, you are right.

PC: And did you graduate from Lufkin?

MC: I did in 1957 and then I attended TCU [Texas Christian University] and graduated in May of '61 from TCU with a Bachelor of Science in elementary education. And then I got a job at Kurth Elementary the following Fall in September and I taught second grade there two years. Clint Hawkins was my principal there.

PC: Okay, and just for the record TCU stands for what?

MC: Texas Christian University.

PC: Okay and so you graduated from there and then became a teacher in elementary education?

MC: Yes.

PC: And your first teaching job was at Kurth Elementary?

MC: Yes in Lufkin, second grade.

PC: Okay. Now, as far as race relations go what was your earliest experience of being around the other race, in your childhood or just as far back as you can remember?

MC: Well my aunt and uncle lived next door to my grandmother and me and they had rent property and they had black property and so I went with my uncle a lot to collect rent so I've been around blacks all my life. We had blacks to work at our house and things like that and I just thought they were like one of us.

PC: Right, just didn't think anything different.

MC: No, I surely didn't. No, because I'd been around it all my life.

PC: So, you were accustomed to having interaction with them before integration.

MC: That is right, that is true. And, I didn't mind eating with them or anything like that. I never will forget Mae one day, my grandmother said, "Well Lula" her name was Lula,

and she said, "Do you want this today" and she said, "No my taste doesn't call for that today." (laughter)

PC: Sweet! Now, when did you begin teaching in Diboll?

MC: I taught in Diboll, I called down here and I just wanted to substitute and I talked to Mr. Pate and I told him that I had five years experience teaching second grade only. He said, "Boy that sounds good Martha Carswell." He said, "we have two sixth grade teachers Opal Franks and Carrie Hemphill that have 40 students a piece." This was like four days before school started. "And, we certainly need another teacher and you sound good." And Ray was sitting in the background and he said, "Get your foot in the door Martha; get your foot in the door." So I called down here and talked to him a few minutes and he said, "We want you." And I signed my contract and I started school that very day that school was supposed to start. I had to come down here and get my room ready and stuff like that but I made it and everything.

PC: In four days, huh?

MC: In four days.

PC: And what year was that?

MC: 1967.

PC: Okay.

MC: And I was at...it's called now the Diboll Primary School is where I first started.

PC: But then it was the elementary.

MC: Right, yes it was. And, I had a job teaching fifth and sixth grade both. I had a homeroom of sixth grade and we taught reading and health. And we took our own kids out and did PE with them. We didn't have a PE teacher like they do now. And then I went into Mrs. Birdie Pate's room and taught fifth grade reading and math in that room and then I went across the hall into Mrs. Ruth Poland's room and taught fifth grade reading and math in that room.

PC: Oh wow!

MC: Some of my fifth grade students that I remember still today is Flossie Eddins, her daddy passed away last week, she was fifth grade. I had her. I had Dianne Pavlic, which is Lynn Pavlic's sister. Had Suzanne Hollingsworth, her daddy was with Temple and I think they got transferred maybe to Georgia so they left Diboll. Then I had Jay Wyatt, Kaye Murry, Joe Hambrick. That is just some of the ones I remember.

PC: How many students did you have that first year with teaching fifth and sixth grade?

MC: Oh me, well you know, I just taught their home room, you know. They may have had 25 kids you know, and I just taught the two classes, in Mrs. Pate reading and math in there you know, and probably 25 in Mrs. Poland's room and then I probably had about 20 in my sixth grade class.

PC: Now 1967, the fall of '67 was the first year the high schools were integrated...

MC: Right, yes.

PC: ...but the elementary schools were still Freedom of Choice at this time which Freedom of Choice started in '65. Do you remember your first year here if there were any black students on the campus?

MC: No, I think it was the next year that I got my first black student. His name was Michael Jones, he was crippled. I understood that and everything and I never did make fun of him or anything like that. His brother was later killed in service and if I'm not mistaken I think his dad had a cleaners here, maybe Marcellus Jones.

PC: Yes ma'am, I believe that is right and his brother Johnny Jones was killed in Vietnam.

MC: His name was Michael Jones and he was very, very nice and the kids wanted to help him, you know. They didn't think anything about it at all, you know what I mean.

PC: Right, now was he the only black student in your class?

MC: In my home room yes it was.

PC: In your homeroom okay, so that was the next fall which was the first year of full integration, the fall of '68.

MC: Right, that was '68.

PC: So tell me is there anything particular about that first year of integration; were there any problems on the campus as far as teachers or students?

