

BETTIE KENNEDY

Interview 170a

August 28, 2007, at The History Center, Diboll, Texas

Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, Rev. Bettie Kennedy discusses her life and memories growing up in Lufkin as the adopted daughter of homebuilder Will Ingram and his wife, Evie. She speaks of her uniquely integrated neighborhood of whites, black, and Jews, attending the segregated Dunbar School in Lufkin, and her family dynamics. Rev. Kennedy gives her thoughts on integration, education, and Lufkin's historic neighborhoods.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Today's date is August the 28th, 2007 and my name is Jonathan Gerland, and I am with the Reverend Bettie Kennedy and we're in The History Center in Diboll, Texas. And Mrs. Kennedy is going to tell us a little bit about her life, and I thought maybe if we could just begin by telling when and where you were born.

Bettie Kennedy (hereafter BK): It's been many years ago. I was born May the 19th, nineteen and thirty-one down in Broaddus in a rural area there to a mother, Willa Mae Ingram, who was 13 years of age at the time. It's a beautiful story about that birth. I understood that they had sent the oldest boy, Joe, into a new neighborhood there in the rural to get the midwife to come to deliver me and the midwife's husband would not allow her to come. So, she told the boys to go farther down the road to a doctor there and maybe he would come. But, in the meantime, the sister to Willa Mae, Sara Ingram, delivered me. The story says that she always heard, "count twelve and cut," so she counted the twelve notches and cut. So when the boys returned....

JG: So that would have been your aunt?

BK: That would have been my aunt.

JG: Ok.

BK: I was born. It is said that I was so small that you could hold me in one hand and really I should not have lived because the weight and all of that at that time. But, there had to be a special touch by the Lord that allowed me to live through the conditions. My uncle, Will Ingram and Evie Ingram, came to visit and they saw me and Mother. Evie Ingram said to my mother, "Give me this baby." And months later after they had moved back to Kilgore the boys picked cotton and raised enough money for her to get a bus ticket to bring me to Lufkin. I was 18 months old when Will and Evie Ingram took me into their home.

JG: Can I back up just a little bit?

BK: Yes, you may.

JG: What do you know about your father?

BK: I don't know anything about my father. It is said that Harvey Shad was my father. There are many rumors about the story of who my father is and even today we haven't located a person that should have been the father. One rumor was that said my grandfather was a sharecropper and the owner of the land was my father, who was a white gentleman, but we have not found a Harvey Shad. That's the name that I have been given through the years as being my father. Now there are certain characteristics that I possess which are very different. My eyes are very auburn, my hair is a texture that is different, my skin color is unusually different from the other members of my family – that is my mother and her brothers and sisters.

JG: Ok, and did your mother have other children?

BK: No. I am the only one. I broke the record.

JG: You broke the record.

(Laughter)

BK: Yes.

JG: But your mother had brothers and sisters?

BK: She had brothers and sisters. There were 9 siblings in her family.

JG: Ok. And Will Ingram and his wife were living in Kilgore?

BK: No. They were living in Lufkin.

JG: They were living in Lufkin at the time.

BK: Yes, yes.

JG: Ok, ok. And so they came to Lufkin to visit.

BK: Yes, yes. They came to Broaddus to visit.

JG: Ok.

BK: Yes.

JG: What do you know about your mother at the time...if she was in Kilgore was...I mean not Kilgore I'm sorry....in Broaddus?

BK: Well Kilgore is the area...it was out in the rural.

JG: I heard you say Kilgore, I don't know where I...

BK: Yeah, it's between Tyler and Kilgore. And it was called the Gladewater Community...

JG: Uh huh.

BK: ...in the early years. But it's called Wynona today.

JG: Ok.

BK: The area where our ancestors were freed slaves in that area.

JG: Ok.

BK: Yes.

JG: And what was the Kilgore connection?

BK: The Kilgore connection is the location between Tyler and Kilgore. And it was called the Gladewater Community.

JG: But, I mean your family's connection with that.

BK: Only location.

JG: Ok.

BK: Between Tyler and Kilgore...is where the land is.

JG: But your mother was living in Broaddus at the time you were born.

BK: Born, yes.

JG: And you lived with her for eighteen months.

BK: Yes.

JG: Ok. And then...

BK: In the meantime, my grandmother had passed away and my grandfather had lost the sight in one eye and was losing the sight in the only eye that he had. So, he thought, the story goes, that if he went back to the home place...that he would have brothers and sisters and someone to help to see after him.

JG: Ok.

BK: Yes. And the picture...is right behind you. That's it. Now, that's George Ingram...the one on the right is Willie Mae who is my mother. And the one on the left, no, the one sitting in his lap, that's Willie Mae. And this one on this side is Sarah, so they're close in age. The one that's standing is the oldest sister and she's Goldie.

JG: Ok, and who is George Ingram?

BK: George was my grandfather.

JG: Your grandfather...that was Will's...?

