

R. L. KUYKENDALL

Interview 256a

April 09, 2013, at The History Center, Diboll, Texas

Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, R.L. Kuykendall reminisces about his life. He speaks about growing up as an African American child in Galveston, Texas in the 1930's and 1940's, attending segregated schools and joining the Navy. He talks about his time in the Navy and then his time as a student at Texas Southern University in Houston. Upon graduation, he started teaching in various small schools around southeast Texas, including Coldspring, where he met his wife, Viola Tims. Mr. Kuykendall moved to Lufkin in 1969 and began teaching at Dunbar school, spent a few years as Principal of Crockett High School in Crockett, and then returned to Lufkin as Principal of Garrett Primary, from which he retired. Mr. Kuykendall also discusses his time as a member of Lufkin's City Council, the Lufkin Planning and Zoning Committee, and the Deep East Texas Council of Governments. He also speaks about his project with Reverend Betty Kennedy to preserve African American history in Lufkin by interviewing African American citizens and recording their memories in oral history interviews.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Okay, I think we are ready to begin. Today's date is April 09, 2013. My name is Jonathan Gerland and I'm with Mr. R. L. Kuykendall and we are here at the History Center in Diboll and we are going to do an oral history interview. Mr. Kuykendall if you would, to begin just tell us when and where you were born.

R. L. Kuykendall (hereafter RLK): I was born in Houston, Texas in 1933.

JG: Who were your parents?

RLK: Ella, Lloyd and Ella Kuykendall. I have a sister, Dorothy Kuykendall. I have a brother, Lloyd Kuykendall. My sister has passed about ten years ago.

JG: What did your father do for a living?

RLK: A common laborer, he worked at a printing store.

JG: Printing?

RLK: Yes, printing store.

JG: There in Houston?

RLK: No in Galveston.

JG: When did you move to Galveston?

RLK: I don't know.

JG: Okay.

RLK: I was that kind of young. Now I remember growing up and knowing I was in Galveston and I think it was a later time that I learned that I was actually born in Houston. And, I went to school in Galveston.

JG: What are some of your earliest memories of your father?

RLK: A worker. He worked at a printing store and I'm not sure just what it was that he did because he delivered some things and he had some other kind of jobs that he was doing. This was about that time of year, in '33, '34 or '35 or something like that. And, he worked there a period of time and during World War II he started working at another place. I have forgotten the name of that place, but at any rate he used to ride a bicycle to work. I guess it was just during those times that it wasn't a whole lot but some bad things happening too. But, at any rate things were, I wouldn't know how to describe it I don't think but, it was those type back in the thirties so whatever you could think of, what you may have read about was probably taking place and the way people got along with each other or didn't get along with each other. There were no problems in terms of race because it was a mixed area where we lived. We lived on 11th street in Galveston and we all lived in that area. I'm saying black, white, purple, green, and we grew up, we did everything but go to school together.

JG: You did?

RLK: Well, I had to walk to the west end of Galveston. It was about sixteen blocks west of where I lived and the other direction the school was about maybe 8 miles so it was during those times where I had to go there while a school closer was right down the street. There was nothing...

JG: But the school you went to was black and white students or you just lived together and went to separate schools?

RLK: We lived in the neighborhoods but we went to separate schools, church.

JG: Went to separate schools, okay.

RLK: It was...I don't know if you are old enough to understand it, but it was one of those things where we played football and everything else in the street with everybody, with each other.

JG: So, an integrated neighborhood but a segregated school.

RLK: Well people to see so, that had something to do with it. There was some Hispanic people that lived in the neighborhood but they went to the other school also. We didn't have, I don't know if this is what you want me to tell you, but we didn't have any problems as such it was just the fact that one was black, one was white and one was brown but as far as the kids were concerned and I think the adults we all just lived together and we just separated when we had to separate with schooling and all of that. It's what I would call goofy in terms of what we had to do, were forced to do in a period of time like that. We played together down the street, girls, boys, black, white, Mexican but no fighting. Nothing like that happened. Only as we grew up we saw the differences beginning to change. I remember I went into the Navy. I stayed in there awhile and I came home on leave and I walked in the bank and I recognized this friend, I guess, she was a white girl, she never did remember me. She lived across the street from me growing up. I talked and she said "no, I don't remember you." We were grown then because like I said I was in the navy.

JG: So this would have been in the fifties.

RLK: Well this was growing up, well yes at those times yes. But, I just walked out and just looked at her because I said how is it that we played ball in the street and everything else but she doesn't remember me. I'm a full grown man and so was she full grown so, I just left it alone you know.

JG: Right. Tell me a little bit about school, about your school experiences. What size class rooms, your education, just any memories you care to share about school that would be beneficial to todays and the future people who are interested?

RLK: Well as we both said a few minutes ago the schools were separate. I went to Booker T. Washington School as a kid then when I got to the 8th grade I had to go to George W. Carver School which was another 8 to 10 miles because I passed up the other school (JG: the white school) which was on 15th street and I lived on 11th street I had to go to 27th street and then to 30th street for the 8th grade.

JG: Okay, and you walked?

RLK: Yes.

JG: You walked, okay.

RLK: Yes, we passed each other going back and forth to school. Nothing was ever said if anybody bothered anyone, but just saying what was and how dumb I would call it and we had stores, went to the stores together and everything else but it was just the way that it was. We didn't have any...