MC: No, we even had a black teacher, Esther Hunt. Well it was just one wing there which is now elementary school but it was called Temple Junior High when I went there and that one wing was sixth and seventh grade and that was all. Then there were three sixth grade teachers, were Opal Franks, Carrie Hemphill and myself. Then there was Larry Hand, there was Sara Williams, there was Minnie Evelyn Holcomb, there was...let's see who else. That is all I believe I can remember. But then I stayed over there at that school until 1971.

PC: Now your first year you are at elementary, fifth and sixth but then the next year the fall of '68 which was the first year of full integration was sixth grade?

MC: Sixth grade.

PC: Did you move campuses?

MC: Yes.

PC: Yes, so it's what we know now as the junior high campus or ya'll went to the elementary school?

MC: Well, the elementary school.

PC: Oh, the elementary...oh the former black school.

MC: Right, yes, H. G. Temple.

PC: Yes, they made that H. G. Temple, okay that is right.

MC: And it was just one wing there, it was sixth and seventh grade.

PC: So they moved sixth grade over there.

MC: Yes.

PC: That first year of full integration.

MC: Yes, see eighth grade was over here in junior high still, eighth through twelfth. I mean eighth through twelfth was I guess high school maybe, I guess.

PC: So they moved sixth grade to the former black school and then they renamed the school Temple Elementary.

MC: Yes, uh-huh, but then I stayed there until May of '71 and I had to...Jerry Gartman was my principal and I went in to tell him one day at noon, I never will forget, he was eating a hamburger and drinking a coke and I said, "I have something to tell you Jerry." I said, "I hate to interrupt your lunch, but" I said, "I wanted you to hear it from me rather than from somebody else." I said, "I'm pregnant and I understand the rule that you can't come back and teach in September." But I said, "I'll follow the rules and everything" because I was not even three months then when school was out because my son was born in December. He said, "Martha let me tell you this, all you have to do is pick up the telephone when you get ready to come back and you will have a job."

PC: What kind of rule was that now?

MC: That you could not teach if you were pregnant. You could not start school that is right.

PC: Oh, okay. What if you were already teaching?

MC: Well I was already teaching and I got pregnant but then I had to quit in May. I could not start school in August or September or whenever they started.

PC: Really!

MC: But I think it wasn't but two or three year's later maybe that they passed a rule that you could teach.

PC: Wow that is a strange rule wasn't it, for today looking back at it.

MC: I know it. Then I came back, after I had John I came back in January of '73 and that is when they added that other new wing on over there at that school.

PC: Okay, well let's back up just a second to the '68 with integration.

MC: Sure.

PC: What was your first knowledge of integration? You know, whether it be in the school or just you know, how did you become aware of integration?

MC: Well I knew it was coming and I was ready for it. I mean I knew it was here to stay.

PC: Okay, was there any discussion, you know, your first year during the Freedom of Choice?

MC: I can't remember anything about that.

PC: From the school board, the administration, you know, did they have a teacher's conference or meeting and them discuss anything.

MC: I can't remember. That is about 44 years ago so that is hard to remember. I can't remember.

PC: Nothing that stands out in your mind as far as them making a big announcement or anything?

MC: No, I'm sure there was, you know, but I just accepted it and went on.

PC: You were already kind of prepared for it and just kind of knew it was going to happen.

MC: Yes.

PC: Now, that Freedom of Choice year they sent out a form, there was some type of form where the parents, they sent this form home and the parents had to select which campus. Do you remember anything about the form and how those were handled? We found that in the school board minutes.

MC: No, I don't.

PC: I was just curious if they really implemented it or they decided not to do that. It was a form and they sent it home with every child and they had to check which school they wanted to go to in the Freedom of Choice years. I was just curious if you had ever seen any of those circulate.

MC: No, I'm sure I did but just don't remember it.

PC: When you heard that integration was coming how did you feel about it personally?

MC: Well like I said I had been around blacks off and on all my life and I just accepted it and took it and said I would do the best I can.

PC: Do you remember if there were any problems on the campus as far as any other teachers that had black students in their class, do you recall any problems?

MC: No I don't.

PC: And so the parents, the Jones family, as far as the parents were there any issues there?

MC: I think they were fine.

PC: Okay. Were there any fears you know, amongst the teachers?

MC: I'm sure there were.

PC: Anything that you personally remember?

MC: I can't remember anything that stands out. That is just human nature to be kindly apprehensive.

PC: Right, exactly. What about within the community, anything there as far as like going to the store or businesses, anything there?

MC: No.

PC: Now what about the classroom experience, anything that you witnessed or experienced that you want to share whether it was that first year or anytime until the new wore off and everybody got adjusted, were there any issues?

MC: Well I'm sure there were down the line there were issues, you know what I mean. Because, it had worn off you know and everything like that.