BK: Brother.

JG: Brother.

BK: Yes.

JG: Ok.

BK: And see you can tell that he's lost the vision in one eye and he was losing the vision in the other eye. And his wife had now passed away, my grandmother, with twins...she'd given birth to one and wasn't able to give birth to the second twin. And she died in childbirth. And so he returned back to the Kilgore, Gladewater area.

JG: Ok.

BK: Where he had lived as a child.

JG: Now what was Will Ingram doing in Lufkin?

BK: Now, that's a good question...

JG: At the time that he...

BK: ...and we are doing the research on that now. Dave Ingram, the history of our people, there were two slaves that came from Georgia to Texas. And Dave was one of the ones. And Dave came to Lufkin and Will came to Lufkin to live with his uncle...Dave. And we're trying to find a lot of, we're trying to find history about Dave. There are people...Dave was a preacher and I've located three people that remember Dave. I hope

to talk with them sometime later this week about what they remembered about Dave. On the phone many of them remember him as riding in a wagon, a mule driven wagon. So, that's how they remembered him. And he was called Pappy Ingram and his wife was called Mammy Ingram. His wife was Kate Ingram. She died in nineteen and fourteen and is buried in Stranger's Rest in the Lufkin Land Community there.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: It's called the Frost Cemetery; you'll hear it called either Frost or Stranger's Rest. Stranger's Rest is the one that I've known it as. So, her tombstone is one of the four tombstones that's still in that area. And that's interesting to know. So, she passed away in nineteen and fourteen. And Will and Evie married in nineteen and sixteen. I have a copy of her burial and evidently in those early years, Mr. Gibson was the one...Mr. Gibson was the one who probably did the burying...during those years since 1914.

JG: Uh huh. She is showing me a record of the funeral.

BK: Yes.

JG: From the funeral home records.

BK: And it was seventy-five dollars...very interesting. Her name was Kate Ingram.

JG: Forty-five for the casket.

BK: Yeah.

JG: It's like ten for the burial robe, embalming \$12.50, and some other transportation charges there.

BK: Uh huh. Now the funeral service was at Goodwill and that church is still standing. They evidently didn't know his first name so they just put Reverend Ingram here.

JG: And what year were you born again, I'm sorry?

BK: I was born in 1931.

JG: '31...ok. And so at eighteen months old your uncle and his wife...

BK: Yes.

JG: ...came and adopted you or...?

BK: Well, they saw me and they wanted me.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: Mother had lost a child. I understood she had become pregnant and she lost a son at six months old...or seven months into her pregnancy. And she never had any more children. So I'm closest to the only child she had.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: Yes.

JG: So they...did they officially adopt you or just...?

BK: As far as I know I have a record of paper that was drawn up. And I don't know whether that is within the keepings of adoption today or not...

JG: Yeah.

BK: ...in those years.

JG: But you went at eighteen months old, you went to live with them. And for all...

BK: Well they...Willie Mae brought me here.

JG: Ok.

BK: Remember the...her brothers and, I guess, maybe a sister, to me, have been among the ones that picked cotton. And the monies that they raised was enough to buy the ticket for Mother to bring me here.

JG: Ok.

BK: And she brought me here. The story goes that...

JG: Did your mother live...lived in Lufkin as well?

BK: No, she never lived in Lufkin.

JG: Ok.

BK: She lived in Arkansas at her death. But, she brought me here and I thought that was an interesting story that they picked cotton and saved enough money for her to come.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: And I would say to Mother...and that's who I refer to when you hear me say mother. I'm really talking about Evie Bell Ingram, Will's wife. Because that's the one

that I am closest to. And she said I would go around and say, "You better keep this baby 'cause Willie Mae gave you this baby." Yes.

JG: Ok.

BK: Eighteen months, I'm saying those words of wisdom. (laughing)

JG: Ok. So, tell me about some of your early memories of living in your new home.

BK: Oh in my new home that was a joyous time because Mother was such an industrious lady, so I never went to bed hungry. I never went around dirty, because she made sure that I was cleaned and hair was combed and in place. And I always had three meals a day. So those were good times.

JG: And then, how many other children were living in the home at the time?

BK: At that time she took my aunt Annie Mae to live in the house with me. And I just found this out in recent years before Annie Mae passed away...that she took Annie Mae to help with me. To make sure that I was dressed in the morning or whatever was necessary. So Annie Mae stayed in the house with us until her senior year, and then she left and went to Arkansas.

JG: But I mean, Will Ingram and his wife...they had children right?

BK: No, they had no children.

JG: They did not...they did not have children. Ok, I'm sorry.

BK: Only one son.

JG: Ok.

BK: And she lost that son...

JG: Ok.

BK: ...in the sixth or seventh month of her pregnancy.

JG: Ok...ok.

BK: Yes. Right behind you there is a map that I have sketched...can you reach that one?

JG: This one or the house?

BK: No, the one...that's it. This was a glorious time for me...

JG: She's showing me it looks like a floor plan of the house.

BK: It is. And I drew this...this house is still standing...both of these houses are still standing.

JG: It's at 402 Chestnut St.

BK: And 408 Chestnut St.

JG: 408 Chestnut.

BK: Now, it is said that Will and Evie Ingram lived in the 408 house after their marriage while Will built the big house. And when this house was completed they moved into the big house. Now, this house became a grocery store, a beauty shop, and then it became a dwelling with two apartments. And it's standing there today. We're not sure, I can't find exactly when it was built, but evidently it was built before they married in 1916. But the, it's some unique things about that piece of property, as I remember it as a child. So this is...this sketching that you see is what I remember most. There was a driveway in which you would drive into the garage. In the garage Daddy kept lumber because he was a carpenter. And the backside of the garage was his workshop where he would build things. He was a contractor. He would build cabinets and everything when he'd hand you the key to the house the house was completed. Paper, electrical work, plumbing, whatever was to be done was done and completely done. I always had an area to play, which was always a fun time 'cause there were trees and, I guess, Daddy would tie the rope to the tree to make me a swing. And I had play areas that I could get out and play under the trees. I had my own little garden spot. But on that property were four houses. One house stood right behind the 408 Chestnut, which meant this house would have been 408 and a ½. Then, Daddy built Mother a washhouse. I thought this was very unique...Mother took in washings in the 30's, during my growing up period. She did as many as twenty washings per week. And I don't know how she kept them separated, but this house was divided into two parts: one part was the wash area. In which, there was a wash machine with three tubs, and the last tub was the bluing tub. I don't know whether you can buy bluing today, but you put bluing in the water and the water would turn blue. And that would be the last wash. She had an area where she...

JG: That kept the whites white.

BK: Yes.

JG: Kind of helped the whites to be cleaner.

BK: Yes. You remember bluing?

JG: Uh huh.

BK: Yes. Well, that's the way it was. Now we stepped up on the porch and here was the pot. And this was set up on a stilt area. And that was a door and you make the fire to boil

the clothes here. She would take them out of there and put them in through the washing machine area, wring them into that tub, and then wring them into this tub, and then wring them into the last tub and then wring them out... and then hang them up. And there were clotheslines there on which we'd hang them. We had a chicken yard to feed the chickens and then there was a hen house. And you'd go and gather the eggs. There was a garden spot. And then there was an out toilet because the early years we didn't have an indoor toilet. Later years we had the bathroom area, there was a space but there were no fixtures. And later we had fixtures and that was interesting. So, this is the way that I remembered 402 and 408 Chestnut St. It was a delightful place to grow up – a heavenly place to grow up. Yes.

JG: And you lived there from about eighteen months old till the time that you went to college?

BK: Through college and through marriage.

JG: Ok...ok.

BK: Yes.

JG: 'Course you were born in '31 so this is during what there...known as the Depression.

BK: Yes. It was a...

JG: Can you tell a little bit about the neighborhood overall and just the time period?

BK: Yes. The time period...I know.

JG: I know you've talked before about some of the neighbors and things like that, so.

BK: The time period was a fascinating period and I did not realize that we were in a depression. Because, if you notice, to have a garden which meant we had fresh vegetables. To have a hen house we had eggs and food there. I think Mother was laying a foundation for me for the work that I do today...because whatever we grew in the garden she would send me into the neighborhood to carry beans or okra, cantaloupes. I remember a year we had more cantaloupes...my goodness. And she would send me to carry cantaloupes to persons who were sick or just people in the neighborhood. But it's strange that Daddy built most of the houses in the area. That's Jewish families, white families, black families. And on this street where 402 and 408 Chestnut...he built the ones at 416, the 418, and then the next building is Lucky Ward's School. Now, I did not attend Lucky Ward's School but that building is still standing there. So, that was the community. The next was Duke's home. Mrs. Lisa Duke's...I don't remember her husband. But then, Longs Chapel Church was there. The First United Methodist Church was on Bremond, also the First Baptist Church. So, my neighborhood was an integrated neighborhood and I did not know anything about segregation or integration...were words that I did not know. Because, my neighbors were just my neighbors...and I had the run of

the neighborhood, can you imagine that? Mother would limit me...I could go up Bremond and go up Groesbeck, and go up Paul Street. And, at the top of the hill I could go back down the hill. I thought Mother had eyes in the back of her head because there was Mrs. Massingill, there was Mrs. Thelma Smithhart. As far as I know, she's still living. And they would look after me when I would ride the bicycle up and down the hill.

JG: So you played freely with the white children in the area as well.