JG: Now when you went to the stores together was there any separate but equal there? I mean blacks didn't have to use a different door or everybody came and went the same way?

RLK: Yes, I lived right across the street from the school.

JG: The school or the store?

RLK: The store, I'm sorry, yes right across the street from the store.

JG: Was it owned by a white man or a black man?

RLK: White, and there were no problems, you know, everybody was friendly and parents and the people in the store, we go in as kids and everything was wonderful.

JG: Were there many black business owners that you can remember?

RLK: Not when I was growing up there were not any in my neighborhood and I'm trying to think now if there were any others away from me. But, there was a grocery store across the street from our house which was white owned and about a block the other direction there was a grocery store and everybody just went to the store together and there was no problems. I remember on one occasion where some of the guys, some of the black guys, came from the west end of Galveston, lived out west there and something happened at that time and I don't know why they did whatever they did do, but they had to call the police and somebody was arrested. I don't know. It was just persons who were not ones who lived in the neighborhood. We knew them from going to school, but why they did whatever they did I have no idea. What followed that I still do not know, but living in Galveston was, I think that Galveston had a difference, difference meaning what happened in Houston racially and what happened in Galveston was totally different, by Galveston being what it was in terms of...I can't put my words together, but at any rate by it being the beach over there in Galveston. People did come to Galveston and walk down the streets and on the beaches and everything else but yet it was a known thing there was a place for you, son. I can remember a friend of mine, and I was real small, there was an ice cream parlor within walking distance and there was a spot for us, long big long place, well he and I we wanted ice cream. We knew how to act, whatever that means, and we stood in that little cubby hole just like we weren't there. The people were there, they weren't doing anything, they weren't working at all and we wanted ice cream. We didn't tell them that we were just waiting for them to come down and wait on us. All of a sudden, this was during World War II also, this soldier walked up to the counter...

JG: A white man?

RLK: ...and he said to the lady "when are you going to wait on these kids, they have been standing her forever." "You wait on them now." He put his money on the table and he asked us what do you want. Well, now it's almost like putting me in trouble as a kid you know, because you are doing something with this lady that I don't think she wants you to do but he didn't care. All he knew was that these kids had been sitting here waiting for ice cream. So, reluctantly she asked us what we wanted and she gave it to us. He said some other words to her. I don't know just what it was, but he indicated to her he

didn't like what she was doing. I don't know if he was from another state or anything else but he just felt that the kid standing there waiting for ice cream in this little cubby hole and you got all this room back here which was undoubtedly where she worked she was told how to handle things but she went on and handled it and got it to us and we walked on home just as happy.

JG: So did he pay for your ice cream?

RLK: He did.

JG: He did okay.

RLK: Yes, he did pay for it.

JG: It was you and how many others?

RLK: Just two of us.

JG: So, you were what fifth or sixth grade? During World War II so you would have been maybe ten years old or so.

RLK: We were younger than that.

JG: Okay, tell me about...how often did you go to the beach?

RLK: What part of the beach are you speaking of?

JG: Well any part, you can get into the details.

RLK: No, it wasn't any part, see.

JG: Well just tell me about the beach experience.

RLK: East beach I would have to say was for whites. I don't remember seeing any sign.

JG: Okay, so the beaches were definitely segregated?

RLK: Oh yes, yes. Not written like a sign but we could go down on the beach and go in the water but now the parts where there were eating places and all that, no we couldn't do that. We were just out there in the water playing.

JG: So, how often did you do that?

RLK: We could do that any time mother said you could go down there. I lived about two blocks and we knew what the rules and regulations were from home, so we didn't have to worry about getting in trouble or doing something with other people because you got in trouble at home if you did the wrong thing.

JG: So, you would get home from school if it was warm enough and...

RLK: No, this is mainly I think we spent more time during the summer.

JG: During the summer when school wasn't going on.

RLK: Yes.

JG: Did you go on Saturdays or just during the week or did you avoid it on Saturdays?

RLK: I think, I'm not sure because it seemed like it must have been a day that we weren't supposed to be at school, Saturday, Sunday, I don't know. I don't remember.

JG: I imagine Galveston then and like today had a big influx of people from Houston that would come down on Saturdays and things. Is that true?

RLK: Okay yes, but that is not where we were. They were down on the other end down there.

JG: Okay.

RLK: Where we were it was just children playing in the water. It would be gulf movement and there was really no one else there in terms of race. They were on the other end of town.

JG: Okay.

RLK: There were no buildings or café's or anything else on that end where we were, none at all. So, we'd go out there and walk in the water or whatever, you know, and then go back home but there was nothing to do, no place to go, no café's or anything else just a piece of land that was just there.

JG: Okay, undeveloped even.

RLK: Yes.

JG: No, designated beach even, I mean like did it have plank walk ways or anything?

RLK: No, no, that was on the other end see.

JG: All right.

RLK: Now if you were working you may have worked in the area that you just identified but it was really nothing there, just water, and we would go out there and walk in the water on the edge there but nothing ever occurred at that particular area.

JG: So did y'all ever go to the main part of the beach? I mean, not necessarily swimming or anything but just out of curiosity or anything just to see the bathing reviews or anything, anybody from the black community?

RLK: Well the question becomes to go someplace else, you didn't belong there.

JG: Okay.

RLK: See, you were kind of in trouble. The man wants to know, "why you down here boy?" That kind of thing you know, so we knew things were of such a nature that some things you really just knew. Your momma and daddy had already told you those type things so when they weren't around, well if there were no people there when we went out there, there were no buildings, when I say no buildings there was just no other people. We walked up there and got in the water or walked in the water, but we couldn't go down where all the activity was. That lasted for awhile; I guess we all grew up and started doing other things. Now, when I left home there was nothing still on the west end, was where we went and did what we were going to do. We meaning us, east end was over here for whites.

JG: Now, you were saying earlier that the east end was for the blacks.

RLK: No, there was nothing on, I lived on the east end of town, but there was nothing there, no buildings or anything else it's just that we went out in the water. Now, the buildings were farther east on going down.

JG: Towards the ship channel?

RLK: No, no, this is where the happenings were. Everything that was going on, fun things that whites did they did it all right there in that area.

JG: You made a career in public education. Are there any teachers, in looking back that you had in Galveston, that stand out in your memory as being influential to you?

RLK: When you say influential you are meaning like what?

JG: Well, I guess another question would be at what point in your life did you decide to go into a career of public education and was there any spark that a teacher might have instilled in you early on or did this come about much later?

RLK: Yes, I would say yes, maybe not in the same sense as you are speaking right now. I know in the classroom teachers were close to us and made sure that we did what we should, but no publicly we just went to church. I mean, you know, like you see kids might see other people and they speak to them and they hug you or whatever it wasn't that type of setting. Nobody was angry at you but more of what you are speaking of right now was happening at school in the classroom where you may have gotten some of those

hugs and all those things but otherwise the nature of the time was that you went home, the teacher went home unless you had a problem there was nothing unless they may have called your parents or something. I think basically we knew better and surely there were others that did dumb things and went to jail and all that kind of stuff, but I think it was just a case of where we knew what to do, what not to do. We knew that when I saw a blonde head coming down the street or something it wasn't a thing of saying don't say anything or don't do anything, don't be fearful it's just a fact that it was a setting. This is what we do, this is what you do. I never had any fights with anybody, with the kids on the block, we played cowboy and everything else but we never had any fights or racial type things.

JG: How was your Navy experience as far as seeing new things, seeing the outside world, maybe interactions between the races compared to your experience in Galveston? Talk a little bit about the navy experience of integration or segregation in the military and maybe in other places you might have been stationed.

RLK: I finished high school at 17 and at that time many of us kids from the block went into service. Didn't have any money to go to school, parents didn't have any money to send you to school. Not everybody, some of them went and had money to send kids to college. Mine didn't, the ones on the block didn't, didn't even talk about it. The thing that happened is we finished high school and we started going into the service. My brother finished a couple of years before I did.

JG: What branch did he go into?

RLK: He went into the army.

JG: Army okay.

RLK: And my time came, "what are you going to do?" The situation would be somebody would ask, "You going to school, you going to college?" Well that never happened. That type of question was never asked. There was some black kids that did go to college but it just depends on who you were and monies that was in the family. But, a group of us decided we were going to the service and you choose the Army, Navy whichever. My group, I don't know why, chose to go to the Navy and as I said I was seventeen when I joined the Navy. I didn't find any problems being in service because of the mixtures; the thing is that you treat people the way you are supposed to treat people. I don't care where you go you still don't step on people to do things. And, it didn't happen to me so we just went through basic training, didn't have any problems with any of it.

JG: Did you go to San Diego?

RLK: Yes, and I never had any problems, well those who didn't want to be friends with anybody weren't friends with anybody.

JG: Did you have many white friends in the service?

RLK: I had when I was in basic training I think I had two or three in the same barracks and we were kind of close. We didn't know each other but we were kind of close for whatever reason, you know. We would go to lunch together and things like that. We got to know each other and naturally where are you from. That didn't help me any because of when you told them where you were from I haven't ever heard of it first of all. We got along well and in my company there was no fighting or anything like that.

JG: Were you based on a ship?

RLK: Yes.

JG: What ship or ships?

RLK: There is too many of them to remember.

JG: Well that is okay.

RLK: Ask me some questions please.

JG: Sure, let's get, because I want to get up into your teaching career, so maybe just describe or explain what was the transition to make that decision? When did you decide that and how did you get the degrees? What prompted you to go into education?

RLK: My time was up and I got...I had 30 days to make a decision of whether I was going to reenlist or just get out of the Navy. When I came home, the question was always what are you going to do now?

JG: What is next huh?

RLK: Yes, well it hadn't dawned on me, because of the upbringing I wasn't in that frame of mind of "I am going to do blah-blah-blah." But, the question was asked so frequently it made my brain say there is something, you have got to be doing something. Well, I decided, well I worked at the hospital a good while.

JG: There in Galveston?

RLK: Yes, then I decided what the other guys had decided to go into service. My brother had gone already. He was in the Army and my friend down next door to my house we both decided to go to the Navy. Why I don't know. So, we did go to the Navy and spent 3 years, too many months and seven days, or something like that. At any rate things began to make changes and the decision was made based on people asking, "you are out of the Navy now what are you going to do?" Well, see I had no background in terms of saying I'm going to do blah-blah-blah when I get out but it dawned on me and people kept suggesting well, "why don't you go to school?" Well, I wasn't in the background where my parents were those type of people who would say those things. We

didn't have any money anyway. I decided I would go to college, go to college and I said that is a new phrase in my brain, "go to college." So, I did do that and everything was put together and then the next question is what are you going to do in college?

JG: Did you go to Texas Southern?

RLK: Yes, I had relatives who lived in Houston and my cousin mentioned that to me and said, "Why don't you come live with us and go to school?" Well I mean all that sounded good. I mean I had never thought about that kind of stuff. Your background is your background you know, either you know something or you don't know about it. You hear about it whatever. So, I decided, I told my parents that I was going to move to Houston and live with my aunt, which was fine with them because they had very little education so that made it where everybody was happy then, you know, because they did not finish high school or any school, they just worked all the time. I did go to TSU [Texas Southern University]. I still, I don't know if I was ready to be there. I don't know because I did some things that as I look back now that I shouldn't have done. I didn't study like I should have studied. I stayed longer than I should have stayed.

JG: What did you major in?

RLK: Music.

JG: What drew you to music, why music?

RLK: I was in high school band.

JG: What did you play?

RLK: Trombone.

JG: Trombone.

RLK: My brother as I had said, had gone into the Army and he was in the band in high school and he got in the band in the service. I thought I wanted to go into history. I didn't have any background. I went to school and did everything but nothing had been planned in my own brain so when they asked me what I wanted to major in I didn't really know and I said something that even the people didn't know what I was talking about because they knew it from a different name completely. So, I couldn't think of what I wanted to major in so I thought about I was in the high school band, why not. So, I majored in music. It took a while, as I said earlier, to get my brain together and start doing what I should do. I stayed longer than I probably should have stayed but at any rate you go through things. I liked what I was doing in music. My sister played piano, my brother played piano. I never played piano. I did enough when I started teaching with kids, you know. So, basically that is the way it happened and I became a music major. I met a young lady but we broke up. She finished before I did but I did finish and got a job in a little country towns.

JG: In Texas?

RLK: Yes.

JG: Teaching?

RLK: Yes, I was a band director and I guess my grades weren't like they should have been so I wasn't getting the best jobs but I needed a job and I started out working in small school districts.

JG: What counties, in and around Harris County and Galveston County or where?

RLK: I was trying to think, it's written some place. I can't think of it right now but all of them were small towns and small towns are different from other towns and sometimes the principals were different and parents were different no matter what you said or did. I tried to be what I call to myself a good teacher. I wanted to teach. That is what I wanted to do. I didn't have time for doing some of these things that some of us did as teachers, you know.

JG: Now did you have marching band, did you teach marching?

RLK: Yes.

JG: So these little schools they had football teams.

RLK: Yes, they had football teams, they had bands, some schools I didn't have a band other than some horns and one of the schools a friend of mine worked down the highway and he was doing pretty good with his band and he would help me sometime to have time to make things look like something was going on and everything else but I really became set on teaching and I meant for those kids to learn. Some did and some didn't. Some came from different homes, nothing was supportive of them and I lost what I had 8 jobs. The only job I didn't lose was right here in Lufkin. I was fired. I don't know why. There was some reasons about principals and they would just let me know that I wouldn't be back next year. I don't know why. I didn't have enough of whatever it was to discuss with them the how comes' and why's and all those kind of things. It was just "you won't be here next year." That is all and I moved on up and moved on up. Did the lady who is going to work at Lufkin schools, where she came from right now, I worked at all three of those towns where she lived. I don't even know her now, one day I'm going to get to meet her, Coldspring and all in that area.

JG: You are talking about the superintendent that Lufkin just recently hired?

RLK: Yes, the one they just hired, yes. She is from there but I worked in Coldspring, three schools over there.

JG: So, you would teach there a year, did you teach at any of them more than a school year?

RLK: I think at least two, each one was at least two years but, I never knew how come why I was leaving, no more than the superintendent told me we are going to do blah-blah-blah next year.

JG: Right, what brought you to Lufkin?

RLK: I was teaching in...what is the next town going down this way?

JG: Corrigan?

RLK: No, go down further.

JG: Livingston?

RLK: Shepherd.

JG: Shepherd.

RLK: Yes, I had a friend who was also a music major was working here at Lufkin and I would come up on weekends to meet with him. His wife and I went to TSU so I came on weekends but then what brought me here was there was a music teacher, a female music teacher here in Lufkin and that is what brought me here. We got to know each other and eventually over a period of time we did get married. Are you from Lufkin?

JG: Not originally, I graduated from Lufkin High School.

RLK: Okay, you are too young to have known her. She was a music teacher and a choir teacher at Lufkin High school before she passed.

JG: And what was her name again? Just for the tape.

RLK: Viola Tims. Have you heard of the Tims in Lufkin?

JG: Yes sir.

RLK: Okay, well she was of the Tims family.

JG: So, you came to Lufkin in '69 is that correct?

RLK: I married her in '66.

JG: So, when did you start teaching in Lufkin about that time? Were you teaching then?