PC: Any particular event that stands out?

MC: No I can't remember anything particular.

PC: Overall how would you rate the integration process?

MC: I would say it was all okay.

PC: Now Mr. Pate hired you right?

MC: Yes he did.

PC: Okay and who was your principal at that time?

MC: My first year was Mrs. Bea Burkhalter. That was Bessie Furgurson's grandmother.

PC: Right, okay.

MC: And then my next year was Jerry Gartman.

PC: Okay, and I believe, did he become the principal at Temple Elementary the first year of full integration?

MC: Yes, he did, he did. He was over there until I...well in fact and he was there when I came back in '73, I believe too as principal. I believe he was.

PC: Now when you went from the elementary campus in '67 and then the first year of full integration you were transferred over to what became the Temple Elementary which was the former all black school...

MC: H. G. Temple, yes.

PC: ...were there any significant changes in just the building, the facilities, the material they had, was there anything that you remember that was significantly different with what they would have had to work with and what the white elementary had?

MC: No, I can't think of anything.

PC: Okay, well they built the new school in '53, so you know it was...just wondering if anything stood out. Now what about Mr. Massey, did you have an opportunity to know Mr. Massey?

MC: I just knew he lived across the street from that school.

PC: Did you ever work with him or have any dealings with him?

MC: No.

PC: Well we know he was well thought of.

MC: Oh yes, he was well thought of.

PC: Was his wife a teacher on the elementary campus?

MC: I want to say yes, but I'm not sure. I think she was but she may have been gone when I came. I can't remember for sure.

PC: Did your position change after integration?

MC: Yes, yes, I went to fifth grade when I came back. Is that what you are talking about, my teaching position?

PC: Well that first year fall of '67 you had been hired at the elementary and you were fifth and sixth grade teacher but then that year of fall of '68...

MC: When I moved over fall of '68 I was sixth grade.

PC: You just went to sixth grade.

MC: Yes, self contained.

PC: Self contained, so you got your own classroom then.

MC: Yes, yes.

PC: So really it was better for you then.

MC: Yes, see it was much better, it was.

PC: Was that due to the integration process and the changes that were made across the campuses you think?

MC: I guess it was. I don't know why I had my homeroom and was in two fifth grade classes that is just where they put me.

PC: Well that probably felt pretty good that you had your own spot.

MC: Oh it was. It was really good.

PC: Do you remember how many students you had in your classroom at that time?

MC: Probably about 18 to 20.

PC: Would that be what your...that you mentioned earlier they had 40 I believe that...

MC: Yes, that was better than that.

PC: I believe Mrs. Burkhalter talks about that in her interview.

MC: Did she really?

PC: I believe...that they had a lot of kids in their class.

MC: Oh they did, they really did. And, I think that Mrs. Franks and Mrs. Hemphill got to pick the ones that they wanted to give to me. So, it was a little...kind of rough that first year of discipline wise I'm talking about.

PC: Okay that was another question. Just the change overall, the big picture of the change because, you know, we get used to where we are going to school and then things change so there was change for everybody. You know, change for the white students, change for the black students, change for the teachers and administrators, so that first year can you just share with me anything that you remember?

MC: I remember that the Shipp family moved from Alaska here that year and I got Randy Shipp in my class. Then I had Nancy McDuffie in there and I had Kathy Saxton in there. I had Archie Patton in there. I had John Douglas Price in there. I had Virgil Crocker in there and...but overall it was good. It was...always your first year is going to be tougher than any other year you have.

PC: Was it rough due to the mixing of the races or other issues?

MC: Just other issues I think.

PC: So not really race related?

MC: No I don't think so.

PC: Did everybody seem to get along over there at that campus?

MC: Yes, they seemed to, they did.

PC: Did you have any problems transferring to that school knowing it was the previous all black school was that an issue?

MC: No, it was not an issue at all.

PC: Now we know Mr. Pate retired that year, the fall of '68.

MC: I didn't know what year he retired.

PC: He retired that summer and him and Mr. Foster worked together for a couple of years [months.]

MC: Oh did they, okay.

PC: Do you know if his retirement had anything to do with the integration process?

MC: I don't know maybe he just...he had been here a long time. I don't know what year he started. Do you know what year he started here as superintendent.

PC: I have forgotten right now.

MC: I went to his retirement party. It was at the Fredonia Hotel in Nacogdoches.

PC: I believe that it was just they had to retire at a certain age is what Mrs. Smith said.

MC: Oh yes, oh really, okay.

PC: Yes, just knowing he was here for a long time and then he retired that year, we were just wondering.

MC: See they named the gym the W. F. Pate Gym after him at junior high.

