

ROBERT RAMSEY
Interview 49b
March 12, 1985
Becky Bailey, Interviewer
Dorothy Farley, Transcriber
Retyped by Courtney Lawrence

ABSTRACT: Longtime Diboll teacher and Principal Robert Ramsey reminisces about his time in the Diboll schools. He talks about superintendents Wilbur Pate and David Foster, integration, sports, and racial issues. He particularly recalls some of the difficulties of desegregation and the influx of Mexican Americans into Diboll schools.

Becky Bailey (hereafter BB): When did you come to Diboll?

Robert Ramsey (hereafter RR): When we came in 1947, Wilbur F. Pate was superintendent of schools and had been, I believe, since 1942. Mr. Pate came here and served one term as principal and he was elevated to superintendent and he was superintendent in '47 and remained in that position until 19...let me get my dates now, to around 1968, wasn't it, Rita. In 1968 David Foster replaced him so most of my years at Diboll was under Wilbur F. Pate.

BB: That is twenty-six years.

RR: Yes, he was here a long, long time.

BB: What kind of a person was he? Just tell...

RR: Mr. Pate was very conservative. He lived in a conservative community at that time. Our evaluation was very small compared to what it is today. Something like, oh, three and a half million dollars, I believe, was our evaluation for the taxes for our schools. That didn't provide enough money, as you can see for operating two school districts then. We had our white school and we had our black school. Unfortunately, the black school got pretty much what the white school didn't want in the way of teaching material, as well as, text books. You know a lot of times we would carry text books that was kinda wore out over there at the high school, over at the white school, we would carry them over to the colored school. So it was...it was run very conservatively. Teachers were not paid anything above the state salary. I think Mr. Pate maybe drew a little above the state salary, but very little. I know that as principal and coach, our football equipment was nil. I'm telling you, we had to buy our own shoes, our own shoelaces even, the boys did. To play football and we didn't have any...very little money to spend for athletics.

BB: When did you retire?

RR: My last year as high school principal was in 1974.

BB: Oh, okay. So then you had Mr. Foster next.

RR: I served under him all during Mr. Foster's years here. When he left, I quit too, the same year he left. But I went into...the last two years of my work here in Diboll was as a full time Driver Ed teacher. I resigned as high school principal the spring that Mr. Foster left and they asked if I would remain and teach. I was the only Driver Ed. teacher that they had on the faculty and I agreed to stay on two more years and I taught Driver Ed. during the school year.

BB: Well, that was good.

RR: It wasn't a summer program then. It was during the regular school year.

BB: Now it is before school. It is real early, early in the morning.

RR: They do the driving mostly after school is out in the spring. They do the classroom part after school hours every day during the school semester.

BB: Was there a lot of changes that Mr. Foster brought with him?

RR: He sure did. I think Mr. Foster was a great school superintendent. He knew how, first of all, to work with people... being cooperative. Some were not cooperative with Mr. Wilbur Pate his last years here... his last years there was a lot of...I don't know...there was a lot of things that he wanted that he couldn't get the school board to go along with it. Then when Mr. Foster came...he was new and it seems that he just jumped right in and they followed whatever points he wanted to pursue and it worked much better for our school system. He was in charge of everything, so to speak – personnel, curriculum, facilities, and things of that nature. He did a real fine job. I think Diboll was very fortunate in getting David Foster as superintendent.

RR: He was...

BB: Seventy. Sixty-eight to seventy-four.

RR: Yes. Right.

BB: What kind of a man was David Foster? I have never heard anybody talk about him.

RR: I would say in his late thirties, is that right?

Mrs. Rita Ramsey (hereafter MRR): Well, in his forties. I think he was mid-forties.

RR: Think he was mid-forties. He might have been forty.

MRR: I don't know. He might have been thirty-eight.

RR: Might have been thirty-eight or thirty-nine. I would think. Had two young girls. They were not yet in high school. So they were young. In elementary school. He was...

BB: But he came from somewhere outside the district?

RR: He came from Nacogdoches. He served in the Nacogdoches system as principal. I believe he was a junior high principal. But he had gone to the college and worked one year in some department but I am not sure what department that was. But he came here from Stephen F. Austin actually from Nacogdoches. And he went from here to superintendent of the Waco School District.

BB: That is quite a jump.

RR: Yes, it was a good opportunity for him and he wanted to go up and he did. He took a big step.

BB: Yes. And then after him was Mr...?

RR: Don Robbins.

BB: Robbins. Okay, and he has been here and will change now.

RR: Till now.

BB: Just you're off the cuff thinking. How do you think it will work out having someone from inside the system taking over for Mr. Robbins? Like Mr. Dunlap is going to do?

RR: I was real pleased that the school board gave the job to Jim Dunlap. I think he will be, well, we know he is a fine person, first of all. And we know his credentials are satisfactory and I am just real pleased that they hired him. He knows our community and the community knows him and I don't think we are gonna have to, or need a great lot of changes made. We have got a good school system now. We have always had a good school. I think it will be just a continuation of what we have had. Maybe he will, as stated in the news media, that he plans to involve you teachers more in policy making and his principals, which will be good. I think they ought to be involved more with the decisions making of the school.