RLK: I was...when I married her I was in Coldspring teaching. Every little city around there I taught in, all three of them, Coldspring and we married when I was living in

Coldspring. I have a problem right now that is why my words won't come to me. I'm under a doctor's care, but anyway, we got married in '66.

JG: So, I understand you taught at Dunbar Junior High School in '69 and '70 I believe. Did you teach History and Language Arts? How was that and talk about integration that was going on at this time? Just talk about Dunbar.

RLK: I just taught. I heard what you asked me but I never had any problems with kids, parents, especially when I came to Lufkin. I never had any problems. I don't know what happened all those times before but...

JG: Do you remember your first experience in an integrated classroom?

RLK: The first integrated classroom was here in Lufkin when schools mixed. But that didn't, I hate to say it like this, but that didn't mean anything to me. What meant to me was my teaching. I didn't mean to go in and hurt any kid's problems, all I want you to do is learn and let me help you learn. I actually had kids and I told them this, if you can't do it like we need to do it just please keep quiet. Whenever you want to know something I will help you but, if you don't want to know please do not disturb the class. And, some of them did just that and sat there every day.

JG: Now, would this be blacks and whites?

RLK: Yes, it was mixed by that time, yes because schools integrated in Lufkin after I got here. I never had a problem with kids or parents either. I just wanted to teach; that is what I wanted to do and that is what I was trying to do. You have to ask me questions because I can't pull things out of myself. Just keep asking me and things will come to me.

JG: Okay, well I don't necessarily mean to leave your Dunbar years but...

RLK: That is okay just take me where you want to take me.

JG: I understand you left and went to Crockett High School for awhile. What was going on with you moving to Crockett?

RLK: I was working on my masters then and I found out that...I was at SFA and one of the instructors over there told me there was an opening in Crockett and I made the contact for assistant principal and by that time I had gotten my masters and I interviewed and I did get the job.

JG: As Assistant Principal at Crockett High School?

RLK: Yes.

JG: Now was Crockett already integrated by this time?

RLK: Yes, because the principal was white, yes it was integrated.

JG: Okay, how was that experience compared to your Lufkin experience as far as the school system, the integration and that kind of thing?

RLK: Well in Lufkin at that time I was just a teacher. I had gotten my masters and everything and I had finished my classes for having principal and I interviewed down there and I started out as assistant principal and I personally didn't think very much of my principal but there wasn't anything I could do about that other than do what he told me to do. He himself wasn't doing anything but then they moved me up to the position when he left on his own.

JG: So you were principal then?

RLK: I started out as assistant (JG: right.) and then when he left they moved me up to principal. The school in itself was not what it could have - should have been because the principal wasn't doing anything. Half the time he wasn't there, it was almost like I was running the school and that was to my liking because kids are here to do certain things and that is to learn and there was some kids when I first got there that were fighting in the hallway and change classes and all that kind of stuff. Well I made it a point that they can't fight or whatever it is in the hall if I'm out there in the hallway. Sometimes I didn't know where the principal was at all but the word got around, not being hateful to anybody, but you don't have time to be fussing and pushing and all that going to class, not in my hall anyway. Well, I had to be in my hall if things were going to happen like I said and I don't really know when the principal left that I don't know that I asked to become principal or they just moved me to it.

JG: Said, here you go. And, then you left Crockett and came back to Lufkin.

RLK: Well I was fired there too.

JG: You were fired at Crockett?

RLK: All the jobs except Lufkin I have been fired. When I left Crockett I came back here as assistant principal.

JG: Did your wife go to Crockett with you or did she stay here and teach?

RLK: Yes, she went to Coldsprings with me. They found out that she was a music teacher and the band director, the two of them went to college together. She was a music teacher. I'll have to agree with them, she was good because she did things that the kids liked, contest and all those kind of things and she worked with them. She was that kind of person.

JG: So she did music and choir as well?

RLK: Well that is the same thing.

JG: Okay.

RLK: She was a choir teacher and it just so happen that I had been...

JG: Did she give instructions in playing instruments too though didn't she?

RLK: No, no, that was band then see.

JG: Oh okay.

RLK: This is strictly choir, singing, and she would go to contest and got back with some good stuff, you know, ribbons or whatever that kind of stuff. I did well until I guess I still don't know what happened in Crockett. I don't know what happened in any of these places. I haven't done anything to anybody wrong. You may think I'm crazy but all I want to do is teach and be fair to you. I had a situation in Crockett where some of the kids were smoking the wrong kind of cigarettes and I got worried about that and I stood around and looked outside at lunch time and all that and I actually saw that going on so, I did the next best thing and that was to call them in. But, by calling them in I had already called the parents to come in at the same time and then I called the superintendent. I just wanted it to be the way that it actually was suppose to be and I had seen the kid on the playground, the school yard and where he had put his stuff in his wallet.

JG: Are you talking about marijuana?

RLK: Yes, and I called him in he was surprised when I asked him what did he put in his wallet and, there was some girls involved also.

JG: Were these white or black students?

RLK: Both.

JG: Both.

RLK: Yes, I wanted to talk to the parents across the street there was a store, a business, where some of the parents lived and I called over there and talked to the person in charge. I asked him if I could borrow those parents and I told him why I needed to borrow them because I needed to get this drug stuff off campus. So, he did let me, he got the parents, they came over across the street and I called the superintendent and he came in with his assistant and we all right there in my office this is what we talked about. Mothers were hurt you know, not by a child like that but nobody said anything like that and right there before them that I told them what would take place and they would be out of school for a period of time. Now, this superintendent is hearing me saying this too. This is my school now and everything worked out fine and then he left and he came here as superintendent but at any rate these are kind of things that I did.

JG: Okay, so they fired you in Crockett, and then you came, and that was in '82 I believe and then you came back to Dunbar as the assistant principal?

RLK: Yes, the principal at Dunbar I called him and I let him know what had taken place and if it was possible I would like to come back. He said well "let me see, let me talk with the assistant superintendent." So, he did make contact with the assistant superintendent and he called me back. There was some other stuff going on that I didn't know about me when I was here and they told me all of that and I was thinking what it is, I haven't done anything but, some parents who knew some other persons some kid had told them something. But anyway, I did get back here as assistant principal.

JG: Now was Dunbar a seventh grade center by this time? Was it just seventh grade?

RLK: It was seventh and eighth grade.

JG: Seventh and eighth.

RLK: First time I started Dunbar it was seventh and eighth grade. But, things worked fine in...going back I left Dunbar and went to Crockett but anyway.

JG: But then you came back to Dunbar in '82?

RLK: Yes.

JG: At some point in there it became a sixth grade center or something like that at some point in there.

RLK: No, sixth grade wasn't there at all.

JG: Okay.

RLK: It was seventh and eighth grade.

JG: Because I went to East [Junior High] about this time and it was eighth and ninth grade, Junior High East if I'm not mistaken was eighth and ninth grade.

RLK: Junior High was over here now but Dunbar was over here.

JG: But I thought Dunbar was the...

RLK: No, it started out as sixth grade and seventh grade, no it was seventh and eighth grade that is what it was.

JG: So, how was that different? You were at a high school where you had, you know, tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders.

RLK: No.

JG: At Crockett, how did that compare with being principal at a high school going to now seventh and eighth graders?

RLK: That was junior high.

JG: In Crockett?

RLK: Yes.

JG: Oh okay, I thought it was high school.

RLK: No it was junior high.

JG: I had here high school, I'm sorry. So, you were at a junior high in Crockett?

RLK: Yes.

JG: Okay.

RLK: Wait, wait, wait...

JG: Patsy has Crockett High School here.

RLK: It was, yes, you are right. I've been to so many schools.

JG: Well, let's go ahead and get to Garrett. So, now about '86 or so you went to Garrett Primary School. So, now you are going down to grades and you were there for about 11 years and that is where you were when you retired. So, how was Garrett Primary School, how much of a transition was that for you?

RLK: Beautiful, when I say beautiful there was a situation that it had already been an elementary school and it became what you mentioned it was and I just went there and started being a principal and dealing with teachers and talking with teachers and I had no problem with parents. I just wanted to teach and this is the way I wanted things to be taught and I let it be known to teachers and faculty meetings and those things what I expected from them and I would do everything I could to help them in what they were doing. And, it stayed that way. I never had any problems, in fact I haven't had any problems with schools other than those things I've told you already but.

JG: Okay and you retired in 1997.

RLK: In '87, was it '87 or '97?

JG: Well, I have here '97.

RLK: Oh okay, '97.

JG: Then you were elected to city council in '98 I believe.

RLK: Yes.

JG: What drew you to run for city councilman? Did you have people in the community asking you to do that? Is that something you felt drawn to or?

RLK: I had a friend of mine who was on the council.

JG: Who was that?

RLK: Don Boyd.

JG: Okay.

RLK: I don't know if he suggested or what...I can't remember now just how it happened that I decided I would run for the position and I did get it.

JG: Did you take his seat?

RLK: Oh no, no, no, it's always two black ones as it is now. That is the way the city is made of, you know, but at any rate he and I had gone to TSU [Texas Southern University] together in Houston so we knew each other. He was the first black one on the city council.

JG: Of Lufkin city council.

RLK: Yes.

JG: Who was in your seat before you were elected? Who was the person whose position did you fill or who was there?

RLK: I understand what you're asking me. I'm trying to think, as well as I know him, Percy...oh you've heard him also...well anyway, he was the one there and he decided to retire and I decided to run for it. It so happened...

JG: So, it was going to be an open seat then?

RLK: Yes, right, yes. I think he is still living or somebody told me the other day he had died. I can't think of his name. You've probably heard of him because he is a citizen of the city.

JG: What were some of the big projects going on at that time with the city? Can you remember some things you were trying to accomplish? Talk about if you want to the city managers, mayors. Was C. J. MacLin, was he the city manager?

RLK: Oh yes.

JG: And was Mr. Bronough mayor?

RLK: Yes, they were there, Bronough and so was MacLin. That is who was there until we have now.

JG: What were some of the issues the city was trying to accomplish when you were elected, some of the early?

RLK: I can't remember.

JG: Okay.

RLK: I know that whatever it was it was nothing I was against in terms of should not be taking place or I may have voted against if more had voted otherwise so anything could have happened. I don't know.

JG: You served I think also on the planning and zoning commission...

RLK: Before that, you are right.

JG: ...what was going on with that? What was some of the work y'all were doing?