PC: Once there was full integration how was your relationship with the teachers, with the black teachers?

MC: It was fine, Esther was wonderful.

PC: What black teachers were on that campus that first year of full integration?

MC: Esther Hunt is all I remember. Maybe there was a Mrs. Sibley.

PC: Okay, yes ma'am.

MC: I believe she was on there. That name just rings a bell. Then I had Odyessa Wallace later on when I went back and taught just fifth grade. Odyessa Wallace was fifth grade too.

PC: So just those two teachers that first year at Temple Elementary.

MC: As well as I remember.

PC: So that campus was sixth, seventh and eighth or just sixth and seventh?

MC: Just sixth and seventh my first year over there in '68 when it was full integration. It was just that one wing.

PC: So they just had those two grades and that one wing.

MC: Yes, that is all. And then when I came back in January of '73 and you may not know this but, they told me I'd be coming back in the middle of the year, you know, if I came up there and sat in those classes for two or three days, you know, make sure that would count as a whole year toward my teacher retirement for teaching one semester. So I made sure I got those days in. I sure did. I still remember my room number, 17.

PC: Oh wow. Now you worked with Mr. Greer was that right?

MC: No.

PC: Mr. Gartman.

MC: Mr. Gartman.

PC: Did he have...do you know anything about his first year there, any issues or anything that he would have had?

MC: No, I don't think so.

PC: Did you have any personal knowledge of how decisions were made on the administrative level pertaining to integration?

MC: No.

PC: And what about working with Mr. Ramsey, did you work with Mr. Ramsey?

MC: No, I never did work with Mr. Ramsey.

PC: How was your relationship with the school board?

MC: Okay, real good.

PC: Do you ever remember anything about an assembly once school started and they had an assembly with the sixth and seventh graders and discuss racial issues or integration or changes or anything like that?

MC: No.

PC: Any particular memory that stands out to you just your teaching years overall that you want to share? Regardless, it doesn't have to be related to integration just anything you want to share.

MC: Well, I will say this; I had a black principal for ten straight years.

PC: Okay and who was that?

MC: James Porter, he started in '78 to '84. I had him for six years.

PC: Okay and what was Mr. Porters position? I know we interviewed him. Did you work with him on that campus the first year of full integration or was he at junior high?

MC: No he came later, he was at junior high. Yes, he came later and then after that from '84 to '88 that was four more years that made the ten straight years I had Mr. Alexander. But I cannot think of his first name. It begins with an A.

PC: I can see his face right now.

MC: Alex.

PC: Yes ma'am.

MC: That is who it is. Alex, Alexander, that is right.

PC: So you started working under Mr. Porter in '78?

MC: Yes, because when I came back in '71 to '75 I had Jerry Gartman.

PC: Okay.

MC: And then I think after that, if I'm not mistaken, I could be wrong I had Ray McClain and then Mr. Porter was next.

PC: Okay.

MC: I think that was correct. And then, I can tell you my principals mostly all the way down.

PC: Okay.

MC: I had after that...and then from '88 to '89 I don't know if you know it or not but, they added that last wing on.

PC: At the elementary?

MC: Yes, at the elementary school and I had Dale Anderson then. And, then '89 to '91 I stayed over there. I wanted to go over to junior high and teach sixth grade but they didn't move me over there. I was fifth grade, see and they wouldn't move fifth grade so I had to stay there so, I stayed there two years under Helen Cheshire from '89 to '91.

PC: '89 to '91. What were you saying about the sixth grade, they moved it to the junior high campus?

MC: Yes, they moved sixth grade over there see. But I wasn't teaching sixth grade so I stayed over there because I was a fifth grade teacher.

PC: So that made that campus...

MC: Sixth, seventh and eighth.

PC: Sixth, seventh and eighth.

MC: And then high school was nine through twelfth.

PC: The Junior High campus became sixth, seventh and eighth. What did the elementary campus, what was it two through five or three through five? Do you remember?

MC: I don't know that because I think it was through sixth.

PC: So they made a change in '89 is when they changed the grades up a little bit on the campuses.

MC: Yes, I think so. Then in '91 I got a chance to move over and just teach math only and I taught honors and regular math three years under Mr. Anderson, '91 to '94. So see I hit him for four straight years. I had him four years in all. He was principal six years but I only had four years.

PC: Okay.

MC: And, then after that I had a lady principal again was Donna Ingram. You probably remember her name.

PC: Yes ma'am.

MC: Then after that I had Ricky Stevens from '96 to 2000 and then Terry Sowers from 2000 to 2002 and that was the year that I retired.

PC: Okay, 2002.

MC: Yes.

