

MARSHALL CAPPS

Interview 189a

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Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, long-time Diboll Independent School District board member Marshall Capps reminisces about his 12-year tenure on the board, including the years of integration. Mr. Capps began his school board position when the Beulah Common School District consolidated with Diboll in 1962. Shortly thereafter, the Diboll board began the integration process with a Freedom of Choice plan. Mr. Capps remembers it to be a relatively painless process in which the board recognized that desegregation would happen and wanted to control the process in their town.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Today is February 3, 2010. My name is Jonathan Gerland. I'm at The History Center today with Mr. Marshall Capps who served on the Diboll Independent School District Board of Trustees during the time of racial integration. I thought maybe Mr. Capps we could just begin by telling how and maybe when you came to serve on the Diboll school board.

Marshall Capps (hereafter MC): In 1962 Beulah Common School District consolidated with Diboll School and I was on the board at Beulah. I had served one year. I was the last selected trustee out there at Beulah. After we integrated they wanted somebody, I mean after we consolidated they wanted somebody from out there to be on the board and they asked me to do it. So, I ended up serving twelve years.

JG: Twelve Years.

MC: Twelve years.

JG: Talk a little bit about your background about serving on the school board at Beulah. A little bit of your own background, your family, where you were raised and maybe some of your earliest experiences with race relations.

MC: I was raised out there at Beulah and went to school there until, through the seventh grade. I graduated from out there in 1942.

JG: When were you born?

MC: May 12, 1928.

JG: 1928, so you went to school there in Beulah.

MC: Yes, for all those years until '42 and I graduated and we were going to the high school students, junior high students were going to Lufkin at that time, so I went to Lufkin school and graduated from up there in 1947 I believe it was.

JG: 1947 okay. What was your family background? What did your father do for a living?

MC: He was a farmer, a log cutter and just anything he could get to make a little money back during the Depression. I remember those years. It was pretty rough, you know. The crisis was in '29 you know, so even in the late thirties I can still remember it. It was pretty hard times. We had a cotton farm out there and to be honest with you I think if we hadn't been living on a farm we would have went hungry some of those times because there wasn't that many jobs he could do. He could cut logs and make ties, so we would raise our food. You could raise hogs in the woods at that time and cattle, and you had your chickens and eggs and milk and all that stuff.

JG: Subsistence farming, huh?

MC: I'm telling you, that old pea patch come in handy too. (laughter)

JG: What did you do after graduation? What was your chosen occupation or profession? Did your formal education end at high school?

MC: At high school, yes. I went to put my application in at the papermill. That was the going thing back then. I also had this friend of mine down in Channelview, he was working at a steel mill down there and he said "I can get you on down here if you want me too." I said "well see what you can do." So, he called me and said "I've got you a job if you want to come." And about that time the papermill called me to come to work out there. I was almost a Houstonite.

JG: Almost a Houstonite.

MC: Thank goodness I didn't go down there. I went to work for the papermill and worked there about three years and went into the Army then in 1950.

JG: Was the military integrated at that time? Did you serve with black soldiers?

MC: Somewhat, there were a few blacks, there wasn't that many. They were beginning to get more blacks in there with us, you know. But they hadn't integrated with women at that time. (laughter)

JG: So, you pretty much lived most of your life in Beulah, is that right?

MC: Yes, I served, trained in Santa Barbara, California until I guess it was April of 1951. Went to France for more training there until January of '52, and went to Korea. That was an unnecessary thing in my life. I got out of the Army in '52, October of '52 and got home and married in December 12, 1952 and went back to work for the papermill.

JG: Back to work at the papermill. Were you working at the papermill when you were on the school board at Beulah and Diboll?

MC: Yes.

JG: Okay. So, what was Beulah like at that time as far as the school system and serving on the board? I know you said you were just there about a year or so. How was the district? How did y'all view Diboll taking Beulah in? How did the community see it?