RLK: I can't put it together. I stayed on there a pretty good while. I functioned but right now, as I said, this is not working as it should be. [referring to his memory]

JG: Tell us a little bit about what you are referring too, your memory.

RLK: Oh, this is the doctor...

JG: What has the doctor told you?

RLK: Well I woke up one morning and I was working down at Dunbar, Elementary now, and I had my breakfast and dressed and all of a sudden I didn't know where I was. I was in my own house. My wife passed some time ago and it just dawned on me I don't know where I'm going but I knew I had dressed to go to work out at Dunbar. So, I called a friend of mine and asked him to come take me to the doctor. I didn't want to drive so, he came to the house and he stopped at the same sister-in-law that brought me here today, and she called someone and anyway she told me she said "no you need to go to the hospital." Well, how did she know I needed to go? But I believed in her, so he took me to the hospital and they took me in that morning and I stayed overnight. This taking place

now with the doctor when he came he started examining me and asking me questions and the next thing I had to spend the night overnight and he looked at my spine and he eventually told me he never put the name to it but at any rate it's something that is going to happen later on in life. That is why my sister-in-law brings me here because of my driving but now otherwise I could drive me, but he said don't drive and I don't need to be out there on the street driving a car. Said no I don't have any problem with you saying I don't need to drive. I don't need to be taken to the doctor or anything. I will not drive my car. He said "well okay." Right now I'll drive it like she brought me here today when I have to go someplace I will drive my car to her house about three blocks from me and then she will drive everywhere else we are going. I believe he is telling me that something is going to happen later on with this disease. He asked me at different times "do you still live at your house by yourself?" So, it's something that is going to take place.

JG: Right. Has he said dementia?

RLK: That is what it is, yes.

JG: That is what it is okay.

RLK: See I couldn't think of the word but right away when you mentioned it, dementia, yes.

JG: Well I just want to ask you a couple of more questions and then we will finish it up.

RLK: Okay, just keep talking.

JG: You had done several oral history interviews with other people and I know you taught history as a teacher a few years back and just tell us a little bit about, I know Reverend Bettie Kennedy had a role in this but, tell about your interest and what drew you to start interviewing and doing those oral history interviews that you did?

RLK: I don't know.

JG: You don't know.

RLK: There is some kind of interest. I went to bed last night a little after twelve o'clock reading books. I read last night a book that my wife had given me some time ago and I hadn't gotten to it like I wanted to but anyway, it told me quite a bit about life, people and particular things that we as black people what we have done through the years books written by other people about people who happened to be black because of time that the things just didn't happen. And, it was really amazing to me to read about this person that I had heard of before and I just sat down and read history books. I don't know if I will remember or something may come up and it will hit me "oh yes" or something like that but I just enjoy reading history books. I was a history teacher and I don't know if that is what I am. I just like reading and that is my past time.

JG: Any real memorable experiences in those interviews that you did? Anything stick out in your memory as something of interest?

RLK: In what?

JG: Those interviews that you did, those recordings, anything in particular?

RLK: Well, yes and no, yes because those were people Mrs. Kennedy took me to and they were older people and they were new to me. A lot of that I heard has taken place.

JG: These are Angelina County people and your early experiences weren't from here.

RLK: Well yes, Angelina but just the fact that some of those things these people told me were black people and never heard of before and what they had done and that is what strikes me. I don't know everything but I do need to know more about me meeting people like me. They have done something. I had history books but at the time I had history books those books had torn pages in them or no pages at all sent to us from another source. So a lot of things were not in there and as I read now I learn about a lot of black people and what they have done and how they were connected to even whites, you know. And, one I was reading about last night this man it is just amazing to have to live through life and find out this person didn't do that and this person didn't do that or they did do that or something like that. Those are the things that amaze me when I read and learn about people and what they have done and I never heard of them in school at all. It is just amazing. I just want to know and I get angry when I find some other black people don't want to hear that stuff. What do I say "you don't want to hear that stuff?" Well it's about you, that is what it is about. You've done something, you don't want to know and I guess it could happen with any race of people but it's just the idea that there is so much that people have done and other people will not put it out where others can learn. But, it was just amazing and my wife had given that to me some years ago and I have a whole stack of books at home that I read and I talk to these people because Mrs. Kennedy is the same person, she has boxes and boxes of books too. She reads all the time and she has introduced me to some of those people that you have gotten from me and it is just amazing to learn what people have done. Maybe they were ignorant, if you call it, maybe they didn't go to school but there are certain things that people have done no matter who they are and you need to know about this country and what has taken place. That is my opinion and I just like reading and I like teaching school. Even if I could go back but even if that were to take place there would be some of those missing sometime like the doctor say I don't need to be driving that car because you might miss a car, bam, things like that. I don't know. I don't mean to sound any other kind of way I just. Keep asking me questions or whatever.

JG: Okay, I'll ask you one more. Can you tell me a little bit about your work with DETCOG, the Deep East Texas Council of Governments?

RLK: Helping people, that is the basic thing, it helps people similar to some of those I just mentioned. They don't know and they don't want to know in certain cases but there are people out there to help them also.

JG: What did you do with DETCOG specifically?

RLK: Well we do more meetings.

JG: Were you on the board?