BK: And the Jewish children. The Hyman's, Carolyn and Leon and Shirley. Now, Shirley was older than we were but Carolyn and Leon...we were all very close together. Leon and I were more of friends because we would ride our bicycles. Carolyn was a little bit older and she's still living...she's living in the Tyler area. She's the only one living out of that family. The family all have passed away. And they could not ride their bicycle unless I went with them into the community. The Abrams...had the Abrams Store downtown, became Cannon and Parker in later years. Well, that was a fascinating area too. And the Abrams lived up on Paul St. And the Buck Store...that was another store downtown. We had quite a few Jewish stores in those times. Trevathan Drug Store, Carolyn's Shop, Abram's...just the community was. And I thought...Mother would send me down to pick up a dress for her and I didn't have any money. So, I would sign a little slip of paper and carry the dress home. She would call ahead and tell...and we call her Aunt Early. Her name was Barkley, at the dry good store. Mother would say, "Send her four or five yards with piece goods, whatever." And I would go pick it up. Again, I would just sign a little slip of paper and carry the piece goods home. So, we had the run of the community. And I guess my life was most unusual because of the fact that my father built houses and I felt that was part of that...the growing up period.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: So, and I'm talking about Bremond, Chestnut, Paul, and that's part of your historical district now. Which is...which...I had the run of the community. And we were integrated. So when we started talking about integration when we started talking about limitations. Some of these I did not understand.

JG: Now, tell me about school.

BK: Ok...school...

JG: School was integrated right?

BK: Segregation...no. No, no...segregated, yes.

JG: I mean segregated, right...yeah. It was segregated.

BK: Now Mother was very tactful with that. The Kennedy's had the jewelry store downtown...her daughter, the McDermits. Madeline and I, we played together, Madeline lived on Bremond...just a block away from my house. And I would go up to Madeline's

house and Madeline would come to my house. So it was time to go to school...so, Madeline went to Central Ward and I wanted to go to Central Ward with my friend Madeline. And Mother said, "No, I want you to go with Mrs. Hackney." And Mrs. Hackney was a teacher at Dunbar. So, she would...her husband would pick me up in the mornings and I would ride to school with...with them.

JG: But, you wanted to go with your...with your white friend. Uh huh.

BK: I wanted to go with my little friend...which was my white friend. But, it didn't...it really didn't faze me what was occurring.

JG: What was going....yeah.

BK: What was going on. I just accepted what she said.

JG: You just saw it as that's just what Mama...what Mama told you to do.

BK: When she spoke that was it. I didn't question her why.

JG: Yeah...right. Ok.

BK: Yes. So, that was interesting.

JG: And you went how many years to...you went all through high school.

BK: I went through high school...through...well, Dunbar had twelve grades.

JG: Ok.

BK: Yes. So I went all those grades there at Dunbar. That was one of the pictures you saw here. This is my graduating class in 1948, '49.

JG: Oh yeah.

BK: Sang with a leading quartet. That's the quartet that we sang in, yes.

JG: She's got a three ring binder with some photographs. And some from her high school days.

BK: Yes. Oh, here am I. Bettie Kennedy and then Bobby Whitehead. Bobby Reynolds at that time. Evelyn Banks...and she's still living. Bobby is living and a member of Long's Chapel Church. Mildred Jones has passed away. And wherever we went we would always win a first place. I sang first soprano, Bobby Whitehead sang second soprano, Evelyn sang first alto, and Mildred sang second alto.

JG: Now did any of these...the relationships that you had with, you know I'm talking about the racial...

BK: Yes.

JG: ...issues with the whites. Did any of that change as you grew older? I know y'all grew up together but, you know, by this age, junior, senior year in high school.

BK: Madeline had moved away. It seems as if Madeline's mother and father separated and the last report I had that...she had moved to Nacogdoches. But I haven't been able to track her down.

JG: I guess what I'm asking is did your early relationships with other white children...

BK: Last.

JG: ...yeah, did it change as you got older?

BK: Yes. No, no it did not change. Carolyn and I...I hear from Carolyn today. That's a letter that I've received from Carolyn Hyman. Now, Carolyn never married and here...this is her history of Mr. Hyman. Mr. Hyman was a financier of Will's houses that he built.

JG: Ok.

BK: And this is her report of that experience. This is Mr. Hyman here. Here's Mr. Hyman here. This was Carolyn's report as she gave it...

JG: Uh huh.

BK: ...to the Angelina County Historical...

JG: Commission.

BK: Commission. Yes.

JG: Ok.

BK: Yes.

JG: Alright. Anything else you want to talk about your father and your mother during those early years? Or your, what we might call childhood years?

BK: Yes. It was a delight to have Evie Ingram as a mother. She was a teacher in Crockett, Texas. And this was in 1914, and it evidently was the same year that she met Will. I understood that Will had gone to Crockett to visit a cousin. And they'd had a

dance and that's where he met her...at the dance. And proposed to her, and they got married and he moved her to Lufkin. But...

JG: So they were...approximately how old were they when they, more or less, I guess adopted you? Were they in their late thirties, early forties?

BK: I guess so...I had not given that much of a thought.

JG: Ok.