MC: Well of course that was a change, it was controversial, you know. Of course I was against it. You had, out there you had at that little school you had a couple of teachers and you had all those students, you know.

JG: Was Beulah by then through high school or was it still just through seventh grade?

MC: No, it was just seventh grade.

JG: Just seventh grade.

MC: You couldn't get as much education as you could like at Diboll had different grades and all those teachers. The thing was school was your focal point back there in the community. You had all these get together and people got together and had all these parties and different things at the old schools.

JG: At the old school house, on the school ground. Did you have children that were attending Beulah at that time?

MC: My oldest daughter, she started in 1961 and I was talking to her about it the other day. I said, "Well who was your teacher?" I thought I knew. She said "Mrs. Walker, Mrs. Howard Walker." She went there one year and then came on out here to Diboll after that when we integrated [transcriber's note – should be consolidated].

JG: Besides change can you recall anything a little more specific. You said you were against coming into the Diboll schools. Anything you can elaborate on that? Was it change in itself?

MC: Well, yes you hated to give up your lifestyle. We had that little grocery store down there and people would meet down there some, you know, especially the old guys would get out there and talk about the weather, not old women. (Laughter) But that is about what it was.

JG: Was it generally considered at Diboll just that pure education would have been a better thing or what?

MC: Yes, really you did. You knew it was better for the students. But I tell you there is some, education is there for you if you...I think the main thing is your parents leading

you. I know of this...my dad's friend when he was a little boy he told me about it several times out there. Of course there wasn't very many people lived out there then. This little boy lived about a mile, mile and half from me and his mother would come over and pick him up in this old surrey. She would carry him over there and let him spend the day and night. She home schooled him and that boy, my dad's friend, right down there in that creek bottom he got enough education there; he went on and made a doctor. He started his practice in Okalahoma, he died young. My dad, that was...he thought about that a lot, it must have been a good friend of his. I had thought about that, if anyone really wanted an education they could get it if they strived for it.

JG: If they truly wanted it, yes sir.

MC: Of course we had some pretty smart people out there that done real well in life.

JG: You said you were against it, was the majority of people in Beulah against it? Maybe just if you could comment on the process of how Diboll took in the schools.

MC: I don't remember, seems like it was left up to the school board to do it. I think probably the majority was for keeping the school out there. But, the majority of the school board ruled that they would consolidate with Diboll.

JG: You came directly onto the Diboll school board when that happened?

MC: No, I had to be elected out here.

JG: Oh, you had to be elected, okay. So that ended your public service at least temporarily until you were elected.

MC: Well, it was just one year I was on the school board out there and the next year I was on it here, you know.

JG: Right okay. Well then maybe describe your earliest experiences on the school board and specifically we are getting into the racial integration issue. Do you remember when that first came up as a topic for the school board to consider?

MC: Well in 1964-65 they passed what they called the Freedom of Choice and that was about the time, that was right after I came out here, you know. I came here in '63 the first year and so '64 they gave us Freedom of Choice.

JG: Was everybody pretty much in agreement with that?

MC: No, there were different views on that too. (laughter) You know change a lot of time is hard to come by. But anyway in 1965-66 school year there were 750 white students and 230 black students, you know. So that came about and I think it was in 1965 the board voted to implement the Freedom of Choice that school year. We had to submit a plan, the school did for that and they accepted our plan. We were one of the first ones to turn it in.

JG: Who actually worked up the plan, Mr. Pate? I am specifically referring to the plan that was published in the newspaper. Was it something that Mr. Pate worked up and presented to the school board?

MC: I think it was, he knew we had to do that. He submitted a plan and give the black students an opportunity to come into the district if they choose too. I think it was in 65 that there were 21 black students registered to attend the formerly all white school. I think there was only one that followed through, one black student.