PC: So you worked from 1967 to 2002.

MC: That was 33 years.

PC: Thirty three years.

MC: And then from 2002 to 2008 that was six more years I subbed. And if you subbed 90 or more days a year, and this was just my goal, but if you weren't retired that would go a year toward your teachers retirement. If you subbed that many days, at least 90 days or more because that would be more than half of a year.

PC: So you subbed for how long?

MC: For six years straight. So, really I have 39 years in with Diboll.

PC: Wow that is great.

MC: And then I had five years somewhere else. I had 44 years in all if you want to call the substituting.

PC: That is wonderful. So '67 through your subbing years was 2008.

MC: Yes, but I was out two years, see I was out from '71 to '73 with my child.

PC: Okay, so you had a pretty good career then with Diboll Independent School District.

MC: I sure did. It was like my second home.

PC: Yes ma'am.

MC: I came to all the ball games down here and was very, very active. The years they had Diboll Day I helped work with that and in junior high I was very, very active. I was pep squad sponsor. I was the UIL Coordinator for twelve years there. I was the Stack Sponsor. The year I was the Stack sponsor we got the state award plus the national award.

PC: Yes ma'am, that is wonderful. I remember all your efforts. You were there when my kids were in school.

MC: That is true, that is right.

PC: Yes ma'am. Now, forty four years is a long time so you saw a lot of change within the school district. Any particular change comes to mind that you think was the biggest change? Any change that you think was something that really made a difference in just the big scheme of things?

MC: I think maybe it made a difference when they put ninth, you know added ninth to the high school, nine through twelve, I think that was really a good deal, you know. They are building that new elementary school. I guess they have started on it. But, I don't understand how it's going to be laid out. It's going to be different isn't it? It's going to be like...

PC: It's going to be both elementary and primary all together but two separate entrances. They are going to that I think. Is there any instances that you can remember in the seventies? We know there were some racial tensions in the seventies. That was my high school years here and we believe it was '74 or '75. Do you remember anything about that school year when they had some racial tensions then?

MC: There probably was some but I just don't remember what they were. You may remember it.

PC: Back to your Diboll Day involvement, in '68 when they had the first year of full integration do you remember if that is when Diboll Day events were integrated as well? We know before that they had separate events. Do you recall anything? Were you involved with Diboll Day then?

MC: It was later on; yes it was definitely later on.

PC: Okay. Is there anything else you want to share, a particular principal, anybody you worked with, a special memory, a special student something that you remember that you care to share.

MC: Well or course I taught Jermichael Fenley and now he is with the Green Bay Packers.

PC: Yes, I guess you enjoy watching him then.

MC: Oh yes I do, I really do and everything.

PC: And they may be going to the Super Bowl.

MC: That is right, they may be. They may be on February 5th I believe.

PC: That would be wonderful wouldn't it?

MC: That would be wonderful. It would be.

PC: For a Diboll student to be in the Super Bowl and have a Super Bowl ring.

MC: Oh yes, wouldn't that be something.

PC: Yes ma'am. Well it sounds like, just going back for just a minute to the integration it sounds like then from your perspective everything went really smooth.

MC: Yes, as far as I can remember.

PC: And, how did your student, the black student, Michael Jones, how did he do that year in school? Did he adjust well?

MC: He adjusted well but I think we helped him a lot, the best I remember, but he picked up and everything. I'm sure he graduated.

PC: We've interviewed Minnie Faye, which would be his sister. Now do you still live in Lufkin?

MC: Yes I do.

PC: And what are doing in retirement? Just enjoying it?

MC: Yes, and of course I substituted for three days this year but I have had some health issues the last three years. My husband had cancer and then I've had both eyes done, cataracts. I had a blood clot so I was on Coumadin for seventeen months so I didn't feel like it was wise to be subbing during that time, you know.

PC: Right. Now these are copies from the annual '67-'68 and '68 - '69 when you first began teaching. I was just wondering if anything prompted your memory as far as these would have been the early years of integration, as far as some of the teachers that you worked with, anything stand out before we wrap it up as far as...

MC: I saw Mr. Spencer yesterday and he has retired. He taught seventh grade, Mrs. Stubblefield was eighth grade. Mr. McNeese was eighth grade. Mr. Porter eighth grade. Mrs. Sibley I did get that right, she was there.

PC: Anything particular about her that you remember as far as her early years?

MC: I thought she was a pretty good teacher.

PC: Got along well with everyone?

MC: Yes, I did.

PC: Okay. Well Mrs. Carswell that is all the questions I have. Unless there is anything else you care to share we will conclude the interview. I really thank you for spending your time with me today.

MC: Oh, well thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW