

GUESSIPPINA BONNER

Interview 294a

June 30, 2020, at The History Center, Diboll, Texas

Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT:

In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, Lufkin City Councilwoman Guessippina Bonner speaks about her life growing up in Fairfield, Texas and spending time in Mt. Enterprise, Texas. She remembers the stories her grandfather told about their family's land and how they acquired an education from the segregated schools in this part of Texas. Dr. Bonner speaks about growing up in segregated East Texas, her family's attitude toward education, and the strength of her family ties in the two communities. She tells about going to Dillard in New Orleans, one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the southern United States. This is where she first experienced life in a major city and witnessed the effects of the civil rights movement first hand. From Dillard, Dr. Bonner speaks about her experiences teaching science in the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles, Portland, Oregon, and Houston, Texas. She then recounts her time in Boston, Massachusetts working as a lobbyist with the National Education Agency and teachers' unions. The interview concludes with her speaking about moving to Lufkin to care for her family, running for and serving on the city council, and her vision for helping North Lufkin and the city's African American community overcome its challenges.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Today's date is June 30th, the last day of June, 2020. My name is Jonathan Gerland and we are at The History Center today with Dr. Guessippina Bonner and we are going to do an oral history interview and ask questions and get it transcribed and put it on our website.

Guessippina Bonner (hereafter GB): Great!

JG: Dr. Bonner, thank you for being here today.

GB: Sure.

JG: Let's just start with telling us when and where you were born.

GB: I was born on the way from Fairfield to Corsicana, Texas.

JG: On the way!

GB: That is the story my mom tells.

JG: What and when?

GB: I was born August 30, 1946, so my birth certificate says Corsicana, Texas, but I actually lived and grew up in Fairfield, Texas. Most people don't even know where that is, but that is my home. Actually, I tell everybody that is my ancestral home because my ancestors came from Fairfield and in the surrounding communities of Fairfield. I am a true history buff, so I wanted to find out everything I could about my family and as much as I could. So, I was always, can see right now hanging on the fence watching my grandfather feed the little calves and the pigs and asking questions.

JG: Yes, well good I want to get into that.

GB: And he was patient enough to answer.

JG: Well good, good. When you say on the way, were you on the way to be born?

GB: Yes, that is what my mom said.

JG: Yes, well tell me about your family, go ahead.

GB: Well I have two...it's interesting, my family is almost distinct from each other. My mom's family is from Concord, Texas, here in East Texas.

JG: Okay, the one in Angelina County?

GB: No, the one up in Rusk County.

JG: There is several of them.

GB: Is it?

JG: Yes.

GB: I didn't know that. Well, the only one I knew was Rusk County up by Mt. Enterprise.

JG: And what was her name? Her maiden name.

GB: Emma Williams. She was one of ten children and...

JG: Okay, tell a little bit about her family then.

GB: Well her grandmother, my mom's grandmother, was named Emma, and that is who my mom was named for, which is Emma. And as my mom told the story, and I have a little documentation but not a lot, she was the child of the Cherokee Indian woman and a black man. And so, that is the story of that part of her family and she was a midwife and a person who provided health care and everything for everybody, black or white, in the

community. She tells the story of when the doctor was called and he would ask them, “Is Emma was there?” and he would tell them if Emma can’t fix it, don’t call me.

JG: And that was in the Concord, Rusk area?

GB: Yes, Garrison, Concord, all up in that area. I actually, some years back, about 10 to 15 years back, I was at a NAACP National Convention and there are a number of black Cherokees that were there trying to circulate, and did circulate, a petition that they could be recognized as a part of the tribe, just like the tribe that is in Oklahoma, because when the tribe was recognized by the U.S. Congress, they chose to leave out the black members of the tribe.

JG: The Cherokee’s did?

GB: Well, Congress.

JG: Or Congress did in defining American Indians.

GB: That is correct. And what was so fascinating about it, is because they knew exactly where Concord was and they knew many of the people that they had on the rolls that I knew from that area, and so we decided we were going to be cousins.

JG: So, Williams was her maiden name?

GB: Maiden name, yes.

JG: You don’t know anything about her father?

GB: My mom’s parents? Yes, I knew both of them. I grew up coming to Mt. Enterprise and Concord during the summer months because my Mom had to work and I stayed with them. My grandfather was Sam Williams and he had I think 3 sisters and 3 or 4 brothers and they all grew up in that area. My grandfather was a sharecropper (**JG:** okay) and he was a very, very hard-working man. I can’t remember really until he got real, real old him not getting up going to work. He also did timber in the timber industry, logging and also pulpwood. That is the thing I really remember about him because that grandfather would let me follow him to the woods and he taught me how to mark the trees. Once he cut them, he taught me how to mark the trees so they could be stacked properly for the pulp wood guys to come in and pick them up, because you don’t just pile them up in a pile. There is a certain length they have to be.

JG: How did you mark them?

GB: With an axe, it was three axes long. So, I would 3 axe long and then I’d mark them so he could cut them with a saw.

JG: Okay.

GB: Once I marked them, he cut them and it was fun. I mean, this is work and I'm going yes but I'm enjoying myself. You know how kids are?

JG: Oh yes. So, how old were you when you were doing that?

GB: Oh, I must have done that, I guess I was 8, 9, 10, each summer I come and go follow him to the woods. My grandmother would be fussing, "don't you let that girl hurt herself."

JG: Now did you have any other cousins working with you then?

GB: Oh they didn't work with me no, but most of my cousins, my family, on my mom's side and my father's side too everybody lived in Texas, so my uncles, as a matter of fact he has two daughters that here live in Lufkin right now that have taught in the Lufkin school system. I had another aunt who was a beautician and they lived in the Timpson, Tenaha area until they decided to move to Tyler. My mom's oldest sister lived and taught in Concord until they tore the school down and moved the kids to Henderson. Then my Uncle, my mom's...two of my mom's brothers one left and went...well all of them went into the military and then my mom's second brother moved to Oregon, well he moved to New Mexico first. He was working for Job Corps and he worked on the Indian Reservation and that was a wonderful experience, and then he later moved to Oregon. My mom's baby brother moved to California and now he has moved back to Lufkin and he is 94 years old.

JG: And what is his name?

GB: Willis Williams. He worked for the post office downtown; that's how their yard was so pretty until he retired.

JG: Well, I can already tell we are going to need to do more than one interview.

GB: Not necessarily.

JG: Well it's hard to get a person's story in one or even two sometimes. It sounds like you have a lot of detailed information.

GB: I do.

JG: So, I don't...that is important and I want to cover that but maybe for this first interview we will jump around a little bit (**GB:** sure) if that is okay with you and maybe focus on more specifics. Maybe today will be more broad and I do want to get back to Fairfield, but maybe this is a good time either Fairfield or in Concord, in your growing up and experiences and knowing the different family members, did you ever hear any stories of people, maybe you didn't know, and maybe even back to days of slavery did you hear any family stories?

GB: My mom's grandmother Emma, the original Emma as we called her, she was the child of a slave, an ex-slave and an Indian woman, and so they talked about it. I was protected from the abuse of slavery. Now my father's side was totally different. They really were a different set of African American people, like he...I was able to trace their, well they had done it, my grandfather had done it all the way back to Africa, but my mom's people we weren't able to do that. The difference...they never talked about the abuse. They never talked about...I had a couple of cousins, my grandfather's sister's son or something, they had to move out of the country. He had to leave, as they called it. That is what they would call it. If they get in trouble with a white man, they would say, "he gotta go." So, that is how they protected them. But this was in the early 1900's, so I didn't get to know him or anything like that.

JG: Right.

GB: There was a lot of...not abuse, but unfair treatment. For example, my grandfather was living on a farm as a sharecropper there in Mt. Enterprise and they were living basically in a shack. And I have a picture of my grandmother, my mom's oldest brother and oldest sister, and my Mom and the next child next to her is a baby in my grandmothers lap, but they were working this farm and the guy that owned it that he was working with was cheating him when he turned in his crop. So, as my Mother and her oldest sister were old enough, the oldest child dropped out of school to go to work to help my grandfather take care of the family, but my Mom and her sister were the next two and so they went to school. So, they were able to understand the math and the language that was being used to cheat my grandfather out of his share of the crop. They started asking questions, and so this guy, who was white, told my grandfather, "Well you got to move, you can't stay here no more. Them big mouth girls of yours is just too much trouble." So, in the middle of the night they had to get like 4 or 5 kids at that time, in the middle of the night, they had to get all their belongings which wasn't a lot but it was for them at that time, and find a place to stay and another white man had a shack down in the field that he wasn't using for anything but storing hay and all that stuff, and he let my grandfather stay there with his family. So, my mom told me the story of how they had to take cardboard boxes and do the walls and keep the wind and everything out until they could figure out a way to do better. Also, when my mom and my aunt went to college and came back, they were helping of course, that is what you did then, everybody helped. It wasn't like I went to college and I'm going to take care of my family and you do the best you can, no. Well my Mom and my aunt went to college and they saw to it that the younger siblings then went to college.

JG: Right.

GB: My mom told the story about how they went to school with two dresses. She had two dresses and she would take one off and wash the other one and that kind of thing as long as they were in school. They went to school in Texas College in Tyler, but they helped their father get out from under the thumb of the guy and helped buy some land which we still own.

JG: So, your grandparents who you visited as a child, that would have been your memories would have been in the 1950's, so he was still sharecropping?

GB: No, at that point he had stopped the sharecropping and was doing the logging.

JG: The logging.

GB: And always hunting...

JG: So, do you have any personal memories of sharecropping or is that stories that you've heard?

GB: Well not from my grandfather, but from my mom's oldest brother, who took over from there. He used to...man he grew watermelons. I have never known, I was used to going to the store and get a watermelon or somebody would bring them by on a trailer and we would buy them like that, but he used to sell watermelons by the truck loads, the 18 wheeler truckloads and that is how he made the money to send his two daughters to college.

JG: On another man's land?

GB: No, he didn't own the land. It was on another man's land. He had to take part of that, a percentage of that. And now I know where, it's sandy land up in Mt. Enterprise and Garrison, really, and I go through there on Hwy 315 and it goes right straight through a farm where he would grow watermelons. When I go through there I go, "I remember that." But I enjoy it. The other thing my mom...it was so funny, because I didn't grow up really, really working hard. I'll be honest, I didn't. I was my granddaddy's baby girl, and that is all I cared about, but I wanted to go to the cotton patch because all my classmates, they would be on a truck and they look like they were having so much fun and it was noise and I'm sitting there going, "I want to go!" And my granddad would go "no, you're going to school."

JG: Now is this in Fairfield or Concord?

GB: This was in Fairfield. They kind of connect because my Uncle that grew watermelons also grew cotton, so when my Mom...

JG: So that would be the fall when you'd be picking cotton, right?

GB: Well chopping cotton in the summer and then picking it in the fall. I wanted to do that so bad, and my momma said you don't want to do that.

JG: You actually wanted to.

GB: Well I didn't have no smarts. I didn't know what was going on.

JG: It was because of your friends were.

GB: Yes, my friends were doing that. So, finally one day my mom came and of course my mom grew up chopping cotton and picking cotton because they were poor and that is how they made their living. So, my uncle had cotton, her oldest brother, so she told him, “take her with you one day,” so he took me out to that field. Man, it was hot!!! I didn’t have any cold water in the refrigerator, so I ended up riding with my uncle back and forth on the cotton patch on his tractor. So, the next day my Mother asked me, “you want to go?” “Uh-uh!”

JG: So you learned your lesson in one day.

GB: One day! And, I would wave at mt friends...

JG: Instead of envying your friends you were...

GB: I would wave at them.

JG: Again, I want to come back and it sounds like you’ve got a lot of memories with your maternal grandparents. Let’s jump back to Fairfield. Now tell me a little bit about your dad and his family.

GB: That is a very interesting family life. My father was an only child.

JG: Oh, okay.

GB: And, later in life he taught school for a while, but he really wasn’t interested in teaching, and so he became a minister. But my father’s family is extremely unique. We have documentation of ancestors from Ethiopia. Actually, pictures of this man and two daughters that came to that area from Ethiopia that was, I’m trying to think, that was my grandfather’s ancestors, my father’s fathers’ ancestors. But the really interesting part of his family comes from a slave who, I don’t know anything about his slavery life, but he came from Alabama with his wife. His name was Gabriel Brown.

JG: Gabriel Brown.

GB: And his wife was named Ann and everybody called her Grandma Ann.

JG: They came to Texas after the Civil War?

GB: I’m not sure what the date is, but they acquired, he acquired because women weren’t allowed really to own property and stuff then, he acquired over 1,000 acres of land in a community south of Fairfield called Plum Creek. And, it’s almost to Buffalo, so it’s about half way between...

JG: Now, how did he manage that?

GB: I have no idea!

JG: A thousand acres?

GB: A thousand acres of land. He had a mill where he ground the corn and all of that and also a gin, a processing place for cotton. A cotton gin. He was very industrious, yes.

JG: Tell his name again?

GB: Gabriel Brown, yes.

JG: Gabriel Brown.

GB: And right now, there's a church in Plum Creek that is Browns Chapel AME Church and it was named for both of them, but Grandma Ann was the one that donated the land for that church and the cemetery across the street. The land has... since kids get it and they sell it and they do whatever and there is only about 50 acres of that ancestral land that is still intact with the family. My grandmother's sisters' children own that 50 acres and they still have that. So, that is where my father's ancestors are from that type of an environment.

JG: So, he was an only child (**GB:** yes) but now how would that have been his grandfather?

GB: It was his great-grand father, my grandmother's grandparents.

JG: Did he or you get any of that inheritance?

GB: No, because my grandfather convinced my grandmother to sell hers which was dumb, but that is here nor there.

JG: That is fascinating! A thousand! That was hard for anybody to get 1,000 acres.

GB: It was a hard thing to do, yes. And I have somewhere, and I'm going to go back, I was thinking about it the other day, I need to pull that. The cousin that had all those records passed about three or four years ago and her grandson supposedly has the documentation.

JG: Was that Freestone County?

GB: Yes, Freestone County, yes, and my grandmother had, her mom was murdered, and so this aunt...

JG: What was her name the one that was murdered?

GB: Oh, her name was Elizabeth.

JG: Elizabeth.

GB: Brown.

JG: Elizabeth Brown.

GB: It was just my grandmother and her sister's two kids and my grandmother's aunt Lucy, now that is an interesting story because Lucy was educated. As much as you could be at that time, and she used to interpret paperwork for people and explain to them things that was in writing. That is what she did. But in 1901, and I have documentation for that, Aunt Lucy rode a mule from Freestone County to Austin to take a test to become a teacher. She had as much as my dad said an eighth-grade education and you could teach then with an eighth-grade education, so she rode this mule and she went to Austin and she took the test and we have the record she made 90. So, she passed! So she came back to Freestone County and was a teacher from that point forward. That was my grandmother's aunt.

JG: And what was her name?

GB: Lucy.

JG: Lucy, okay.

GB: And she had one son who has been dead many, many years now, but then my grandmother and her sister lived with Aunt Lucy and by the time I knew Aunt Lucy, she was blind but she knew my big mouth. (laughter) I can remember to this day going by Aunt Lucy's to see her and stepping up on the porch "Pina is that you with your big mouth?"

JG: She called you Peanut?

GB: No Pina, p-i-n-a, the last part of my name, Pina, that is what everybody called me.

JG: Oh Pina, okay.

GB: So, she was a fascinating lady but she believed in education. My grandmother's sister didn't go onto college. She graduated from high school, but my grandmother went onto college at Paul Quinn College. It was at that time it was in Waco. That is where she met my granddad. They were both at Paul Quinn going to school and they met and married and everything else is history.

JG: I want to spend a little bit more time, you mentioned both sides of your family going to college and Texas College in Tyler and now Baylor, so I don't want to forget that so,

we will work into that, but tell me a little bit more about your immediate family, your siblings, and tell me about your first name.

GB: Well, let's start with my first name. My father brought that first name back from the war. He fell in love with that. I told my Momma I said...

JG: From World War II?

GB: Yes. He was in Italy, in Naples.

JG: Okay.

GB: So, I asked my mother, "why did you let him do that?" It took me forever; I have nightmares of when I had to try to learn how to spell that name. I stood in the corner more days than not in the first grade. Everybody else was spelling Carolyn, and Jim and Tim and here I am, I can't spell it.

JG: I've had to check myself several times and I still don't know if I'm spelling it right.

GB: Well finally I got it!

JG: Two s's and two p's.

GB: Just like Mississippi. But Mrs. Love made me stand in that corner many a day and my Mom said when you get it, you'll have it.

JG: I didn't know if there was a particular person that you were named for.

GB: I have no idea. He just came back with it. He liked that and he came back and convinced my mother to name me.

JG: Now where were you in the birth order?

GB: I was the last one.

JG: The last one.

GB: But my parents were married, both of them were married before they married, so I have a brother who lives in Washington, D.C. and then my sister is deceased and she was my Mom's child. My brother was my dad's child.

JG: Tell me again your parents first and last name.

GB: My mom was Emma Bonner and my father was Clifton Bonner. So, he grew up over in that Fairfield area, so he of course had a college education and I didn't even know...

JG: Now tell me about his college education.

GB: Well he went to school everywhere because he was terrible.

JG: Now he was the one who became a minister?

GB: Yes, he was terrible. My grandfather's sister told me his story because my grandfather wouldn't tell me. He said I want you to be like your daddy, but when he grew up of course his mom and dad, my grandparents, both of them were college educated, so of course they wanted their child to be college educated.

JG: Where were they college educated?

GB: Well my grandmother, my dad's mom, went to Paul Quinn, and my grandfather did too. Both of them went to Paul Quin in Waco. But, when he was growing up in Fairfield, there was no high school for the colored children, so they had to go, most of them and my dad included, went to Palestine and they would live with different families so they could finish a high school education because there was no high school there for them at that time.

JG: Past the eighth grade or so?

GB: Yes, but my dad was a character. He was a typical only kid. He was spoiled rotten. That is what my Aunt Mary told me.

JG: So, how did he grow up? Did he grow up working in the fields?

GB: No.

JG: Tell me about his growing up.

GB: Of course, he said he worked in the field, but my granddaddy didn't let him work in the field. According to my Aunt Mary, my granddaddy's sister, he would do a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and then finally he said he was going to go work for TXDOT [Texas Department of Transportation]. I can remember him working for TXDOT maybe one summer and that was it. He said, "I'm not doing this is hard work just like I did with the cotton patch." So, he left Fairfield and went to Atlanta, Georgia to the Seminary there in Atlanta, Georgia and he became a minister from that point forward with United Methodist. It used to be ME Methodist Episcopal, but it's United Methodist now so, he became a United Methodist minister and that is where he did that until he passed away.

JG: Where did he pass away? Where was he living?

GB: Houston.

JG: In Houston, okay.

GB: Yes, he was in Houston.

JG: So, let's focus a little bit on your mom and dad and you're growing up. Tell me about your house. What type of house did you have?

GB: Well, again I didn't realize at the time, but whatever I needed my granddaddy made sure I got it. My parents were divorced when I was ten.

JG: Okay.

GB: I didn't realize that was supposed to be a problem because granddaddy was there.

JG: Who did you live with after they divorced?

GB: My mom, we stayed in Fairfield, that was my fathers' home, but we stayed there because my Mom was a teacher. She taught at the school system there for 28 years.

JG: Was there a name of the school?

GB: Dogan, D-o-g-a-n.

JG: Dogan School.

GB: Yes, it was named for Matthew W. Dogan, who used to be the president of Wiley College.

JG: Oh, wow!

GB: But we stayed there and the home that we lived in, my grandmother had made it to be built.

JG: So that is still your dad's side of the family?

GB: Yes, and that is pretty much who I really grew up with, was my dad's side. I know more about them.

JG: So where was your dad? Did he go away?

GB: Roaming around all over the world, no not over the world but he was in different places. He was in Marshall; he never went to Dallas, but then he went to Houston.

JG: But he was a minister?

GB: Yes, with the United Methodist Church. Then he went to Lamar, yes, Texas City. I remember Texas City. I would go stay with him sometime during the summer if I didn't have anything else to do, and get out of my momma's hair.

JG: So, growing up then with your mom and your grandparents, what about siblings?

GB: No, they were older than I.

JG: Okay they were all older. Were you the only child of your mom and dad?

GB: Yes.

JG: But they had children from previous marriages?

GB: My brother and my sister, there were three of us. And, we were treated like brother and sister. There was no difference made except they were jealous of me the way I had my relationship with my granddaddy. (laughter)

JG: So, talk about the community in which you lived there in Fairfield?

GB: In Fairfield?

JG: Yes, there in Fairfield? How far out of town did you live?

GB: I was in town.

JG: In town!

GB: Next door to the school.

JG: Next door to the school so, your mom taught...

GB: That was a good experience too, because my grandfather, originally when the school was built it was a Colored school. My grandfather taught there of course. He had a college education and then when my father returned, my Mom was still in east Texas, when my father returned from the service, they moved to Fairfield and in order for my dad to have employment, my grandfather wanted my father to teach at the school and they say well we can't hire two people from same family. Can you believe that? Well, they did, and so my granddaddy said okay fine I got a farm and I can make a living; I'll do what I need to do, so he resigned so that my father could teach at that school system and he started driving the bus, the school bus, to bring the kids from the country here, two routes. He would keep the bus at the home and then he would leave out one way and pick up the kids and come in and drop them off and then go pick up another one. Then my father, when he became a minister my Mom started teaching at Dogan and so she not only taught, but she was the girls basketball coach. The only girls' basketball coach they ever had. So, because she was very good.

JG: Now did you play? Did you play basketball?

GB: I played at it. (laughter) I tell everybody I grew up on them yellow buses going to ballgames, so yes, she put a suit on me and make me get out there and try. But my sister was very, very good! But the story that I like to tell everybody, when I was in first or second grade, my grandfather driving the bus he would come in in the morning with a load of kids and I would sit on my front porch. I'm here at my house and this is the school, but my granddaddy would pick me up for his second route so I could ride the bus to school.

JG: Just for the experience of riding the bus?

GB: With my friends.

JG: Yes, yes, talk about ethnicity and maybe segregation, racial segregation.

GB: Oh, very segregated, but as I look back on that part of my life, I was very protected. My family basically, we didn't talk about race relations as I remember it, but they would, you know, I knew things like this is the white fountain and this is the colored fountain. I knew there were certain...like for example, if you go to the fountain at the Drug Store in town, black people couldn't sit, you had to go buy your stuff in a paper cup and then leave, you couldn't sit at the counter.

JG: So, who would tell you that?

GB: No one told me you just...

JG: So, growing up so your parents...

GB: I experienced that; I experienced that, like if we were there for a parade or something, you know, if you wanted a glass of water, whatever you couldn't go sit down and cool off or anything you had to get yours and leave. Going into the restaurants, the cafes' as they called them, you couldn't go in the front and sit down, you had to go to the back door even though they were black cooks. The food was delicious. There was one lady that cooked the best coconut pies, but that is all I could ever get because my granddaddy once again said, "we don't go to the back door." I said, "but granddaddy that pie is good."

JG: So, was it your grandfather then that talked to you mostly about the way blacks and whites...

GB: Yes, and also too in most areas, here in Lufkin, Mt. Enterprise, or in your smaller communities, if you look at the names of the black and white families you got some of the same names. I remember one time my sister had gotten a traffic ticket and she had to go to court and the judge's name was Bonner and he told her you don't come in here no

more because I'm going to call your granddaddy. He said, "I'm going to call Uncle James and tell him. Don't come in here no more and she didn't." But we all understood that the ancestral crossing had happened, but we went to separate schools. I didn't have a new book until I went to college and bought it. All of our books came from the white schools when their kids were finished with them. They were marked up and pages torn out and all that stuff, but once again as my granddaddy said, if you learn all that is in these torn up pages, you'll be a genius. And I had, I tell people all the time, probably I had more books at my house than my school had in their library. I don't even remember us having one full shelf of books at my school library. I don't even know if we had one but I always had books at home and I was taught to read.

JG: What were your favorite books? Do you remember?

GB: I really don't. I remember my dad loved westerns and he used to, when I was real little my mom tells the story that he would have the books with the pictures and he would point out things. Almost like a comic book or whatever and then after a while I noticed he was reading some books but they didn't have pictures and I asked him where are the pictures.

JG: Now you eventually went onto college and we will get into that in a minute but you majored in biology (**GB:** I did) so did you have an early interest in that, or is that something that came later?

GB: No my dad had a cousin, a first cousin, my grandfather had a sister that had a son that had gone on to college to be a mortician and a biology teacher and he ended up teaching at Texas Southern. But everybody had a hand in what I was going to do except me. You going do this and you going do that. I'm going okay! So this cousin, my father's first cousin, was a teacher at Wiley College here in Marshall and one summer he got me into the National Science Foundation summer program for high school students and that was really my very, very first experience with working in a lab and understanding real biology because my high school didn't have that. And I was just fascinated by it and actually I was looking last night, now that you mention it, I was looking at the way they work with the COVID stuff and I remember growing up saying I wanted to be an anesthesiologist. Little did I know what that meant, but that is what I wanted to do. The name sounded good. But he got me into that program and my interest in the sciences and I enjoyed that. I never really wanted to be other than getting to be a doctor to be an anesthesiologist that was all I really wanted to do. I didn't want to be a doctor to see patients. I wanted to do the research that was involved in developing things. I watch the programs now and I still remember and understand a little bit about what they are doing.

JG: Yes, so the gravitation towards science came a little later.

GB: Well in high school.

JG: Yes, in high school, okay.

GB: Because my cousin was a biology teacher at Wiley and so I learned, he got me into that program and from that point that is where my interest was.

JG: Like I said, I know we can come back to a lot of these things in more detail, but to keep moving chronologically, let me just back up. Tell me about how your family celebrated holidays like Christmas and Juneteenth. Was Juneteenth important?

GB: It's interesting, Juneteenth was...most of my holidays as I remember, yes all of my holidays were celebrated with my mom and her family. I tell people all the time if I had a quarter for every time I went down highway 84 from Fairfield to Mt. Enterprise, I would be rich, because I did...

JG: So, you would go from Freestone to Rusk County for holidays?

GB: Yes, lord for weekends, holidays, whenever my mom felt like she needed to come home. She really was a good caregiver and eventually my grandparents, her parents, ended up coming back to Fairfield, Freestone County, as they got older. The kids didn't want them living out there in the woods, so they stayed with my mom until they passed. But as a kid I got so sick of going back and forth to Mt. Enterprise. I didn't have any friends in Mt. Enterprise, all my friends were in Fairfield. But I adjusted, and I would get in the car with my mom and here we go. But Juneteenth was an interesting event.

JG: You want some water?

GB: Yes. It was an interesting time.

JG: We are going to take a sip of water here, for the recording.

GB: Good, good, yes. The churches in the country would celebrate Juneteenth and they would have what they call a campground meeting, which I was trying to reestablish that type of a thing with the building I have up in North Lufkin and it really worked. I just had other things that got in the way, so we haven't had one for a while but we may have one pretty soon. The food was amazing and my mom would tell me the story about how they would chop cotton and they may not celebrate on Juneteenth per say, but they would celebrate that release from slavery during the summer and she said the wagons would come and the people would have cooked. They didn't do any cooking at the church, they brought it with them, and my first question was, "well Momma didn't someone get salmonella poisoning?" She said, "we didn't know what salmonella was." I have to look at it like it wasn't all these preservatives and all that stuff in the food and it maintained itself. Then after the wagons were no longer there, I do remember myself the food being in the trunks of people's cars and they would come to church and they would have church service, then eat, then more church service, then they'd eat, so it was an all day thing.

JG: So, all the food was prepared and then brought?

GB: Yes.

JG: Were there ever any open pit barbecues that you went to?

GB: No, they brought it already prepared. That open pit stuff came later.

JG: Okay.

GB: But they brought the food already prepared.

JG: And it was mostly tied to the churches.

GB: Yes, as I remember. I don't remember it being like a community center or anything like that it was around the churches. The churches were extremely important in the African American community.

JG: Yes, talk about that and schools too, I think.

GB: When they tore down the schools or moved the schools that really, really destroyed many communities. I know it did in Concord. The old buildings are still there, but it's destroyed. And then the area where my dad's father family grew up is a place called Stewart Mill and they tore the school down there and the church and so that community really is no longer in existence except in people's minds. So, the church and the school, that was really the only safe place that black people thought they had. Primarily the church because that was the only... that's why in the civil rights movement they went in the church because that is the only thing they really truly owned and it was safe.

JG: Do you have any personal memories about that?

GB: About the church or the Civil Rights Movement?

JG: Well both.

GB: Well the church, again, it was our recreation and actually it wasn't until as I tell everybody that I became half a hundred, that I realized that Sunday School was Sunday *school*. It may have been taught from the Bible but it was actually a place where children learned. They learned discipline, they learned how to read and write, they learned how to have vision and projection, and so it was taught from the Bible from a faith base, but it was actually school. For many of the young people who had little or no learning, their parents didn't, they depended on that process to move their children forward. So, again, I didn't realize, I guess I was privileged, I didn't know. My mom never allowed me to think I was better than anyone, never! And, that is to me very repulsive today because without the grace of God we would all be in one place.

JG: Talk a little bit more about that about maybe class. Obviously, there is a white world and a black world, but even within I want to leave it open to you to address any... but

even you mentioned your mom wanting you to think a certain way or don't think higher or lower. Talk about class in both those worlds.

GB: Well I don't know what it was like in the white world because we never mixed. (**JG:** okay) The only mixture that I have, that I remember in Fairfield again, I was in college and I was getting ready to go to Africa. I was one that... I never wanted to sit still. I got a text yesterday from a friend of mine and she said this is the longest you been still in your life. (laughter) COVID did one thing, made you sit out. There was...in order for me to go, I had to raise some money and the white Bonner family in Fairfield assisted me to do that. And there was a doctor, Dr. Bonner, I remember him today, a little guy, and he gave me all my shots for free and everything because he said, "I want you to go, I want you to find your people." And that was really the first time...

JG: And this is the mid-sixties?

GB: Yes, and this is really the first time that I really, I internalized that my ancestors where they were from and how they had gotten there and what...he told me.

JG: So, this is the white Bonners?

GB: Yes, the whites...they helped me, of course, I got money from others. My mom was a teacher so she helped me and my dad and my granddaddy, of course but...

JG: Were there other times before that the white Bonners were involved?

GB: Not really, and again I say not really, except my Aunt Mary she told me she said you don't have to worry about being sick. It never crossed my mind, I mean you know, I'm going "okay!" She said you don't have to worry about going in the back door of the hospital, because you have access. You just go up there, if you need to go to the hospital and you'll be taken care of and don't worry about it. She never told me it was because of the physician who was in charge of the hospital was a Bonner. I didn't know. I call that a protective cone and anybody that was part of our family, my grandfather had a niece that had a barber college, she black, but anything she needed she could go to the bank and the bank president was a Bonner.

JG: Do you know if the black Bonners in that county were formerly with the white Bonners?

GB: Well their ancestors, my grandfathers' grandfather was white. He was one of the white Bonners.

JG: So, they were actually...

GB: Descendants.

JG: So, they were blood related?

GB: Oh yes.

JG: Okay, were they the slaves of them?

GB: Well that is an interesting...I asked that, you know me, I'm asking questions. There was a lady that was the original black mother of the black Bonners and I used to ask my granddaddy was she a slave and he said no she was a servant. I said well did she get paid? He said well in those times you didn't necessarily get paid any cash. Well could she leave? And he told me to shut up. I was always being told to shut up.

JG: But they were definitely a blood relation?

GB: Yes, and this white grandfather told my grandfather and his brothers and sisters, any of you want to go to college I will send you. And, each one of them received 100 acres of land.

JG: Wow! Well let's go back...

GB: I have a lot of history.

JG: Yes, you do and we need to do more than one interview. It's amazing, practically everybody on every branch of your family went to college and that was rare even in the white world. So, talk about that. Why was education do you think, so important to all your branches of your family?

GB: Education then, as education is now: if you get it, if you learn it, if you prepare your brain, I don't care how much racism occurs, it cannot be taken. And, that is what my granddaddy said.

JG: And you've already shared several things that he said.

GB: He said, if you put it in your head and put it in your mind and use it. He said, if you don't use it God will take it away. Education is important because you can design and develop your own destiny. You don't have to wait for someone to tell you, although I was pointed in the right direction, I have also been allowed to develop for myself what I want to become and not dependent as they say in math. I'm not a dependent variable. I am an independent variable.

JG: So, this is the same grandfather that told you it doesn't matter necessarily that these books came from the white school, whatever they've got in them they're still valuable.

GB: Yes, that is exactly who it was.

JG: I know you've said it before, but just for the sake of the moment for my memory what was his name again?

GB: James Bonner.

JG: Okay, so James Bonner was the grandfather who imparted some of this wisdom to you?

GB: Yes, now his wife Sarah, my grandmother, she passed away when I was three, but she left, at her passing enough money for me to go to college for four years. It was predestined. I didn't know it.

JG: How did she have money.

GB: She came from Gabriel.

JG: From the Gabriel's, the thousand acres, yes.

GB: Right.

JG: Well that is interesting. I would like to know more about that.

GB: She put it away. And what is so fascinating about it my grandfather never let my mom and dad know that he had that money for me to go to school and he would add to it each year whatever he was able to add to it, and when I graduated from high school, my grandfather did not let his son, my dad, know that he had that money. He called my mom and handed her cash for me to go to school.

JG: How about that.

GB: I'm thinking oh boy we can go shopping and my momma went no!

JG: Well let's talk about that how did you go to Dillard?

GB: Well actually my step-mother was the one that told me about it. I thought once upon a time... see everybody in my family was a teacher. I did not want to teach, simply because they were teachers. Nothing wrong with teaching I just didn't want to do it because they did it. And the only other career for a black woman at that time was nursing so, I said okay, I want to become a nurse. So, my step-mother told me about Dillard which was a formidable African American School, HBCU [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] in New Orleans. It has its own hospital and good nursing program.

JG: Had you ever been to New Orleans?

GB: I went to school there.

JG: No, I meant before Dillard.

GB: No.

JG: Had you ever...

GB: Hadn't been to New Orleans; hadn't been to Dillard; just got a scholarship to go to Dillard so that relieved some money that my grandmother had left for me to buy other things that I needed to go to school. So, my Mom took me to Dillard, dropped me off at the back door and said I will see you, now call me! And it was so funny; this is a true story, I went to register and we were in the gym, big area and they had the different departments and so of course I saw the one that said nursing. So, I went over to that program and had my little papers and everything in my hand and they were talking to the girl in front of me and said, "Well you know you have to go to summer school every summer in the nursing program to be able to finish in the 4 year time," and I'm going to myself, no counseling, no nothing, I went, "I ain't doing that." So, I said...

JG: What did you think you were going to do during the summers go back home?

GB: I had no idea, but nobody was going to tell me I had to give up my summers, which I ended up doing anyway. But I slid out of the line literally and there was nobody there to tell me I couldn't, so I slid out of the nursing line and stood in the middle of the floor and went okay, which one of these do I want to do? And biology was the only one that I recognized. I knew I didn't want to do English. I was interested in History, but I was trying to figure out now what kind of job can you get as a historian? I said, "no I will just take a couple of those classes." And I didn't know what Psychology was because my high school hadn't told me, so I went over in the biology line. That is how I got to be a major in biology.

JG: And what year would that have been?

GB: '64.

JG: Okay, so Civil Rights Legislation. (**GB:** yes) Talk a little bit about that, that era if you would, (**GB:** Oh, that was fascinating.) and your then own perspective too. That is the same year you were going to college, and in some way's broader horizons from the worlds that you knew.

GB: I didn't know a lot about the Civil Rights movement before I went to college. I mean, from country Texas, it wasn't a whole lot of involvement in everything. My brother had got in trouble going to marches and stuff in Houston and my daddy told us both; my sister was gone, but he told us both, "you go to jail, you stay, I ain't coming."

JG: Now what did your momma say?

GB: She didn't say much about it. I do remember, in 1963 before I graduated that year with the Martin Luther King march in Washington, she...we had a black and white TV and I was outside doing something. I was probably hitting a ball up against the chimney,

because I enjoyed doing that, she called me in there and told me, “come here I need you to sit down and watch this.” And as I remember that is the only time she ever brought attention to what was happening because she was very quiet, very, very, quiet. I don’t know, when she retired from teaching, she got to running her mouth, but until that point, she was very, very quiet. It was emphasized dignity, she emphasized being humble very, very much and but she had me to watch that and I do remember doing that. But there was no civil rights stuff in Fairfield, Texas. But when I went to college, it was and one of the things that I did every summer I was in school... I would of course I was a biology major and I had my biology stuff; I did that all school year and in the summer I would take my electives because I didn’t want to have that interfere with my studies and I would go to the black book store and buy nine or ten books and that is what I would do in the summer is read about black history, because I didn’t know it and I wanted to know it. And, then...

JG: Do you remember any particular authors or titles?

GB: Oh, I read James Baldwin. I read about well... fascinated about Booker T. Washington. He wasn’t my favorite. I enjoyed W. E. B. Du Bois; he was my favorite.

JG: What about Carver?

GB: I read about Carver, well not a lot, because when I was growing up that was the only black people, they ever talked about in my high school was Carver and Booker T. Washington. Maybe that is why I didn’t enjoy them.

JG: You were always wanting to be different huh? (Laughter)

GB: Right, so just...Harlem, I was fascinated by the Harlem Renaissance and even being that fascinated, I didn’t know about a lady named Zora Neale Hurston until my daughter went to school. A fascinating woman; just fascinating. Then the second summer that I was in school, again, I had an opportunity to go to Ethiopia for the whole summer. Changed my whole perspective on being black. So, I went. I had no idea, I had never been; I was by myself. I went with a group called Crossroads to Africa, but when I left Texas, I was by myself. I had never been on a plane.

JG: Where did you fly out of?

GB: We flew out of New York.

JG: New York, okay.

GB: But when I went, we had to go to Princeton for a week for orientation and all that. It was so funny, I never will forget my dad had a cousin, I have a cousin. He called her, she lived in New York. I had never been to New York; I had never been on a plane, but I was going. I was excited! So, he called her and told her look with you meet this country bumpkin at the airport. I’m going, “I ain’t no country bumpkin.” He said, “yes you are!” And she did. She met me and at that time you could go down to the gate and everything. I

met her in New York. I had never seen so many people in my life and then she took me to her apartment. That is the thing that fascinated me. She had four or five locks on her door. I'm going whoa! So, I stayed with her and she took me back down to the bus and put me on the bus to Princeton and the rest is history. I still have friends there. I tell everybody if my mom hadn't been in Lufkin, I would be in Africa today.

JG: Talk about music. Were you in to music of the day?

GB: Oh, I can't carry a tune in a bucket and my sister was a fantastic musician. She had a beautiful voice. But I love music. Music is just one of those things that can calm you, give you inspiration, give you a lot of emotion. I'm not a very emotional person, but I can sit and listen to music for hours and hours and hours. When I grew up of course, most of the music I listened to was at church. We had church music, but there was a radio station in Nashville, Tennessee. You couldn't get it until after ten o'clock at night, I don't remember the name of it, but we could listen to it on our little AM radio and you could order records from them. They would send them COD and you could order them and pay for them when they got there. I remember that.

JG: What kind of music was it?

GB: It was rhythm and blues, rhythm and blues.

JG: Okay in Nashville, but you could get it in Texas?

GB: Yes, in Texas. When I got to New Orleans, they had their own music.

JG: Okay.

GB: No, this is in Texas. And growing up all through high school, I wish I could remember the name of that station, but it would come on after ten o'clock. You couldn't get it before ten.

JG: So y'all would stay up...

GB: Well I could hear my momma, "now turn that radio off and go to bed." (laughter) So, I think music is... as a matter of fact, one of the things my daughter and I are doing; I don't know if I shared that with you, we are doing research on the Chittlin' Circuit.

JG: Yes!

GB: And, now there are many people who have done stories about performers on the circuit and who they were, and that type of thing, but no one has done a documentary on the Circuit itself and how it got started and where it went. And, the research we have done so far shows, well it went across the south, from Georgia to Texas. It stopped in Texas. It didn't keep going and then it went north from Texas and then into Chicago and Detroit, and then back down through Kentucky, of all places, and back down to the

Carolinas and back into Georgia. So that is the circuit. Many times, too, the musicians followed the Negro baseball teams and where they played of course, Diboll being a major one, Mr. Marcellus. You know Marcellus?

JG: Marcellus Jones?

GB: Yes, he was a major player in Texas on the Chitlin' Circuit and he was able to connect with the people in Houston and Dallas and Tyler and as performers were coming through to go to those bigger places, he was able to get them to stop a night or two here in Lufkin and East Texas to perform. So, I didn't know all that until I started doing all this research and so he is a jewel.

JG: Talk about '64, again, '64, '65 there at Dillard, were any of the faculty...what was the racial make up of the faculty? For the recording it was historically black university.

GB: Yes, it was started by the Rosenwald and Stein Family, who were Jewish out of New York. They came down and originally gave them the money for the main, two main buildings, as you see it still there out front, and they helped to establish the hospital.

JG: Were any of the schools in Rusk County and Freestone County Rosenwald Schools?

GB: I don't know, I know the ones I went to, I don't think so. But they had them here in East Texas.

JG: Yes, ma'am that is why I was just curious. I don't want to distract you, so come back to Dillard, yes.

GB: I would credit Dillard with opening my eyes to the world, even though I read and I had more experience and exposure than my classmates did in Fairfield because of my family. When I got to Dillard I was like wow, there is a world out here!

JG: So where were some of your fellow students, where did they come from?

GB: All over. We had, well there were certain, in my class, there were about close to ten of us from Texas and we either caught a train out of Houston or we caught a train out of Longview.

JG: Were most of them rural or urban?

GB: No, they were urban; I was the only little country bumpkin.

JG: Oh, okay.

GB: And, there is four or five of them now, a couple of them have died, but we still keep up with each other and the whole class, even though some have passed on now.

JG: And they came from mostly the south or the north?

GB: No, there were classmates from Chicago; there were none from the east. Most of them Chicago, of course New Orleans at home, a few from Alabama and then Texas of course. No one from Oklahoma as I remember. So we were a hodge podge of young'uns as they called them at Dillard. Dillard really opened my eyes to a world that I didn't even know existed and they were very helpful in my development as I became an adult. They weren't easy. We had to...

JG: The faculty, what was the racial make up of the faculty?

GB: As I remember actual faculty there, we had one white English professor and one white Psychology professor and one Indian, Arthur Violet they called him, he was the Physics teacher. Nobody could understand a word he said. I said that is the excuse to flunk physics.

JG: Did you say Indian from India, the country?

GB: Yes, India and as I remember that was about it. And we had in the years I was at Dillard's we had two white students and they were welcomed and treated like everybody else. So, the other thing we had though, we were right there in New Orleans and we were close and had professors that came over from time to time from Tulane that were like adjunct professors and LSU of New Orleans. The reason I remember those two is because I really, really developed an interest in behavioral psychology and the professor from Tulane got me involved in a study she was doing. She was working on some kind of research she was doing, but anyway she wanted to look at the behavior of African American children who were failing and what was it about them and their home life. Of course, I could go into their homes and it was no problem or anything and I'd do what she asked me to do and I was able to develop that rapport with the family and so I remember doing that and I was thinking about going to graduate school when I left Dillard and I asked her if she would write me a letter of recommendation and she said sure. She put in that recommendation could be a straight A student if she wanted to but she is satisfied with a B. Well I would miss out on stuff if I had.

JG: Well what was the stuff you would have missed out on?

GB: Oh, the fun, the party, the Mardi-Gras, you know, just hanging out with my friends and playing penuckle. I still play penuckle today.

JG: How involved were you in with any of the Civil Rights Movement, I guess?

GB: Well we were protected...well we were quarantined at Dillard. We were able to participate in a few things, but they... realizing that those of us who lived on campus were not from New Orleans and they were responsible for us, they really kind of corralled us. We had our marches and stuff. I remember Stokely Carmichael, as a matter of fact I have a picture of him right now standing up in our chapel at Dillard burning his

draft card. I didn't realize he had a whole pocket of them, so he burned one everywhere he went. And, H. Rap Brown came and we had a march around the flag pole and they let us be a little exuberant and...but there were certain things we could and couldn't do.

JG: It was a private school, right?

GB: Yes, it was a private school.

JG: And you lived on campus?

GB: Yes, I lived on campus all four years. Dillard was as most, I can't say most because I haven't gone to anyone but Dillard, but they exposed me to a world as I didn't even know was out there. For example, when I was at Dillard, I didn't have a whole lot of money. I had enough money to pay my tuition and books and have a little spending change so I just pick up a little job here and there. One of the things the chaplain and his wife, fantastic people, his wife would invite me to come over to help her clean their house. Well when I get there the house was clean, she just wanted to give me a little piece of change and make me feel like I was working to earn it. But this lady, I did not know until I moved back home 20 years ago, her name was Henrietta Wells; she was one of the debate team persons from Wiley.

JG: Really, the debate...yes that beat the white debate team.

GB: Yes, and I told her, I said Mrs. Wells why didn't you tell me that because we would sit and talk and she would share and we just had a good...they took me to my first synagogue. I didn't know what a synagogue was I was from Fairfield. But they did nurturing things like that. They exposed me to a synagogue, they took me to a Cotillion. I didn't have no Cotillion in Fairfield! She taught me how to dress to go and how I was supposed to look and everything and that was the kind of thing Dillard did for me. We'd would sit and talk and she'd tell me about things and then I find out she was part of that team I said, "Mrs. Wells." She said, "you didn't need to know." But that's the foundation I believe it carried forward, her behavior and many other people at Dillard. The concept that my mom had said, is that you are no better than anybody else, you've just had more opportunities. So, that...I believe that very strongly.

JG: Any...when you graduated from Dillard, what were your thoughts? Were you ready? What was the next step?

GB: When I graduated from Dillard, I had really...I was thinking about this the other day too, I had really, really, really, I wanted to go into the military because when I went to Africa that summer I had seen an opportunity to travel and see the world. That is all I wanted to go in there for, I wasn't going to shoot nobody.

JG: Now this is during Vietnam.