BK: But evidently they were because Daddy...

JG: Yeah, if she was teaching in 1914 in Crockett. Yeah.

BK: Yeah...yeah.

JG: She's showing me a certificate from Houston County.

BK: Teaching the second grade.

JG: To teach the second grade – county second grade certificate.

BK: Yes...yes.

JG: For Evabale Jones. So Jones was her maiden name before she married, before she married Will.

BK: Maiden name that's right. Yes...so that was...

JG: Was she from the Crockett area?

BK: Yeah.

JG: Ok.

BK: And that property is still there. It's about fifty-five acres of land, in the Crockett area...out on the Centerville Road.

JG: Ok.

BK: And that's an interesting drawing of the area.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: But, because of Evie's teaching she would read to me every night. And I would love the stories so well. I would say that, "I'm not going to go to sleep tonight, I'm going to

listen to the end of the story.” So, I would hold my eyes open. I would prop them open so that I could make sure that I could hear the end of the story. Often times, she would maybe get a page or two pages and I’d never hear the end of the story. I’d fall asleep. So, to read to me every night was very unusual. On cold nights I remember she would always warm the blanket or the sheets so my bed would be warm when I go to bed.

JG: How would she do that?

BK: By the heater we had a...

JG: With bricks?

BK: No...you had a heater.

JG: No, you had a heater. Ok.

BK: Heater...and you had to bring your wood in and put it in the wood box.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: And she would warm it by the heater and put it in the bed for me to go to bed.

JG: Ok.

BK: If I cried...and I cried an awful lot...she would give me a mirror and she’d say, “Don’t mess your pretty face up, you just shouldn’t cry.” Now that’s a good thing to do.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: I’d look in the mirror in a few minutes I’d stop crying. To cook three meals a day, was very unusual and very different. I imagine, for most families of that time. Daddy would cook doing the...

JG: So he worked in the neighborhood so he could come home I guess for lunch and things.

BK: He came home for lunch yes. And Mother always had a...

JG: Ok. So y’all...you always remembered that she cooked...

BK: We had boiled food. Now we had boiled peas and greens and...

JG: Was the noontime meal the big meal?

BK: Yes.

JG: Ok.

BK: The morning meal would always be flapjacks. Little pancakes.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: With syrup. We had the corncakes through the weekdays. And on Sundays we had the flour cake something like your pancakes today. But then, we would have boiled food for dinner. Like, cornbread and peas, and stew meat.

JG: Now, when you say dinner...you mean the noontime meal?

BK: The noontime meal...he would come home. That would be a big meal.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: And the afternoon, or evening meal, we would have whole cake. And that would be a big skillet biscuit. You cook it on top of the stove and it would cover the whole skillet. And you cook it slow and it will become crusty like a big biscuit. And then, you cut off pieces and you eat it with syrup and butter. We ate a lot of syrup. And that was good. So that would be our meal.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: And that was our meal as long as Daddy lived. And it followed the same pattern. Now, Sundays you would have chicken. You would have baked chicken, fried chicken, broiled chicken, chicken and dressing, chicken and dumplings – always a chicken meal.

JG: And that would be chicken from your own...your own stock.

BK: From the chicken yard.

JG: From the chicken yard.

BK: And you'd have to put the chicken up for two weeks in a pen and feed it special corn and oats or whatever.

JG: Fatten it up.

BK: Yes, to fatten it up, yes.

JG: Now, I notice from one of your signs here that your...Mr. Ingram, your father...died in '46.

BK: In '46.

JG: And you graduated in '49.

BK: '49. Yes, yes.

JG: Class of '49. Tell me a little bit about that...about losing your father.

BK: Well, that...the morning that he passed was a very strange passing. The people had come...people of the Masonic family had come. And all these people at the house that night. I wondered, you know, "Why so many folks here?" So, Mother came and she said, "I think you need to go to bed." And I did...I went to bed. But it seemed like I hadn't gone to sleep before she came and awakened me and said that Daddy had passed. But, in the meantime...

JG: You were about fifteen years old at the time...is that right?

BK: Fourteen.

JG: Fourteen, fourteen years old.

BK: Yes. Mother said that Daddy told her said, "Mrs. Evie,"...and he would call her Mrs. Evie...he said, "You go to bed because I'm going to sleep." But, she did not go to bed. When they awakened me she said, "Well, I'm going to go in now and bathe Will for the last time." So, she went into the room with him alone and gave him his bath and whatever before the undertaker came. These persons had been there through the night. I remember the Lambs had been there through the night. And I still wasn't aware what death meant. So, when daylight came...I said to Mother, "I'm going to go to school and tell my teachers that Daddy had passed away." But, I never thought that he was gone to not return. I thought, sure, he would come back. But he never came back. And I told the Principal and I told the teachers that Daddy had died. And then I went back home to be with Mother.

JG: Had he been ill?

BK: Had cancer of the spine. Yes.

JG: Ok. About how long of an illness was it?

BK: It had last...

JG: Several years or...?

BK: Oh, I'm gonna say a year.

JG: Ok. And I guess that prevented him from working as regularly as he had been?

BK: Yes. At the time that he took sick he had two houses being built. And, he had six employees. So he had asked a Mr. U. S. Smith from Alto to come down to take over the finishing of those two houses...and he did.

JG: And he built houses not...for whites and blacks right?

BK: He built houses for everyone.

JG: For everybody.

BK: Yes, for the Jewish ones he built the Hyman's house. I haven't found the Largent's. There are Largent's in Lufkin and I remember that name mainly. And I don't know how many houses he built for the Largent's. He worked for Joe Stefano. Joe Stefano had, what they call Joe's quarters off Lining [street] there...

JG: Can you say that last name...just for the tape?

BK: Stefano.

JG: Ok. Like S-T-E-F-A-N-O.

BK: I guess that's...

JG: Stefano...or...ok.

BK: Yes. There were...he had sons and daughters living here and I think grandchildren are living here now.

JG: Ok.

BK: That's an interesting part of the history too, because Daddy built the houses in the quarters there...in Joes' quarters. Now Mr. Joe had a theater there called Joe's Show. And that would always be fun to go to the movie to see...black movies...many of the movies were...Amos and Andy.

JG: Uh huh. Ok.

BK: And that kind of one. Yes, it was very interesting. And I think you paid a nickel to go to the movies (laughing) or something like that. In those years it was very little.

JG: Uh huh. And was that at a theater?

BK: Yes. A theater.

JG: Was it just for blacks only...or was it a divided?

BK: Just for blacks only...no, no it was a blacks only.

JG: Just blacks only theater.

BK: Now, Lynn's Theater...which was downtown on the...on what's known as Frank's St. now...that theater was for black's and white's. Black's went upstairs and whites went downstairs.

JG: And was the Pines Theater like that as well?

BK: It wasn't at that time.

JG: Ok.

BK: The Texan Theater wasn't...they were for white only.

JG: White only.

BK: Yes. And later, the Pine's Theater opened their upstairs for blacks.

JG: Upstairs for blacks. Ok.

BK: Yes.

JG: Alright...well, so your father died in '46...

BK: Yes.

JG: ...so your last couple years or so were without your father.

BK: Without my father yes, yes.

JG: Uh huh. Ok. So, was it your mother who encouraged you to continue your education beyond...or he had already...

BK: Well my father...the evening that he was passing, and I did not know that he was dying, had said to me, "Keep the friends that you have, make new friends, get an education. I have put money aside for you to get an education." Now, I'm sure he may have said other things, but, those are the profound words that I remember.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: Mother gave me a glass of juice to have him to drink it while he was talking with me. And those were some of the words that he did. I don't know how long I stayed in the room by his bedside as he said these words to me. Yes.

JG: Ok. Alright. If you'd like we could continue on chronologically and talk more about your life...

BK: Ok.

JG: ...or is there more that you want to say about Mr. Ingram and...?

BK: He was an unusual person...he never talked very much. Very quiet, he would come in from work in the afternoons and he would spend time at a desk that he had built...working out plans for the job that he was going to do. Some of the unique things about his job...the six persons that he had hired...two of them were left handed. And the others were right handed. So, he would put the one on the left hand to nail the boards here and one on the right hand here...and they could build a house faster that way. This was long before pre-cut materials. So, he would cut the boards, give it to the guys, and they would work much faster that way. So, I thought that was a unique thing.

JG: Do you remember the race of the people that worked for him?

BK: Well they were all black.

JG: All black.

BK: And they all lived in...Smitty is one of the names and he's a Cole. He pursued carpentry...his brother Squirrel, is what he was called. Marvin pursued carpentry and lived in the Dallas area. All of these guys, I can't remember two of the guys...but they were all from the Cedar Grove area. They would gather in the morning about six o'clock to go to work at six thirty or seven to work on the job. Yes.

JG: Ok. So, once you graduated from high school tell me about your decision to go on to college.

BK: There was no problem with that. The decision had already been made is where we started from, and it was a journey to go to college.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: So you packed your suitcase, you packed your trunk...trunks in those years to go to college. That means you had sheets and towels and...

JG: And you went to Prairie View...A & M.

BK: Went to Prairie View.

JG: Was there any choice to be made?

BK: Yes.

JG: Were there other choices that you considered?

BK: Yes. I went to Prairie View because that was the cheapest. Twenty-eight dollars a month. Texas College was forty dollars a month at that time which is a CME school in Tyler. But, that was going to be too much money for Mother. I decided Prairie View would be the best place for me to go.

JG: Ok.

BK: So I went there.

JG: And how many years were you at Prairie View?

BK: I was there four years. Yes.

JG: Four years. Ok. And you got a degree?

BK: Got a degree...a BS degree in elementary education.

