

**BESSIE FURGURSON**

**Interview 213 a**

**October 28, 2010 at The History Center, Diboll, Texas**

**Patsy Colbert, Interviewer**

**Patsy Colbert, Transcriber**

**ABSTRACT:** In this interview with Patsy Colbert, Bessie Ferguson reminisces about her school days in Diboll. A junior in high school during the first year of racial integration, Mrs. Ferguson does not remember any serious problems between the races or at school during this time. Although she didn't have many black friends, she doesn't recall feeling anything negative toward the process or any of the black students. Mrs. Russo lived for a time with her grandmother, Mrs. Bea Burkhalter, the principal of Diboll Elementary School during integration. She mentions Mr. Willy Massey, Mr. Pate, and Mr. Robert Ramsey. She also recalls a memorial service for a former student (Preston Russaw) who died in Vietnam.

**Patsy Colbert (hereafter PC):** Okay, today's date is October 28<sup>th</sup> and I'm here at the History Center with Bessie Ferguson and we are going to do an oral history interview about her school days at Diboll High School during the integration years. Bessie if you can we will just start by telling me when and where you were born.

**Bessie Ferguson (hereafter BF):** I was born in 1949 in Lufkin, Texas.

**PC:** Okay.

**BF:** At Memorial Hospital.

**PC:** And who are your parents?

**BF:** Eddie Mae and Vernon Burkhalter.

**PC:** Okay, and did you always go to school in Diboll? Did you begin first grade in Diboll?

**BF:** Yes.

**PC:** What year did you graduate?

**BF:** In 1968.

**PC:** Okay, spring of '68 so fall of '67 was your senior year and that was the first year the high school was integrated. The year before '66 was when they brought the boys over for athletics, they integrated the athletics. 1967 they integrated the high school and then in '68 was full integration. So, your senior year was the first year that the high school was

fully integrated. Tell me do you remember anything particular about that year? Was there anything particular that you remember and how did you feel about it?

**BF:** Well actually the first that happened to us was when we were juniors is when the first 15 boys came over to play football and to me it wasn't full integration, but that was the first time that they came over to our school. And, I couldn't tell that there were any problems, actually I think we had a better football team.

**PC:** Well that is what we hear because the Temple Tigers were a pretty good team...

**BF:** Yes.

**PC:** ...and my understanding from some of the records is that they didn't have enough boys that year, so Mr. Massey actually or maybe the coach asked...Mr. Massey went to the school board and asked them to integrate the athletics because he didn't have enough to make a team. So, yes that would have been the first year. Did you have any black students in your class that year?

**BF:** Well one or two.

**PC:** Okay.

**BF:** We did one or two and we really couldn't see any difference except like I said the football team I think it helped it.

**PC:** Had a winning team.

**BF:** Had a better team.

**PC:** What was your first knowledge of integration, like did you know the boys and the athletics were going to be integrated before you started school?

**BF:** No, I don't think I knew anything about it except when they first came over.

**PC:** Just when they were at school.

**BF:** Yes, when they showed up at school.

**PC:** Was it discussed at home or did you have any conversations with your parents about integration?

**BF:** Not really a whole lot. I was living with my grandmother, Bea Burkhalter, and of course she knew all about what was going on at school and it just didn't seem like a real big deal to us or it didn't to me at the time.

**PC:** Okay, since you mentioned your grandmother Mrs. Bea and she was the principal of the elementary school at the time of integration, is there anything you remember her sharing after full integration in '68 at family discussions about any situations or problems at the school due to integration?

**BF:** I don't remember her making any comments to me about it one way or the other. We all got along fine and we didn't seem to have any trouble at all. The girls came over my senior year 'cause that is when everybody came over and I can remember some of them, Freddie and who did I tell you?

**PC:** Minnie Faye.

**BF:** Minnie Faye and I'm trying to think of some of the others that I remember, but we didn't have any problems. It was just like we were just one big happy family at that time. It was a little different and I think everybody kind of kept to themselves a little bit at that time, you know. We would talk back and forth but not really...in groups, but you had your different group regardless.

**PC:** Yes, and that still happens today.

**BF:** Yes, everybody does.

**PC:** One of the things we noticed that took place after the high school was integrated they began the co-sweethearts and co-queens. Do you know anything about that and how that got implemented and how everybody felt about that?

**BF:** Well I think they started that after I had graduated.

**PC:** Okay.

**BF:** I think that was after I graduated but I think the reason they did that was where everybody felt like they had a chance and people not group and vote.