GB: That is why I didn't go! (laughter) At that point my dad, not my granddaddy this time, my dad said, "no!" But I said I want to do this and see the world. He said, "yes, but you may see it in a coffin, no!" And, as rambunctious as I was, I did obey!

JG: That one! (laughter)

GB: I obeyed most of the time, but that was what I really, really wanted to do but that didn't happen so I ended up teaching. I went to Los Angeles and taught in Watts, which was as bad as Vietnam.

JG: Say that again.

GB: I taught at Watts, you know, the Watts Community in Los Angeles.

JG: W-a-t-t-s.

GB: Yes.

JG: What did you teach?

GB: Science, yes. I taught at an elementary school, John Muir Junior High School and you remember when they had the Watts riot? Remember hearing about that? That community was destroyed and the school where I taught was right in the middle of that community.

JG: So, when was that riot when you were there?

GB: The riot occurred before, no it occurred before I got there per say, but the school was still...they didn't destroy the school and it was in the middle... it still is there but it's not a school anymore, where the gangs would hang out and all that kind of thing. It was very gang infested. One of my favorite stories after I got married and I was teaching there I was working on the weekend as playground supervisor and...

JG: This is elementary school you said?

GB: Junior high.

JG: Oh, junior high.

GB: And one of the gangs came up on the weekend and the guys were over in the corner gambling and so I said I'm going now what am I supposed to do, because I don't want to get shot. So, I went over and I told them, I said, "hey guys, you know I need this job; I got a husband and a baby at home and if they come through and find you guys over here doing this they will fire me and I'll lose my job. Do you think you could go some place else?" "Oh yes, we don't want them to cause you any trouble." I said, "you wouldn't mind, would you?" They never came back, but every now and then one of them would

come through and ...and this is a true story...one will come through and say, "is everything all right?" I say, "oh yes, it's going good." "Just checking!" What that showed me though, if you give respect you receive respect.

JG: Yes, where did you meet your husband?

GB: Los Angeles.

JG: Okay you met him there and married there.

GB: He was from Pasadena.

JG: You mentioned a child.

GB: We have one son and one daughter and we've got those two kids and...

JG: Were they both born in Los Angeles?

GB: My son was, my daughter was born in Portland, Oregon. That is where my husband got a job in Portland Oregon.

JG: What did he do?

GB: Well he is a banker, now he is retired now, but he owned his own business and he decided he wanted to go back to Los Angeles and I stayed in Portland.

JG: How long were you in Los Angeles teaching at Watts?

GB: In Watts 5 years.

JG: But the job is what took you there and met your husband and married and had your son?

GB: Yes.

JG: Then what took y'all to Portland?

GB: He got a job.

JG: He got a job.

GB: In Portland, and that is when we moved there and my mom's brother was there, whose house I live in here, he came back to Texas.

JG: Oh, okay.

GB: He and his wife were there. Portland is a good place, but it was just too white. I couldn't bring my kids up in that environment and feel comfortable. We would have to go to Seattle to go to a movie that showed black people and I'm going no, we don't need to do that.

JG: So was it integrated?

GB: Portland was and still is integrated but at the time we were there...

JG: Just weren't very many?

GB: Three percent. And we weren't treated bad. I'm not saying we were treated bad but there was a cultural desert there and so maybe I was just too impatient to watch it grow. I think now it's much, much better because my daughter's godmother is there and her family but they live in Vancouver, Washington which is right across the river. But Portland wasn't that bad. First of all, when my uncle left, I had no family in the northwest, a beautiful place; I was there when Mount St. Helen erupted.

JG: Really!

GB: Yes, we left going to church that morning and it was blowing before we left and it was blowing when we got out of church.

JG: So, you went to Portland for your husband's job, did you teach there as well?

GB: Yes.

JG: Junior High again?

GB: High School.

JG: High school...science as well?

GB: Yes.

JG: Was that a better teaching job than Los Angeles or how would you compare them?

GB: Well that is a good question. I never thought about it. I missed my little bad children. I did I missed my little bad children and a couple of them...

JG: You said you missed your bad children?

GB: Yes, my little Watts kids. I missed them.

JG: In what ways, explain that.

GB: I don't know. They had a spunk about them. I knew when they got older, because these were junior high kids, boys and girls.

JG: That is kind of a struggling time regardless.

GB: Yes, but I got along with them. I never suspended a kid at all. We would fuss, but the one thing that I did in California, I didn't do it any place else, well I did when I came back to Houston. They would invite me to come to their plays at church or their programs at church and I would take my son and here we go. My husband was going, "you don't need to go in that neighborhood." But nothing ever happened to us and it developed a rapport with the parents that... I mean I didn't go to all of them. I didn't go to every kid's stuff, but I went to some and they told other kids she came to my church yesterday and saw me singing or something and they meant well, they just didn't have the exposure. A couple of them, I remember them getting in trouble in other teachers' rooms and they wouldn't go to the principal's office, they wanted to come to my room and at that time we could paddle. I have a paddle at my house that is shaped like a fish and I still have it and every kid whoever got paddled signed that fish first and it's full. But they knew that, they knew that discipline was important and it was a kid who made that fish. He made it to fit my hand and not that I wanted to paddle a kid, but I wanted them to know that I cared and it worked and I missed them.

JG: So, you didn't have to do much paddling in Portland?

GB: No, I didn't, I really didn't. I didn't have to, it was good and they were high school kids too.

JG: High school yes, so that's the difference in and of itself.

GB: Yes.

JG: Anything remarkable you remember about either school's administration? You know the way the school itself was run?

GB: Not really, not particularly. One thing I tell everybody though; I taught in Houston as well, but of the three school systems where I taught, I was looking at the administration in many instances more concerned about test scores than kids and it wasn't...many administrators were forgetting why we were at the school, which is for the children. Not for the old people, not for the teachers, not for the principal, not for the central school administrators; I know there are certain things you have to do, but the primary purpose for school is for the children and I that was disappearing so I knew it was time for me to go.

JG: So, when did you leave Portland?

GB: I left Portland in 1980 or 1981? My father passed away in 1981...

JG: So, you were in Portland a good while then?

GB: Yes, I came back to Houston. My grandfather passed in '80 and my father passed in '81, so then I came back to Houston and I stayed 5 years and then I left for Boston.

JG: Where did you teach in Houston?

GB: Where?

JG: Yes.

GB: At the high school for Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice.

JG: Oh, okay so not like Houston School District or Aldine or something?

GB: Well that is Houston School District, but it's a charter school. Not charter a Magnet school.

JG: Oh okay, say the name of it again.

GB: High School for Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice. That was a good experience. I really enjoyed my kids there. They were good kids.

JG: You taught Science there?

GB: Yes, but that was a good experience with the kids there because they were mostly Hispanic and white.

JG: Okay, that is what I was going to ask you about the integration.

GB: I had a few African American students, but most of them were Hispanic and white. My homeroom was like a family. It really was; anything happen to one, we were all there and I had one young man in the high school he was like 6 feet two or something like that and he was a trip. He did the flags every morning and then I had two, three African American kids and they were always in trouble, but they would always run to my room and I told the vice-principal, y'all going to pay me to a VP salary! I remember a couple of years after they finally graduated, I would get this post card at the school and they sent me a post card from Italy and they said you didn't think we would make it. They were all three in the Marines and in Rome. We just want you to know we won't forget you!

JG: Wow!

GB: But it's all about the kids!

JG: Yes, yes. So, you decided in Houston then you wanted to...I don't want to put words in your...

GB: That is alright.

JG: What took you to Massachusetts?

GB: While I was in Houston I was active with the NEA, National Education Association and I was a building rep and I got interested in the labor union movement and what was happening with laborers. And then as a part of that I became active with their legislative program and worked with TEA, Texas Education Association. Well, it is TEA, but it's the union part of the NEA. I am very active with that and because while I was in Oregon, I had really been active in the political process. As a matter of fact, I was on the Democratic National Committee from Oregon so I had that experience. And so a friend of mine worked for NEA in Washington and we would talk every Sunday, every Sunday right after 60 Minutes. But anyway, the position came available in Massachusetts and truly they needed a black person because they had never hired a black person for the labor union, the labor program in Massachusetts. She said, "I'm going to send you up there," and I said "I'm not going up there; I don't know anybody in Massachusetts." I'm going to be the only one." She said "you'll be alright." I went and stayed 17 years.

JG: Seventeen years. Now did you raise both your children when you and your husband separated, the children stayed with you?

GB: Yes.

JG: So, I forgot the chronology now but did they move to Massachusetts?

GB: No, well what happened when I left Oregon...well this is an interesting story. My husband left when my daughter was one, okay, so I had both the kids in Oregon and it was good. I had a really good neighborhood; everybody looked out for everybody else's kids, so one summer my mother came from Texas to Oregon to visit us for the summer and all of that and as she was packing to come back home my daughter said, "Where you going little Momma?" And she said "well I got to go home; I got to go back and see about my Momma and go back to Texas." And, she said "can I go?"

JG: She was pretty young now right?

GB: She was like three. "Can I go?" And, so my mother said yes and so she packed her bags and find a suitcase somewhere and put her dolls in it and she was ready to go. My mother brought her back to Texas when she was three.

JG: Back to Fairfield?

GB: No back to Lufkin, because my mom had taught school here and she was taking care of...my grandparents had passed but...

JG: Where did your mom teach in Lufkin?

GB: Well it started as Dunbar but it was the seventh-grade campus.

JG: They had already...