JG: Ok.

BK: Yes.

JG: And then what did you do after college?

BK: I went to Austin to teach the deaf. I taught there for a year in teaching little students in the beginning of their schooling.

JG: And this would have been what....mid to late '50's?

BK: '53.

JG: Oh, ok. Early '50's.

BK: '53, yes. And I taught them. And those were some joyous years for me.

JG: And how many years were you there?

BK: I was there for one year, I got married and came back to Lufkin and taught in Lufkin. Divorced and went back to Austin and taught in Austin again. I worked in Austin...

JG: And who did you marry?

BK: Married S. T. Lewis. Yes.

JG: S. T. Lewis. Ok. And was he from Austin?

BK: No he was from Lufkin.

JG: Oh, from Lufkin. Ok, ok.

BK: Yes. And we had two children. Batell Lewis and Willett Lewis.

JG: Ok.

BK: Yes.

JG: Did y'all meet in Austin or did y'all already know each other?

BK: No, S. T. was a member of Long's Chapel Church and the director of the choir and I was a member of the choir. So, I'd known him all of my life because he was a part of the church. Yes.

JG: Ok.

BK: And I grew up in the church, and Long's Chapel CME Church.

JG: Long Chapel. Ok, ok.

BK: Yes. I was christened in the church. And we call it baptizing now. But in early years it was called christening. Mother and Dad, we gathered at the church for the Christening of me. And Mrs. Tempie Hackney held me during the ceremony and she's still living. She's 93 years old and still living.

JG: Hmmm.

BK: And so that's interesting too. (laughing) Yes. And I sang in the choir with her...so she's been a part of my life. I check on her every day...today...because she's been such a great part of my life as growing up.

JG: So when you went back to Austin for the second time were you teaching still?

BK: Yes.

JG: Ok.

BK: I was teaching older children. I guess they may have been in the second grade then. And I heard from...

JG: And what year would this have been?

BK: I went back in '60, '59 or '60.

JG: Ok.

BK: After Mr. Lewis and I had separated.

JG: So schools were still segregated.

BK: The school was still, yeah, the school was still segregated.

JG: Ok.

BK: And these children...

JG: And your two children...lived with you?

BK: Yes. They went with me. I left the baby here with Mother and carried the oldest girl with me. I thought that would work out easier. And then latter years I carried the younger girl with me. And so I had both of them with me there in Austin. And I lived on the campus...I lived in the dormitory and this was called B. D. and O... The Blind, Deaf, and Orphan School. And, living in the dormitory made it very nice because my children could be a part of the activities that went on on the campus for the children, the deaf children there.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: If there was a festival day or the movies or whatever went on on the campus they could be a part of it. Yes.

JG: Ok. And how many years did you teach at that second go around?

BK: The second go around three years.

JG: Three years. Ok.

BK: Yes.

JG: And then what? I know I'm moving kind of fast but...

BK: Then I came back to Lufkin again...

JG: Came back to Lufkin. Ok.

BK: ...and married again.

JG: Married again. Ok.

BK: I married Oscar Kennedy. And to that union five children were born.

JG: Five children. Ok.

BK: And that's a part of my life, I taught school again in Lufkin. Yes.

JG: Taught school. Uh huh. Ok.

BK: So that's where we are now.

JG: Ok.

BK: With five children.

JG: And how did you become Reverend Bettie Kennedy?

BK: Oh, my goodness, someone said that I preached all of my life because I didn't realize this...that the older kids in the neighborhood could not go to the park or the theater unless I went...and got permission for them to go. And I would carry them to the movies or to the park. Then I said, "Well, it's time to go home now." And load them up and make sure they go home. But, many of those children were older than I was and I didn't realize that till later years. So, I wouldn't allow them to do things...I would keep them in a straight line...this is what you have to do so...I've been preaching all of my life. I started preaching as a licensed minister in nineteen and eighty-one. Yes.

JG: Ok.

BK: And I preached at the one church for twenty years. Collins Chapel CME Church. Over on Row...801 Row St. Yes.

JG: Ok, ok. And tell a little bit...I know for several years now you've been doing historical portrayals and...

BK: Yes....yes.

JG: ...presentations, black history. Tell a little bit about that and what...when did that start if there is a time that you can say that...just what you want to share about that.

BK: There is a time that it started...I worked with special children who had...children who had problems in learning. And, I was wondering how I could get over to the children...I was teaching history...how to get over to these how to understand stories in history. So, we were studying Phyllis Wheatley...and evidently it was black history month. So, I came alive as Phyllis Wheatley...that was the first character I've ever done. And it...I was working at Dunbar at the seventh grade level. And I was...these children were having trouble in retaining history. So I came alive that particular story as Phyllis Wheatley. And that was the first story that I've ever done.

JG: About how long ago was that?

BK: Oh my goodness...that's a long time ago. I assume that was maybe in the eighties I believe.