JG: That would have been Valerie Anderson. Just for the sake of the recording Mr. Capps and I had kind of reviewed some of this history before hand and looked at some of the newspapers and things. Do you recall in the big scheme of things, and by that I mean the school board workings, where was integration as far as an issue? Was it a priority or not a priority? Just as something that maybe the immediacy of it, was it something you felt you needed to take action on soon, in the context of everything else that the school board was dealing with at the time?

MC: I just felt like and some others did too, of course there was always that change. Some of the white people were for the integration and some were against it. Some of the black people were also, you know.

JG: So a little bit for and against on both sides.

MC: Yes, on both sides you know. And then, the school board...different members had different views on it too.

JG: Did you hear directly from your constituents? Did anybody in the community approach you as a member of the school board and say, "This is how I feel?"

MC: Oh yes. You always have that.

JG: Anything you care to share about that? Is that something, did you seriously consider those views?

MC: Well you know, you had some that were for it and you just kind of had to weigh it all in, you know. Of course we had to obey the law and the plans they drew up for us that went down to that really.

JG: Just the realization that it was going to happen and just how... not if, but how.

MC: Yes, that we had too, when.

JG: How and when, okay.

MC: In '68 they passed that law that did away with Freedom of Choice and you had to integrate, you know. Of course that was...

JG: How, in those decisions and I know this was a long time ago, but Diboll Schools we just discussed a little bit about taking in Beulah. I think the next year they took in the Burke Schools. So you've got an addition of students and then shortly after that it's going to be integrated schools. Do you remember any discussions, considerations maybe for adequate facilities with this tremendous growth now of students and maybe changes for campuses and things.

MC: We had to build more schools, more classrooms you know. Of course, whenever it was Freedom of Choice the black students had their own football team and when they integrated and came over to the white school, they didn't have enough to have a team over there. So, all those that wanted to play football came on over or baseball or whatever you know. Actually it was so many students come over until there weren't enough left at Temple High School for it to be accredited. Am I saying it right?

JG: I think so, accredited.

MC: Accredited, so they had to bring them all over here for that purpose, at the high school.

JG: Do you remember the hiring of Coach Jim Simmons? I was able to review the board minutes a little bit briefly. Do you remember anything specifically about how he was hired? In the minutes it mentioned some questions the candidates had to successfully answer. Do you remember that?

MC: No, I don't remember that but, when he came here our football equipment was in bad shape. It was dangerous for our kids to play without good helmets and good pads, you know. So when he came here he was just young and vigorous and wanted to have a good team so we gave him the go ahead to build us a good athletic program and he did. He got on to it. The first year he was here he put us \$60,000 in the red. (laughter) So we said, "Well what are we going to do?" Somebody said, "Well, see if Mr. Temple will help us." Good 'ol Mr. Temple and he was right behind us all the time. He helped us that year.

JG: Helped you out.

MC: So we did and we went to Mr. Temple the next year we had about \$60,000 debt and we went to Mr. Temple again and he came across again.

JG: And of course for the recording we are talking about Arthur Temple, Jr. who was head of the company.

MC: Yes, of course he always was with the school district for things we needed. We would have to have some land to build a football stadium on or other buildings and it was no problem there. He was always behind the school.

JG: I want to come back to Coach Simmons a little bit but, since we are talking about Mr. Temple right now, did he ever address you or to your knowledge any other board members about the issues of integration?

MC: Simmons?

JG: No, Mr. Temple?

MC: No, not that I know of, no.

JG: I think I knew the answer to that, but I needed to ask. We are just asking everybody across the board.

MC: No, he never did.

JG: Okay, so now back to Coach Simmons. I think when he was hired they definitely were giving thought to the integration program and how that would play into the sports program, the athletics program. But, that was some of the questions, concerns, his views on racial integration of the athletics program. So, that was really what y'all were looking for, was someone who would not be, certainly not an obstacle there but maybe even a credit to that program. I just wondered if you remembered anything specific.

MC: Not anything specific, that was a few days back.