GB: Yes, so she came the first year they changed that campus to seventh grade. The principal of that school at that time belief it or not my mom had been his babysitter when he was growing up, so he knew and they were closing the black school in Fairfield. She was talking about going to Washington, D.C. and he said no you don't need to do that you just come on to Lufkin.

JG: So your daughter then moved to Lufkin. One of my questions was what brought you to Lufkin?

GB: Well my mom, that is what brought me to Lufkin. (**JG:** Okay) but then my father passed away, my grandfather passed away and I came back to Houston, my son and I came back to Houston, but I just did not want him growing up in Houston. Houston was not an environment that I felt a young black man needed to grow up in with a single parent. My uncle lived across the street from my mother which, male image, he had three sons, again a male image, and they treated him like a brother.

JG: Do you mind saying his name?

GB: What my uncle?

JG: Yes.

GB: Willis, Willis Switch.

JG: Willis Switch, you mentioned him earlier.

GB: My mom had another brother, my uncle who lived in Oregon had moved back home and bought a house next door to my mother, so my son was surrounded by black men, which is what I wanted him to have. So, I brought him to Lufkin to live with my Mother during the regular school year and he graduated from Lufkin High School.

JG: What year?

GB: In '87.

JG: In '87, okay I graduated in '85.

GB: Maury Williams, he played football. But anyway, in the summer months he would come to Houston and stay with me to go to summer school there in Houston, so that is how he was able to get ahead in terms of the subjects that he needed for college by coming to Houston and taking those classes. My daughter stayed with my mother until

she was...finished the eighth grade, stayed here in Lufkin, and then by that time I had been in Boston for awhile and so she then came to Boston to go to school.

JG: Talk a little bit about the move to Massachusetts and I want you to tell or retell the story you told at the foundation offices the other day.

GB: Oh about...

JG: Yes, tell about that incident.

GB: Massachusetts is a strange environment. If you want to see some pure racism go to Boston.

JG: Really?

GB: I mean it...but I say it like that, and it's truly not fair because the guy who was the manager for the division where I went, I asked him his name one day, his name was Flannigan, I said, "Flannigan why do you Irish treat black people so bad?" And, he looked at me and he truly was surprised he said, "why you say that?" So, I gave him a couple of examples and he said, "Oh that doesn't have anything with being black. We treat each other like that." I said, "Flannagin." He said, "just watch," and he was right. That experience, well a couple of times, that one I talked about at the group the other day, was one day I was going to a meeting in Framingham, Massachusetts, one of the union meetings and I stopped at this department store, not a super stop or grocery store – nothing like that. It was a department store, to buy some hosiery and I had gone to the bank before I went and I had a hundred-dollar bill. So, I paid for my purchase with that hundred-dollar bill and before I could get out of the door of that store they had called the police from Framingham.

JG: Say the name of that town.

GB: Framingham.

JG: F-r-.....

GB: F-r-a-m-i-n-g-h

JG: Framingham, not farmingham...

GB: No Framingham, there is a Farmington, Massachusetts but anyway, they had blocked my car in, because I was getting ready to get in ...

JG: The police?

GB: Yes, and I'm going.. is something going on here that I don't know? And they wondered where did you...we got a call that you paid for some merchandise with a

fraudulent hundred-dollar bill. I said well then you go across the street over here to Bank of America, because that is where I got it from. They said well we need to check. I said, no problem, but I need to make a phone call because I have six attorneys down the street waiting on me to get there and I need them to know where I am. They went, “oh-oh, we think we made a mistake.” I mean all I did was pay for some merchandise so when I got to my meeting, this young lady, now she is the General Council in Massachusetts, she said, “you should have let them take you to jail. We would have been rich! I said I didn’t need that problem at all. And then one night, I used to travel a lot for my sorority, and rather than catch a cab or anything from the Boston airport, I would catch a bus to the suburbs where I lived and then take a taxi on home. That is what I had done; I had gotten off the bus and gotten a taxi and we were on our way home and the police pulled us over and said, “well this lady in the back of your car, we suspect her of having robbed a store.” And I’m going, I just got off a plane and the driver said, “Sir you have to be making a mistake I just picked her up at the bus station” and he said, “Are you sure?” He said “yes, I’m taking her home.” And, if he hadn’t said that, they probably would have tried to arrest me.

JG: So, where were you when you came to Lufkin? Where did you come from? Was it Massachusetts?

GB: Now?

JG: Yes ma’am.

GB: Massachusetts. I moved back home because my sister was seriously ill and wasn’t able to take care of our Mom and she subsequently passed away before my mom. I knew somebody had to do it and I didn’t have anybody to tell me I couldn’t.

JG: Now you told me the other day you knew Bettie Kennedy for a long time or a time before you moved to Lufkin, so talk a little bit about that. How did you meet Reverend Bettie Kennedy?

GB: She was a Methodist, CME Methodist minister and I remember my mom calling me and telling me, “What you think about women being preachers?” I’m going, “I don’t have no problem with it, what is the problem?” “Well they assigned this woman to be the pastor at my church and I’m not so sure how I feel about that.” And I went, “Well it will be alright Momma, it’s the same Bible that the men read from.” So through that church, I got to know Reverend Kennedy and she and my mom worked together in the school system and they worked together with the group called Top Ladies of Distinction here in Lufkin and it was always about the children. So when I’d come home I would see her here at church or at some event or something like that and then when I moved back home, of course, I got interested in history and she drug me in like a cat! (laughter) But, I became interested in Angelina County history because there is a lot of physical history. There is a lot of oral history; there is a lot of people talking, but there is no history about what Angelina County developed as it developed and where it developed and so then she got me interested in this building up on Leach Street and she had gotten

Bruce Love, put a roof on it, because it was going to truly decay. If there is no roof, they would decay so she got me interested in that building. Her father had built that building.

JG: Will Ingram.

GB: Yes, and so she really wanted to see it restored, and then I caught the bug and I want to see it restored. Because that building...remember I started off by saying, when the churches are moved and the schools are moved, the community dies, well that building is an example of a structure that was the center of activity for North Lufkin. Not Lufkin Land, that is another story, but North Lufkin, that building, there was documentation in that building dating back to 1905. I mean charters for organizations that they had just thrown in the closet. And so Stephen F. Austin came down, it was hot that day, I'll never forget it. Bettie sitting right there going through papers and charters and all of that and looking at it and preserving it. And they also used that building for the Masons and nobody kept up, they have that secret stuff that they have and all that. Well I knew it was supposed to be secret, but I'm sitting here looking at it, and I called my cousin in Houston. I told him, I said, "Look, all this stuff is in this building that I have here and I know I'm not suppose to look at it but if y'all don't come get it, I'm going to read every page." He said, "Don't you touch it!"

JG: He was a Mason?

GB: He was a Mason. So, he and a friend of his came up a couple of weeks later in his truck and they hauled it all away and he has told me since...

JG: What did they do with it?

GB: They use it with their services and stuff. It was ceremonial stuff.

JG: Now you can't tell me that you didn't read through it!

GB: No, I didn't!

JG: You didn't? I don't know if I believe that.

GB: No, please do! Because my sister's husband was a mason, he was one of them, I call them mucky-d-mucks. He had a book also that my sister had when she passed, I was going through her stuff, and I gave it to Mr. Coleman here in Lufkin. And I didn't. I don't know, I just didn't. My father was a Mason, my grandfather was a Mason, I just didn't. I was told growing up. It was karma from the grave telling me.

JG: We tried to get some Masonic records and you can't.

GB: What are you looking for?

JG: Just the records. Some of these lodges go back to the nineteenth century.

GB: I know they do.

JG: But, like you say, the Masons don't want that to be public. It's only for Masons.

GB: Now the books I didn't read, but I did read their records in terms of their insurance. They pay twenty-five cents a month and when someone died, they had a burial plan, or whatever it was. They'd give them money for the burial. Is that the kind of stuff you're looking for?

JG: Well just anything. But I don't want to go into specifics on the recording. I was just curious.

GB: I'll look through what we have. I know we found records of the meeting of the Heroin's and the somebodies of Jericho. Bettie knew who it was. As a matter of fact, one of the documents we found has Bettie's mother's writings in it. She was secretary and Bettie said that is my mother. So, Bettie got me involved in all this and then, when I started working on the historical marker, I was fascinated about how Lufkin was laid out and the design of the city. What is the name of that company that came through mapping everything?

JG: Sanborn?

GB: Sanborn, I found those Sanborn maps, man that was fantastic.

JG: Yes, the Sanborn maps are a great example of a record that had a purpose.

GB: Yes!

JG: But the historical value, the enduring value, is something they never envisioned, but it has as equal or sometimes greater value for history.

GB: Right, I didn't even know such a thing existed until I started working on that marker and tracing all of that. I'm just fascinated by doing that kind of stuff. I enjoy it!

JG: Well good I think everybody should. I'm the same way. Talk about how you came to run for city council.

GB: By accident! (laughter) When I came to Lufkin, again I came from Massachusetts. I had been steeped in... both feet and up to my armpits in politics. I enjoyed it, but it's very, very, stressful. I said I'm done with it and I'm not going to be bothered with it. But when I came to Lufkin, I didn't leave my skills that I had in that arena in Massachusetts. I brought them with me in my brain. Again, I read the book! I saw some voids in the way the community was functioning and I thought I had something to offer. I had some know-how of how to get things to happen and I offered it. That's it, that is all it was, because I had planned to come home and lay on my momma's couch and watch Law and Order.