RLK: Yes, I was on the board and then I learned from the persons who are out there what is taking place, what is taking place and what will take place. I just enjoy getting to meet...I'm not on the board anymore in a sense of speaking. I think they have me there because I want to be there and I think they want me to know. I don't know, I enjoy being there and hearing what is taking place.

JG: When is the last time you went back to Galveston? Do you still have family there, any of your brothers and sisters?

RLK: I don't have family at all. I have a brother and two daughters and some nieces, they are in Galveston County but I haven't been to Galveston since I don't know.

JG: I imagine like everything else it has changed from the way you remember it.

RLK: It has, because I talk to them every so often. My brother is in California and we will talk. I'm not goofy but it's just certain things that I like to know, want to know, I read all the time. How much I remember I don't know and then sometimes things will come to me if something else takes place so I just...I like the idea you are doing what you are doing. Maybe it tells me what I know or don't know or something. No one has ever asked me to do what I'm doing. There is a reason for your asking, I don't know what it is but it is something that I've said to you that tells you that. I don't know. Why are you talking to me? Tell me something.

JG: We are just recording your memories and your experiences.

RLK: Yes but why me?

JG: Well, everybody has an interesting story and we don't necessarily mean to single people in or single people out...

RLK: No, I understand what you are saying.

JG: ...but you have definitely your career in education and your life story, you know, I know Patsy even studied under you and your wife in school.

RLK: Patsy?

JG: Yes, Patsy Colbert, who made this list here, just outside here.

RLK: Yes, but I don't know her. Do I know her? I mean I've met her by coming in here.

JG: Well, that is what I'm saying teachers are remembered by people and I don't think it can be expected that every teacher can remember every one of their students, you know, but students certainly remember teachers. We have all had a chance to sit down and think back and reflect on certain teachers and some stand out better in your memories and some not necessarily so. So, to answer your question just your career in education and you know, the fact that you are a black man too is part of it because we look at that experience, the integration of the schools.

RLK: Right.

JG: You know, we are right at that point now that if we are going to do it this is the time because people are getting older. The World War II generation is practically all but gone and those who lived through the racial integration now is the time so, we are just trying to get everybody's story that we can that is interested in sitting down and doing what we are doing. So, that is why we are doing this.

RLK: So, those names that were given to you that you have put on there I don't even know why I started doing that.

JG: I think you said it was Rev. Kennedy kind of put you in touch with those people, right?

RLK: She did but I had interviewed her and I don't know why.

JG: She is another very interesting person. We've interviewed her too but I'm sure that was part of the reason you just wanted to get part of her story and to know her better and to record that.

RLK: But see I have not been doing it all my life. I have asked people questions. Why do I want to know what I want to know? That is the question I can't come up with.

JG: You said earlier when you grew up in the thirties and forties you said it would probably be just like a lot of stuff we would read in books. Well that is true, we have books and we have other records. You mentioned all the papers and things we have, all those are written records and they are very useful and have a purpose in helping us understand the past but, oral history is important because it is the personal story. It is your story and so that is why we are interviewing you and if nothing else it gives flavor to these other stories that you read about in the book. This is someone that we are sitting down with right now. We do that a lot with our schools, the programs and tours we have with school kids, we have people that were born and raised right here in Diboll, went to the Diboll schools and joined the military during World War II and kept a flight log, these were bombers, people that flew in the bomber planes and they kept flight logs and

so we have those as a written record of their experiences in the military and so we bring those records out when we do these tours and we let them see that this was actually written by a person just like them as a kid went to school there and this was his experience. So, that when they read about World War II and study about World War II in school here is a real life person who they can relate to. So it's a connection to the past. So, that is what we are trying to do.

RLK: Well I'm asking you that question but it's the same thing. What made me start asking those other people that Mrs. Kennedy told me about? Why did I want to know that? It didn't matter whether I knew them or not I just wanted to know things. Once I was finished I didn't know what do to with it. How did I meet you? Do you know?

JG: Well, you and I had met years ago through the historical commission.

RLK: Yes.

JG: Angelina County Historical Commission.

RLK: Yes, yes, I remember that.

JG: Yes, we used to visit a little bit at some of those early meetings and things. You had just become on the city council I think at the time too so we just happened to run into each other at public events and things and talked and visited.

RLK: Does it bother you to find people that don't want to know?

JG: That who doesn't want to know?

RLK: That people don't want to know, does it bother you?

JG: It concerns me but I don't know if it bothers me because we have got too many other things to do and there are people who do want to know and so we focus on those. We are not in a classroom or a principal's office such as you were but a big part of what we do is education. And what I tell staff here too is when we are working with these papers and we are doing these interviews and things like this we may not even see the results of usefulness of it even in our own lifetimes but we hope (RLK: It is there.) that it will be here for the future. We collect, we preserve and we provide access to the history for today and tomorrow so, it's not just for today. And, that is why we are recording these and we are putting them online, on the internet because that is how most people get their information now so it's information that we hope will be useful now but also into the future.

RLK: Well I enjoy it.

JG: Well I want to thank you. We've gone close to an hour and a half and that is usually a good stopping point.

RLK: And you can make a lot out of it when you start doing it.

JG: Well I appreciate it very much Mr. Kuykendall.

END OF INTERVIEW