JG: Okay, I fully understand.

MC: But I do remember that he really got into the program real good. He was a good coach.

JG: I visited with him a couple of years ago and he addressed that issue too that at least that year that the athletics program integrated that 66-67 year, that everything seemed to be, you know, no real problems at all. He was actually hired away maybe based on that on the success of the integration program. He told me that once he went off to some of these other schools that he realized it wasn't necessarily because of him but maybe the community as a whole. He had a little more difficulty in some other programs than here. But, you know we probably need to interview him for this particular project. That was just a conversation that he and I had. Anyways, let's talk, I know during this time the City of Diboll had just incorporated as a city in '62, relatively recently for this time period we are talking about. There were a lot of projects you might say, going on in the city that was federally funded, the Housing Authority, the public library building was federal funds. This is kind of a follow up question. Did any of that factor into decisions to integrate and maybe because in essence I know it was being enacted at the state level, but it was a federal mandate really to integrate these schools...but did any of those projects that Diboll was getting a lot of federal grant projects, did that speed up the process to go quicker? Was that just a non-factor, or were you even aware of that?

MC: No, I don't remember that. It probably did inspire us some that everything was going forward. So, we had, I think we done pretty good. We didn't have all that much problem with our racial integration. We had some but that was a plus for us I think. The building program, we build a gym while I was on the board. We built an Ag building, a band hall at junior high. It's quite a few things that went on so it was up and up situation I think.

JG: Right. Do you remember any specific visits from say the state education powers that be, or the federal powers that be? I think the newspapers had talked about periodically they would come down or a representative. Did they meet with the school board?

MC: No, not the school board. They might have met with Mr. Pate. I feel like they did.

JG: Okay, so the board, to your recollection, didn't have any direct reports from these agencies or organizations?

MC: Not that I remember.

JG: Okay. You commented a little bit on the school finances and how going to Mr. Temple at least a couple of times. Anything else you care to share about that? And did integration itself, how did that play into finances and shuffling teachers around, hiring new teachers? Again, just the change that that involved, was there anything else that I've neglected to ask you specifically or anything? And, again I know it was a long time ago. We are just trying to cover all that we can.

MC: Not that I can recall, anything specific about it.

JG: Any, you know the general feeling is, especially someone of my generation, what we've read and what we've heard, that it was a fairly smooth transition. It certainly didn't have some of the troubles that other communities and things had. But, is there any specifics, again not to encounter that interpretation but just more specifics about maybe some of the things that weren't quite as smooth. Anything that you remember, just some of the issues that might have come up that you care to share?

MC: No, Jonathan not that I can recall. There is just not anything, one specific thing you know.

JG: Maybe in general can you describe how these school board meetings went? What was the typical meeting of the school board? I guess y'all met monthly, and then there would be a called meeting here and there as needed. I think in 1966 you were president of the board, is that correct?

MC: No, I think that was later.

JG: Can you just comment how the school board progressed, the meetings I mean?

MC: They went pretty smoothly, you know. You'd have some discussions along on different issues you know. You never will get anybody I don't think on the same track, you know. They have a little different ideas and I guess that is the way it should be to try and think different things, you know.

JG: Was there any one person who stands out in your mind that was maybe a leader especially in this issue, somebody that stepped forward and said you know, that seemed to take the lead in this regard?

MC: Seems to me like Stacy Cooke was kind of a leader, he was a good, pretty smooth headed person. Of anyone I would say he was.

JG: He of course was raised in and around Waxahachie I guess, so he came into the school board kind of the, with interest through his children and everything. If you would comment on, you mentioned your oldest daughter had actually started to school at Beulah, if I understand correctly.

MC: Yes, she went there one year.

JG: Then went to Diboll. How would you describe her experiences, being a father, a parent of your daughter? How was the change from, because I know she only had one year, she didn't have much experience to draw on, but do you remember how she dealt with moving from Beulah to Diboll, and then, maybe later integration itself.