JG: Talk about the change or changes, just change in general that you saw.

GB: Change in what way?

JG: I forgot the exact words that you used. You saw some things that weren't in order.

GB: Right.

JG: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but ultimately history is about the story of changes, and so I didn't want to start off with this, but we have this little book and you go through here and you see these faces and all community here, is what you see.

GB: That is exactly right! That is exactly right and I didn't know about that book until I started working on the marker and I discovered that. In that book is pride! In that book is aspiration! In that book is know-how and...But that somehow has disappeared in the Black community in Lufkin. I don't know why. I don't know when. I don't know how.

JG: Have you thought about it? To begin to try to answer those questions?

GB: Well yes, that is why I'm trying to get my building back together to show people: this is yours. One of the things that really got my interest and it seems like something real small. I work with a group of kids in North Lufkin. I call them the North Lufkin Children's Choir. We had a ball; I haven't done anything this year because I wanted to focus on my building, instead of doing all these other things.

JG: And now the pandemic.

GB: Thank you very much. But anyway, when I first got that building and Reverend Kennedy was still alive then, there was a young man, he still is a young man, but he was like maybe 12, if he was 12. But he was a troubled child, but he was brilliant. The child was brilliant. He was an avid reader. I was always giving him books and he always walked around with a book in his pocket. He wasn't just wearing it in his pocket he was reading it. I took him with a group of 11 kids, I took them to Washington, D.C. one time and some of them still talk about that trip. And we went to the Martin Luther King Memorial and there are plaques around that memorial. He went around each one of those plaques and he said...he called me Mrs. Doctor Bonner...I can tell you what is on each one of those plaques." I said, "no you can't Jerome." "yes, I can" and he did. He did! So, when we got back and we were going by the building one day and I said "Jerome, this is your building, this is our building, this is for the kids in the neighborhood." He said one thing, he said, "can we plant some flowers." I said, "flowers?" I said all the things we could do with this building and you want to plant flowers?" He said, "I don't live in a place where we have flowers. I want some flowers." I said, "well Jerome, I promise you at some point, we're going to plant some flowers." That is a small thing. For him, that was uplifting and for him that was something he had seen someplace else, but never seen it in his yard.

JG: Some connection or belonging.

GB: Yes, and I don't see that in North Lufkin. One day I was helping a neighbor's daughter and she was having a problem with her landlord and so her mom told her go talk to Mrs. Bonner, she can tell you what to do and we took care of it. She said, "are you a lawyer?" I said, "yes." She said, "and you live in my neighborhood?" I said, "yes." "Why you live in my neighborhood?" I said, "Because I want to." "I don't know any other lawyers that live in my neighborhood." I said, "you know one now." And of course, when I was growing up, we all lived together. We lived side by side. You saw a teacher, a dentist, at church. They don't see that anymore. They don't see that anymore. And so that is why it is important to show these children that you don't have to live in Crown Colony or Brookhollow to make yourself have high self esteem and know that you can go and do things. Now, there is nothing wrong with having a beautiful home or living in Crown Colony, but I can walk up and down my street at midnight and not feel afraid, even though we did have a shooting two weeks ago, but they weren't shooting at me. But North Lufkin! Look that. That's pride!

JG: Yes, that is the only word I can think of is community.

GB: It is a community and we don't have that anymore and I want...that is what I want to see happen, because they had people who were businesses. Mr. Coleman, who used to have a service station right there at the intersection of Atkinson and First Street or Angelina Street. He was there for years and he is gone now. There used to be grocery stores, there used to be service stations all over the place. There were cleaners there, there is none of that self-enthusiasm is gone. The children, it's like they have no hope. I had a young man too, part of my little group, that he graduated from high school and he told me Mrs. Doctor Bonner, I can't read. I said what you mean you can't read you just got a diploma. "Well I can't read." And, he didn't know what to do. He told me later on he said I was so scared I didn't know what to do. At Louie Gohmert's office, and Louie and I don't agree on nothing, but his staff is excellent. And they helped me get this young man into San Marcos in the Job Corps. He is now driving an 18-wheeler for Wal-Mart. I mean that is hope, that is hope! And I was talking about this last night, the black children in Lufkin have been at the very bottom of the achievement level in Lufkin Independent School District. I don't know about Diboll. I don't know about Hudson and Huntington, but I know in Lufkin, 77% of the children are on free or reduced lunch, but black kids have been and are right now at the very bottom of the achievement level in all major academics - English, Math, Social Studies, Science, they're at the bottom. So, if you're at the bottom, what you going to do. Now, there are kids who came from families like I came from a family, their family is going to see to it that they are successful and they achieve and do well, but too many of them have no hope, so they end up hanging out on the street. That is what this young man told me. I said, "well what would have happened if you hadn't gone to Job Corps?" He said, "I'd be in jail." That is not acceptable, not to me. And so that is why I keep doing the stuff I'm doing.

JG: What do you see as, I mean I started to ask the question about challenges, that is a challenge in and of itself.

GB: It is.

JG: But, practical things, things you can quantify and make steps forward, what do you see as going forward as some big challenges?

GB: Well one of the challenges, again I was talking about this last night, has to do with the lack of internet service in North Lufkin.

JG: Internet.

GB: I will tell you, I'm going to tell you I'm an avid opponent of putting some cell towers in North Lufkin, although everybody was telling me you got to let them come in because you got to have the internet. You got to let them do what they need to be so that the kids can get the service and everything. My daughter keeps telling me, "don't be stubborn Momma, let them put the towers up the children need the wi-fi and all that." So, but economics is a major impediment and I will tell you I don't know how to say it other than when I see, there's a church that comes up to Brandon Park and they pull up under the shed and they be passing out food and folks just come swarming in there like ants, that upsets me to no end. You give them food, so what are they going to do to earn it. When you earn something, there is pride, there is pride. And pride becomes moving forward. These people had pride. These people had a purpose in life. If it wasn't nothing but to put their white dresses on and march away. The building I have, they would meet at that building and march around the corner to First Baptist. They had pride! They had something they could stand up and say this is what we have done, not what somebody has handed us, but we have done this and I don't see that happening in Lufkin enough.

JG: Right, and for the recording what we are talking about is a 1956 hardbound book called *The Mirror*, which was done by the name, the Lufkin Negro Chamber of Commerce, 1956.

GB: And they still exist.

JG: It's a picture book, hundreds if not thousands of photographs of businesses, the schools, like what we were saying, a whole sense of community.

GB: A community. And we don't have that anymore.

JG: So, how is that going to be changed?

GB: I don't know; one step at a time. A friend of mine in New York used to tell me, one... little steps for little feet. I don't know. I'm hoping. I believe right now we can't afford to be just the Black community. The world has moved too far to do that, but I do believe we can be a multicultural community. We used to have a Heritage Festival for the

city and now that Mrs. Thompson is gone, the Heritage Festival is gone. There is no coming together of the different cultures and we got to do that. We've got to respect it in more than just food. Now, I love eating. I didn't get this size by accident. (laughing) But, there are a lot of things that we can learn from each other. A lot of things. The class that we are taking with Temple, one of the things that is important that we learn how to respect each other. I mean, I don't have to agree with you, but I respect you. And that's what I said. Like Louie Gohmert, I don't agree with nothing he does, but I do respect his staff and him too. When I took those kids to Washington, he took a whole evening and spent with those kids and took them through the entire... a humanitarian act. He could have said I'm busy, I don't have time; but he didn't do that. So we don't agree on certain things, but we do agree on the importance of those kids, and so that is how we should approach each other. If you agreed with everything I said, we wouldn't need you because I could go out and do it. So, difference makes it beautiful, you know. The colors in the rainbow, we take those colors and we make all kinds of other pretty colors and that is just the way we need to evolve. I don't know what is going to happen with Lufkin, but it's got to change.

JG: Well, like I said earlier, we've gone nearly two hours.

GB: No, we haven't.

JG: Yes, it's just five minutes until eleven, and that is fine, but generally two hours is about as long as you can go. But I do think... I would like to do another interview, because I know there is probably some details in some of these things and you'll probably have memories. You'll go back and rethink things and say oh we didn't talk about this and we didn't talk about that. So, let us... We will try to get this transcribed and you think about some other things and we will come back in a few weeks and do a follow up.

GB: But I want you to know, my children, especially my daughter and my son too, but my daughter has her own production company and she has been after me...

JG: Like film production?

GB: Yes, and she has been after me to do a book and I keep telling her I don't have time to do no book, so maybe this will be the start.

JG: But I want to give you the opportunity now before we close it out...

GB: Sure.

JG: Is there anything I didn't ask that you thought I should have asked or was on your mind? We will have the opportunity to cover things in more detail later, but for this first interview, is there anything I failed to ask you or just want to share.

GB: No, I don't have any burning desire, except my emphasis, if I had to say my purpose in life, if nothing else is to help children, because they didn't ask to come here. They didn't ask to be born, and as much as we can do to help them I just...the schools are functioning in the manner they were instructed to do so. The universe has said you will put the pencils and count how many pencils, but we have got to get back to teaching our children how to think.

JG: I was talking about that the other day about journalism. I didn't mean to be ugly, but journalism is gone and the big part of it is just like you said, thinking. Anyways...I won't say anything more on the recording, but that is true of society as a whole.

GB: They have got to learn how to think and the one that can capture that will be the leaders of tomorrow.

JG: Well Dr. Bonner I want to thank you very much.

GB: Sure.

JG: And we will end this.

END OF INTERVIEW