BB: I know everyone at our school is just real pleased about it, too.

RR: I am real thrilled over it. Of course, Mr. Dunlap taught for me. He was my social science teacher when he came here. He and his wife both. And they were, I thought, one of the top teachers that I had on the faculty. And that pleased me.

BB: Linda and I went to school together in Livingston.

RR: Oh, you did.

BB: Yes, we were...she was one year ahead of me. She graduated with Steve. But I have known her all my life. She is real neat. Okay. Let's see the Mexican population started, you know, to come in more in the late 60's you said. So tell me what it was like for a school system. Were there any preparation made, you know, as far as Temple coming in and saying, "We are fixing to bring in a lot of Spanish speaking people here and that is something that the schools are going to have to deal with." Or was it just kinda after the fact, after they were here then you had to deal with it?

RR: That's true. We waited until after they got here to see just what would need to be done. There really wasn't a lot done so far as our curriculum. We did have to hire a bilingual teacher, I believe, in the elementary school and we began to offer Spanish in high school and more classes in Spanish than we had been offering. Oh, the Latin's started coming in here in the late '60s. Our company officials decided that we needed well, labor was scarce at that particular time and they go down...down on the border and just import. I remember Mr. Clyde Thompson making this remark, report... well, we are going to bring in a lot of Mexican families in there. But we are going to be selective. We are going down and select the ones and get responsible Mexican families to come to Diboll to take jobs. We need a lot more workers than we have so that was their intention of bringing in a group of Mexican families that they felt like would make good citizens of Diboll when they first started. But after they came then all their cousins, aunts and uncles all came.

BB: Aunts and uncles...

RR: They brought, they influenced the first group and brought others, you know, and East Texas became very well populated with them.

BB: What kind of an impact did it have say at the high school level. Did you have many at the high school?

RR: I didn't have any to amount to, that would affect our curriculum or course offering when I was... up until I retired. We hadn't made a lot of changes. I think most of them were in the lower grades. Very few...you know most of them drop out of school by the time they hit high school grades. I don't think they do that quite as much now as they used to, but they used to. We seldom got a high school student.

BB: I was wondering what...what do you think the reason for that?

RR: They took...well enough educated. They felt like they could go to work and help support their family and they wanted to work and make some money. They weren't too interested in pursuing their education beyond being able to read and write and do simple math.

BB: Yes.

RR: They just wanted to go to work.

BB: Yes. Well, tell me as you first knew Diboll in the high school. Did we have a drop out problem or did most kids go on and finish high school?

RR: Well, on a percentage basis. It was probably about the same as they are now.

BB: Really?

RR: Didn't have a lot of drop outs but we had a few and we still have a few of them, I understand. I am sure we do.

BB: Oh, yes.

RR: But it wasn't... it was about on a percentage. We didn't have as many in high school. We graduated around thirty-five to forty then each year and gradually picked up. I am talking about in '47, '48, and '49, along in there. Later on we graduated a few more than that. Actually our school didn't really grow population wise until the Mexicans starting coming in, in droves, you know. What do we have now about twenty-five percent Latin's?

BB: Yes.

RR: Twenty. Is the colored race...used to be twenty percent, what is it now?

BB: I would have to get the breakdown. I am going to get those from Mr. Robbins when I do his.

RR: It is perhaps... just guessing now. Imagine it is about fifty percent Anglo. Fifty percent of Blacks and Mexicans.

BB: I think in any one class it may be just a little lower. The white population is a little less, a little less.

RR: Than the other two combined.

BB: Than the other two combined.

RR: I think the black people has remained pretty stable around twenty to twenty-two percent in our school but the Latin's have really increased.

BB: I would like to get into talking about integration now. Why ... I know that Diboll integrated before other people. Other towns had to... what was the reasoning behind this? Why?

RR: Well, we didn't know for sure why they forced us to integrate before they did the larger schools. We were ahead of Lufkin.

BB: Oh, you mean the Federal government forced us to?

RR: The...yes. We were...

BB: Oh, I thought this was a voluntary thing that they had just decided.

BB: No, they kept...the federal government did. Telling us we had to integrate. And so we had a freedom of choice program in 1967, I believe it was. We had our first... '66-'67 school year. We had our first black students to enroll in our school and it was strictly on a freedom of choice. In other words the whites could go over there to Temple School, if they wanted to or they could come here. Well, on that year, we had some very fine capable students to come over here. They were all well behaved and very capable. Our coach was real pleased at that time. Jim Simmons was happy because he was getting five very fine football players from Temple School. All seniors and that was the year that we started winning in football. Up until then, we hadn't...we hadn't been able to beat in that sport, but when integration came, we began to compete well. And in fact, the record, I will say this without boasting. In fact I regretted it so often the second year I was football coach, the eleven-man team here. We won five games and lost four. Would you believe that won-loss record stood up until 1966, I believe it was, all of those years?

BB: That is almost twenty years.

RR: We couldn't... no one beat that record.

BB: Oh, no. And that wasn't really terrific either.