MC: Seems like it went pretty smooth, you know. My wife got involved with PTA out here. They were very active then. They sponsored programs to raise money so my wife was involved with it pretty close with my daughter.

JG: And for the recording your wife's name?

MC: Jenna.

JG: And your daughter?

MC: Angela.

JG: Angela. So then once integration began, the Freedom of Choice, anything that you recall that your daughter or any other children might have shared or experienced or anything.

MC: No, she never did come home crying about anything.

JG: Regardless of the issue, it didn't affect her one way or the other.

MC: She done fairly well with it I guess. I don't remember any issues at all.

JG: Well, have I neglected to ask you anything, anything that you wanted to share that I didn't ask? I guess we've covered most of the main points that I had.

MC: Twelve years on the school board. I'll tell you this, this old gentleman out there at Beulah, he had been on the school board, he said "Marshall I want to tell you something, you got a good job there, nobody will talk about you and the pay is real good." I found that out to be true. (laughter)

JG: Well maybe just reflect on your whole 12 years of experience? Where did integration stand as an issue in that whole twelve year period?

MC: Well it wasn't that big of an issue as a school board member. Really we knew it was coming and actually it was better to do that, so we just kind of went along with it like we had to and wanted to. So, like I said that was a long time ago and I don't remember any specific thing that did happen, that was outstanding like that.

JG: And why did you go off the school board, was it a choice? You decided not to run?

MC: Yes, I wasn't getting enough fishing in. (laughter)

JG: That is a good reason. (laughter)

MC: During that time too my son had just started to school out here and I was little league coach for about four years, you know, and school board and you just kind of want to ease out of it when you can.

JG: Right, so you served I guess for the most part while your children were students and as they got older and got out your interest turned to other pursuits, or more time for those pursuits. Well I'm sure there are other things I might think of later.

MC: I probably will too, I can't think right now. Like I say it was a long time ago. It wasn't all that bad experience. If you can do something to help that is the main thing if you can help your school or whatever. That was the main thing.

JG: I did think of this. I know for instance Lufkin certainly didn't go as smooth as Diboll did.

MC: Right.

JG: What do you think about that with what you went through with Diboll and what you heard of other communities that may not have gone so well?

MC: Well it made you feel good to see that we were doing as good as we were with it, you know, and not having that many problems. Some schools had a lot of trouble.

JG: I know Lufkin just in the last ten years finally some type of court order was just recently lifted.

MC: Yes, I remember that.

JG: I don't recall all the details, but their practices were still under review all these years later. So a source of pride then that you had as a community school board member, the work that you did.

MC: Would you like me to tell you an instance of hiring a teacher?

JG: Sure, what year would this have been, just before integration or after?

MC: Later, after integration. We needed a math teacher and I knew this lady down there at Bald Hill, she was a real good teacher. I had heard of her over the years, she was a friend of the family. Her family and our families were friends and she was just a real good teacher. She retired and she was a math teacher. Mr. Pate was telling, "Who can we get?" I said, "Well I know a teacher that retired, and might talk her into coming and finishing the year or whatever it was." It was Mrs. Rivie Vansau, so I told him about her and he went and talked to her. She said, "I'll come and teach, but I'll tell you right now I'm not going to baby-sit, I'm going to teach." And she taught too, I thought that was kind of funny that she would talk to him like that, real straight "I'm going to teach." She had taught in Lufkin and taught at Channelview, and I had some cousins down there that went to school with her. They would come up here and they would say, "Boy she is mean but she is a good teacher." She talked to Mr. Pate real straight about it, "I'm not going to baby-sit."

JG: All right, well if we think of other things, I'm sure we can get together and clarify a few things. I sure appreciate it Mr. Capps.

MC: I hope I've been a little help. Anytime I can, well holler at me.

JG: All right, we sure will. Thank you again.

END OF INTERVIEW