JG: In the eighties. Ok...ok. I'm sorry if I interrupted.

BK: Let's say '85.

JG: Around '85. Ok...ok.

BK: Around '85. But...

JG: And so that was pretty affective then?

BK: It was very affective. And even today the characters that I do is very affective. Because, I do many character's now.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: Phyllis Wheatley was the one. And I have only done her once since that time. But, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, Harriet Tubman...Sojourner Truth...are a few of the characters that I do. Some of the stories...I did a character for the veteran's clinic. A crowd was there and I did Coretta Scott King and....did my best. I had a display and all this...and after I did the presentation this lady came up and said, "What time is your plane leaving?" I said, "Plane leaving, I'm not going anywhere." She said, "I thought you flew in." I said, "No, no...I'm Bettie Kennedy, I'm really not Coretta Scott King." I began to explain to her that I'm Bettie Kennedy as a character.

JG: As a character.

BK: And they introduced me as Bettie Kennedy, the character Coretta Scott King. So, when I find adults being confused I said, "My goodness, I must have some..."

JG: Doing pretty good huh.

BK: Yes. But now, children...the most unique thing I was in HEB one day and this little one, must have been about five years old, pointed to me and...(gasps) mouth flew open and gasps for breath and said, "Grandmother, grandmother that's Harriet Tubman." And tugged at her dress. "She was at my school this morning."

JG: "There she is, there she is."

BK: And so that was most interesting. Said, "No, that's Reverend Kennedy. No, no." When I find that adults are confused I know that that must be something. So I'm still doing them even today. I do them year round. I don't just, not for...

JG: Black history month. Right, right.

BK: Black history month. I do them year round. Yes.

JG: And you've come to our rotary club a few times.

BK: Yes. That's correct. Yes.

JG: I know you've done some things at the Diboll Library as well.

BK: And they retain that much longer. Even today, I've had older persons to stop me to say, "You came to my school when I was in such and such a grade, and I remember you and remember the story that you did." So the stories really are more meaningful when you come alive in character. Yes.

JG: Right, right. Well it's more memorable. That's definitely so.

BK: Yes, it is. That's correct...that's a good word. Yes, memorable.

JG: I see on...I'm going backwards now...

BK: That's ok...that's fine.

JG: I see on one of your panels that you brought "Willie Ingram, Third Grade Education, Smith County."

BK: Yeah.

JG: Is that your father?

BK: That's Will Ingram.

JG: That's Will Ingram.

BK: Yes.

JG: So...he taught school.

BK: No.

JG: No.

BK: Let me see which one your looking at.

JG: Well, this one right here.

BK: Ok.

JG: It says “Willie Ingram Third Grade Education Smith...”

BK: A third grade education...he taught himself.

JG: Oh he had a third grade...oh, ok.

BK: Yeah...he had a third grade education.

JG: I saw him in a suit there I was wondering...

BK: Now, you see that’s Smith County...that’s still up in that area between Kilgore and Tyler.

JG: Yeah, Tyler’s the County seat.

BK: Yeah, down in that area.

JG: I’m sorry, I misunderstood...I thought maybe...

BK: And he was one of twelve children.

JG: I thought maybe he had some background in education.

BK: No, he had no background in education.

JG: Ok...he had a third grade education, ok.

BK: But Will learned and he really felt the importance of education too.

JG: Ok.

BK: Now he was the baby of the family of twelve children.

JG: So, this picture here of you it says, “Bettie Ingram age 19.”

BK: Yeah, 14.

JG: That was...14, 14. So that would have been the age that you were when your father died huh.

BK: Yes, yes. And that’s very unique that...see the blouse with the sweater on it?

JG: Uh huh.

BK: Mother sewed beautifully and she made that blouse. See the rickrack around it?

JG: Uh huh. Uh huh.

BK: Yes.

JG: Yes, very nice. That's a good picture.

BK: Uh huh. Ok.

JG: Alright. Ok, well...like I said we, you know, we can do a follow up interview or something.

BK: Ok, well whatever you think as we, as we go through this.

JG: But, do you feel like you shared, you know, talking about your father and mother...what you would like to? Or is there anything else you would like to add at this time?

BK: We have touched so many beautiful areas Jonathan...especially when you talked about integration and segregation.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: My experience with that is totally different from the average person in the community. We could go back even to the houses that he built and how he touched many lives, Will Ingram I'm referring to you.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: Because, he was such an unusual person. And I'm sure a lot of this, and I do feel this very strongly, I think an incentive for him to marry Evie Ingram because she was a teacher.

JG: Uh huh.

BK: And she would be an asset to him to help him. Now, I never saw her sit down and read something to him, or point something out to him. But, I'm sure she was a great influence in his life...educational wise, because Mother had gone to Mary Allen in Crockett, Texas and also to Prairie View. Yes.

JG: Ok. Alright, well thank you very much.

BK: Well thank you for having me. I appreciate this.

END OF INTERVIEW