**PC:** And a way for them to feel included.

**BF:** And at that time it was only the two groups really just the black and the whites.

**PC:** Okay.

**BF:** And, now we have had to make that a third group.

**PC:** With the Hispanic population. How did you feel personally about integration and about mixing the races? How did you feel personally?

**BF:** Well it really, like I said, it wasn't that big a deal in Diboll. I mean we never had any problems but yet they always stayed away. Until that point everybody was totally

separated and that was the only time you were really together. That is with the picture shows or anything you went to, but it just seemed to work real well for us.

**PC:** Now like if y'all had events at school, and earlier we were discussing before the tape and you mentioned a community dance you had together before integration, share with me about that.

**BF:** Well I can remember...I was trying to remember the name of the group but it was Ronnie Rector and Bill Everett Tucker and Ronnie Emsoff. Ronnie was my age, the others were about a year or two older and we had some dances at the scout house. The old scout house over where Temple Inland is now, the original place, it was I remember Ray Rector and Gladys and Wanda Rector. It was their son and brother that was in it and they would do all of it, take up the money because they charged. And they would chaperone, they were the police or whatever. I remember that we had those were integrated. I don't remember what made them want to come over to our dance, but they taught us how to dance. I mean, they really...it made it a lot more fun.

**PC:** So, that was before integration?

**BF:** Well it was probably about maybe the year or so because I'm thinking Ronnie Rector was probably a senior. Yes, he was at least two years or a year older than me. We would have to ask Wanda about that, but we had a good time.

**PC:** How did they know about the dance?

**BF:** I don't know. I cannot remember if the band, you know, knew some of the other kids or what but, I just remember they all came to the scout house.

**PC:** Came to the dance, okay and everybody got along? Didn't have any problems?

**BF:** Yes, no.

**PC:** What about when you went to the picture show or any other community involvement or things that you participated in? How were they treated and how did things go at the picture show?

**BF:** Actually I don't remember them in the show. I think they sat up above. I don't think while we had the show in Diboll. It finally went away and you had to drive to Lufkin to the Pines Theater. But I don't remember them coming down and sitting with us.

**PC:** Okay, well before integration during segregation they sat upstairs.

**BF:** But I don't remember them coming when I was in high school. Now see once I got out of high school we didn't go to the show down there. I don't remember them ever coming down and sitting with us.

**PC:** Okay. What do you remember as a good experience as far as your high school days and your senior year as far as integration and it being integrated with the high school?

**BF:** Well the only thing that I can remember that stuck out was when they had that memorial for Johnny Jones [TRASCRIber'S NOTE: The former Diboll High School student killed in Vietnam, honored at this memorial was Preston Russaw, not Johnny Jones]. I think that is who that was. He had gone...he graduated from Diboll and he had gone to Vietnam and we had a...we were all in the auditorium or the old gym and we just had a quiet time for a minute and they mentioned that happening and that was a big deal to us. We had never thought about anybody that we knew personally, you know, being killed in a war.

**PC:** Going off to war and not coming home.

**BF:** Yes, somebody that young, yes.

**PC:** Here you are a student in high school and a senior and think you are just fixing to face the world and then that...that really hit home. It made a lasting impression on you.

**BF:** Well a lot of the boys that I graduated with ended up going.

**PC:** How did the black students react to being integrated?

**BF:** I think they were just real quiet at first but I think some of the people that they felt comfortable with they would start talking in class and stuff. It's not like you had a lot of interaction, you know, to go somewhere with them you know. It was just at school.

**PC:** In the classroom.

**BF:** Yes, in the classroom so there wasn't a whole lot of time to get to know anybody.

**PC:** Did you have any experience as a child growing up being around the black community?

**BF:** Well I don't know if you would call it the black community, but my daddy and step-mother had someone that stayed with my two little sisters and she was part of the family. So, it wasn't like somebody else I mean, her name was Pinky Ligton and she was just part of the family. That is just all there was to it.

**PC:** So, you were comfortable with that and you had been around black people with your family?

**BF:** Yes, that was no big deal. Then there was Chester and some of the people that worked for Daddy. It was just...we just thought they were like everybody else. We didn't know any different really.

**PC:** Just treated everybody equal and fair.

**BF:** Yes.

**PC:** Okay. When you knew that the high school was going to be integrated did you have any fears?

**BF:** Not really.

**PC:** Okay.

**BF:** Now I never as far as like going over in what they used to call the quarters, I would never go over there by myself but we went everywhere as a group. I don't know why I wouldn't but...

**PC:** Well, maybe it just wasn't a place you were used to going to, you know, and just wasn't comfortable.

**BF:** But, we didn't, you know, that was separate they stayed...we were separated.

**PC:** Well everybody knew what the boundaries were and stayed within that. Did you ever as a young child go to the quarters, to the black community?

**BF:** I can't remember ever.

**PC:** Do you remember any instances or anything particular, your dad worked for the company; do you remember your dad having any racial problems with the company?

**BF:** No, the ones that I remember they were just good employees, I mean, the ones that I can remember.

**PC:** Well, we know Diboll we've always said is a unique community and the sawmill was already integrated so the sawmill men were already used to working with each other.

**BF:** Yes.

**PC:** It seems that everybody respected each other and I think just the powers that be and the way that was structured really helped to make the transition pretty smooth. That is really what we are finding through this whole project is that there were not a lot of problems. There were actually more problems in the seventies, in my high school days, '74 and '75.

**BF:** Yes, I know it got to where it was a problem in school but it wasn't for us. But you know I don't know how they would have felt if we had just popped up over there. You know, it is like I have my area and this is your area but, now at school it was all together. We didn't have a problem with it.

**PC:** Okay.

**BF:** And didn't resent them...as a matter of fact I only remember one incident that someone was ugly and it was one of our white boys and when he realized that nobody else was going to agree with him that ended and that was it.

**PC:** So, no one followed and he was kind of like out there on his own?

**BF:** Yes, he really was out there on his own and I think that ended that right there.

**PC:** Do you remember anything about Diboll Day activities before integration as far as the queens having their own race, the queen's race?

**BF:** I remember when Debra Washington ran but I was already out of high school and everything.

**PC:** Right.

**BF:** But now as far as our group there was always black people that worked with our group.

**PC:** As far as raising funds after integration?

**BF:** Oh yes.

**PC:** We found in the records that they had separate black Diboll Day queens.

**BF:** Didn't they have a splash day like that too?

**PC:** Yes, they had their own splash day. We have a photograph of the '62 queen candidates and the '64 black queen candidates. They participated in the Diboll Day parade but then they had their separate activities and since you were here in school in the sixties I just wondered if you remembered anything about the separate queen's races?

**BF:** No, I didn't even know that they raised any money or did that. The only reason I remember the pictures of the splash day. They were very attractive girls and they had one at their pool and we had one at Walter Allen pool or wherever it was.

**PC:** Yes, Walter Allen. Did they ever have any other type of activities together other than this dance that you mentioned?

**BF:** Not that I can remember.

**PC:** Okay.

**BF:** Matter of fact I don't even know how that come about. I just know that we went and we had a good time. We'll have to call Wanda Clark and ask her about that.

**PC:** Weren't you a Diboll Day queen candidate?

**BF:** Yes.

**PC:** What year was that?

**BF:** Now that was in sixty...let's see...it was when I was a...

**PC:** What year did you graduate?

**BF:** In '68...so it would have to be...it was the year Martha Brent won.

**PC:** Okay, well it could have been '68 or '66 then. Well no, it wouldn't have been '68 because you would have already been out of school fall of '68.

**BF:** So it would have to be '67.

**PC:** You graduated in '67?

**BF:** I graduated in '68.

**PC:** Okay. Well it could have been '68 then.

**BF:** It was the year Martha Brent won and we did not have any black queen candidates.

**PC:** I'm thinking it was probably before then. Integration was already taking place here and I think by this point they were probably already integrated the Diboll Day activities but, we don't know that for sure.

**BF:** We didn't have any (black) queen candidates.

**PC:** We do know they had separate activities and separate committees. Mr. Massey and Mr. Rhone, they had their committees and the white community had theirs and then they were in the parade together.

**BF:** We still had people that worked with us though. That is like Maureen Bray, my goodness I can't remember a Diboll Day that she didn't help with Diboll Lumber over there. I mean with the Diboll Day activities.

**PC:** Okay and she is a black lady?

**BF:** Yes.

**PC:** Okay, and so you remember her helping raise money for ya'll.

**BF:** Yes, yes, she helped us.

**PC:** Okay.

**BF:** Well she worked with us and it might be because she was working at the plant then or working for Temple, but she still had a part.

**PC:** They might have just done it for a few years there, you know, the years that we have their photograph was actually in the Free Press. They might not have started out in '53 having it. They might have done it for a few years. It was kind of associated with the school too. They were elected by Mr. Massey and different ones and they had different divisions and raising money for them just like the white ones.

**BF:** Yes, but being with Temple Inland if they worked at Temple wherever they were they worked with us raising money.

**PC:** Did you have a favorite teacher in school?

**BF:** Oh probably Mr. Greer was one. He gave me a hard time in Biology.

**PC:** That is why you liked him.

**BF:** No, he was really a good teacher but, he had a sense of humor too.

**PC:** Is there anything that made a lasting impression during your school days.

**BF:** I can just remember how happy Mr. Pate was every morning when we would come to school you could hear him walking down the halls whistling. I mean, you know, he was just a good example, he and Mr. Ramsey but I can still remember Mr. Pate whistling. It just sounded all over those halls.

**PC:** Now, we don't really know a lot about Mr. Pate because he retired in '68, the year of full integration. He retired that summer and then Mr. Foster came on board. Is there anything else about Mr. Pate that you could share with us to give us a little bit more insight on what type of person?

**BF:** He was very good with the kids, with all of us. He was very fair. You know how some kids would feel like, oh well they are picking on...no...he just, you could tell he cared about all of us. I know sometimes we would want to get out of class and go practice whatever we needed to practice for. We'd always go and asked him and he would have to make sure it was okay, but he would let us know because I knew if I called Granny she would say no, we couldn't do it. But, yes, I remember him. He was a good example, he and Mr. Ramsey both.

**PC:** Yes, I loved Mr. Ramsey. Do you know if Mr. Pate's retirement had anything to do with integration?

**BF:** No, I don't think so. His wife was a teacher too.

**PC:** Oh, okay.

**BF:** She taught over at elementary. I believe she was a fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Pate was.

**PC:** I think, according to Mrs. Ruby Goins he had to retire due to his age and it just happens to coincide with full integration.

**BF:** No, he would have been able to handle it.

**PC:** Is there anything else you want to share with me about Diboll or school days?

**BF:** Well, I just remember I thought we had some good activities and we had a good band. Our football team was good enough, you know. We were so excited we had fun at all the ballgames whether we were winning or losing; we still had a good time. I just wish our band had grown, continued to grow instead of getting less and less every year. I haven't been to very many of the football games and I went and I thought oh my goodness I thought it would be a large band now but it wasn't.

**PC:** I know you were classmates with Minnie Jones. I want to back up just a minute before we wrap up. She was such a good basketball player. Did she ever voice any concerns or regrets that the high school did not offer basketball her senior year?

**BF:** No, not to me she didn't but, she was always a very pleasant person and we got along fine.

**PC:** Okay, okay.

**BF:** Like I said, we did not ever...I think maybe if it had been earlier in maybe our freshman year or something you would have more time to make friends. Like Gunter now, my grandson that is in junior high, he has Spanish friends, he has black friends, he has white friends but they do more together and they've been together. Half of them started school together. We just didn't have that length of time to make a bond.

**PC:** Yes because it was your senior year.

**BF:** Yes, it was just my junior and senior year that I was around anybody.

**PC:** Yes, there wasn't that many because it was just starting so it wasn't that many. The athletics when they integrated and the boys came over and certainly everybody was excited about having a winning team. I think that set the stage a little bit for when they

did integrate in '67, and integrate the high school, the ones that had been at Temple High School I think the other ones kind of set the stage.

**BF:** They did, they did.

**PC:** They were looking forward to coming over I believe. As far as we can tell from this project it was really a pretty smooth experience.

**BF:** I don't remember them having any kind of a bad experience when they came over. I hope they didn't. If they did I was unaware of it.

**PC:** Okay, and as far as any teachers, did you have a black teacher?

**BF:** No.

**PC:** Okay. I know Mrs. Odyssa Wallace was at the elementary school. Did your grandmother, Mrs. Burkhalter, did she ever share anything? Mrs. Odyssa Wallace was on the campus before full integration, we are not sure how all that came about. They started making a presence and they had one black teacher at elementary, one black teacher at junior high and one white teacher at H. G. Temple when Freedom of Choice started. I'm just wondering if you knew anything about how they came to that decision or if she ever shared anything with you?

**BF:** No, she never shared any part of it. Of course, my girls had black teachers once they got in school and...

**PC:** Didn't think anything about it then.

**BF:** Whether they liked them or didn't like them it didn't have anything to do with what color they were, you know.

**PC:** Exactly.

**BF:** It was how they interacted with them whether they were going to be their favorite teacher or not.

**PC:** Right, okay. Well that is all my questions. Do you have anything else you would want to share?

**BF:** No, I'm just glad I grew up in Diboll. I think it's a wonderful place and my grandchildren, some of them are growing up here, two of them anyway.

**PC:** Well that is good.

**BF:** And, I hope they have a good time too.

**PC:** Yes that is right, well thank you Bessie.

Note: Mrs. Ferguson mentions a memorial service for Johnny Jones, a former student killed in Vietnam. That is incorrect. The former student's name was Preston Russaw.

**END OF INTERVIEW**