RR: That wasn't a big...no, that was the first year and I coached six-man the first year. Okay, and it was a terrible record. Second year we went in eleven-man football and I won one and tied one, I think. But my second year in eleven-man football we had a five and four record. And as I said, that stood up over those long years.

BB: Oh, me.

RR: And then when integration came along we started to winning.

BB: Okay.

RR: I never shall forget the first year we fully integrated. That was in '68. I can even to this day see those kids coming to the hallway of Diboll High School. They came in groups, in a group. It looked like they were afraid to get away from each other. They were all clustered together up and down the hall. And they weren't used to each other. They weren't used to white kids and the white kids weren't used to them and so it was

very flusterating time for them and it remained that way for several years. They just didn't know how to accept each other. Didn't know how to get along with each other.

BB: Would you have...did you have a lot of problems from them not getting along or did it just...?

RR: Yes. We had to go to the gymnasium on several occasions. I got on the inter-com system and when I saw something that was major that looked like it was developing such as pushing in the hall, several near fights to break out in the halls between the blacks and the whites. Get these rumors from various ones. Kids come in telling me that so and so was going to do so and so. I have got on the inter-com system and say let's go to the gym for a few minutes and we would go out to the gymnasium and we would talk it out. We maybe there two hours letting the black kids talk and the white kids talk and tell their grievances. What one group is doing to the other and that is one of the things...every time I go...this is one remark I would hear every time, "We go down the hall, they would push us, elbow us." Things of that nature. Little things, you know. Nothing major but just enough to keep the groups all stirred up. One with the other. They just didn't understand each other. They had been taught all these many, many years. I know the black people had how badly the whites had treated them over the centuries dating back to slavery and they still thought that all the white people were kinda that way. Maybe we were to blame for it all for all we know that they had heard about, but it took a lot of patient work with them to get them to tolerating each other. But it was a battle we had for several years there.

From '68 and it was still going on when I quit. Mr. Greer, Mr. Greer had a terrible first two years when he took my job as high school principal. I know I was still there as a Driver Ed teacher.

BB: To watch.

RR: I was Driver Ed. teacher, so I didn't have that. I didn't have the problems that he had. They had boycotts a time or two. The kids would leave.

BB: What are you talking about?

RR: Well, the kids would walk out. One day they walked out across the highway. They weren't going to meet any classes because of the disturbance between the two groups. They were mad at each other, didn't really want to get to fighting. I think one group was afraid and the others were glad of it. So that is the way it went.

BB: Oh, my goodness. I had never heard about a boycott before. Just to leave. What made them decide to come back? How long did they stay gone?

RR: Well, they probably...not long. Parents would get involved and make them come back. We have had...when I was...first two or three years of integration I have had just rooms full of black parents come up here, up to the high school and we would talk and

discuss. They would tell us what they felt like was wrong with our school and we would try to explain to them.

BB: Did you have any black teachers?

RR: Not many.

BB: That would come...that came over? Why not? I mean it seems like, you know if you were integrating that both schools would have teachers, you know.

RR: Well, I think it would have been better if we had had more black teachers. We had as I recall, we had two on the faculty of Diboll High School. But later Mr. Massey came as vice-principal.

BB: Did that seem to help the situation some?

RR: He helped some.

BB: I see. Well, I missed all that. I graduated in '68 and at that time in Livingston we still had freedom of choice. In fact, that was our first year for freedom of choice. I really thought that maybe Diboll did it just because they were...they saw it in the wind and they knew it was coming so they just said, "Well, let's go ahead and do it and maybe things will be fine." But the Federal government really just pushed.

RR: Yes, I was at the board meeting up here the fall before we had to integrate. I heard these guys from Washington, D.C. and they were black, two of them were. Meet with the school board and tell them they had to integrate. No way around it. So they did. They started out as freedom of choice but then that didn't satisfy them.

BB: That was just one year, right?

RR: That was just one year. We all felt like that if they had done, started in the first grade and let them come right on up it would have been much smoother, but that was too slow.

BB: Yes, that would have taken twelve years.

RR: Yes.

BB: To be fully integrated. Well, I don't know. Who is to say now, you know, what would have been best, or not.

RR: That's right.

BB: Because now it seems to go along as not black or white. It is just kids over there.

RR: That's right. We had...our sporting events. Well, it was a non-pleasant thing for me as principal during basketball games; I would go up there expecting everything to blow up because there would be weapons brought in there, sneaked in. I knew, I found out about it usually after every game after it was too late. There would be out of towners coming. We played an all black team from Houston, one of the big 5-A schools up here one night. The game hadn't been going long until we saw this tempers building up between one or two of their black players and one or two of our white players and finally they kinda went together out on the court. And when that happened the gym was full. It was crammed full of people and when that happened the crowd began to swoop down on the floor and I ran out there and Mr. Foster ran out there and said, "Get back in the stand! Get back in the stands! We will take care of it!" And we did. We finally got them back in the stands and the game went on but that sort of thing. You never knew what was going to happen. When we play Hudson they were all white. They were all white and those little cheerleaders would get over there across...I don't know whether this ought to be on the tape or not.

BB: Do you want me to turn it off?

END OF INTERVIEW