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Tom Crosby Oral History Collection
Willie Jefferson Oral History Interview

Interviewee
Jefferson, Willie M.

Interviewer
Crosby, Tom, 1940-

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Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, Willie M. Jefferson discusses his educational experiences at Mayesville Institute in Mayesville, South Carolina, the school’s 160 acre farm, classes in blacksmithing, masonry, carpentry, graduating in 1946, attending Allen University, teaching at Booker T. Washington High School in Columbia, becoming principal at Dennis High School and Mt. Pleasant High School (both in Lee County), and later becoming an Assistant Superintendent. Willie M. Jefferson was born in 1927. Tom Crosby interviewed Willie Jefferson on December 11, 2006. Interview covers Jefferson's education at the Mayesville Institute from the mid-1930s until 1943 and at Allen University (Columbia, S.C.) from 1943 to 1946.
Tom Crosby: Today is December 11, 2006. Today I’m interviewing, your name sir?


TC: Your hometown is where?

WJ: Mayesville, South Carolina.

TC: Okay, where did you grow up?

WJ: In Mayesville.

TC: Now what was the name of your elementary school?

WJ: Mayesville Institute, which it composed of both elementary and high school.

TC: Okay, so what were the grades?

WJ: The grades at that time were from first grade through the eleventh grade.

TC: First through the eleventh grade?

WJ: Yeah.

TC: I see. What year, if you don’t mind, what year did you graduate from high school?

WJ: In 1946.

TC: Do you know if that school was a Rosenwald school or got monies from the Rosenwald fund?

WJ: To the best of my knowledge, it was not a Rosenwald school. It had a foundation that we got money through, mostly from the people in New England, northerners.
TC: So it wasn’t primarily or it wasn’t at all church related?

WJ: No, it was not church related per se; it was independent really with Mayesville Educational Industrial Institute and then they had a Mayesville Educational Institute Association and they were the ones responsible for the operation of the school.

TC: I see. Now the curriculum, for the most part did it follow the emphasis of Booker T. Washington, would you say?

WJ: Basically so, it had an industrial component in the school and that composed of brick masonry, carpentry, blacksmith, watch making, and cooking, sewing, all those were some of the course that were offered.

TC: Now would you say there was a strong emphasis on academics?

WJ: Yeah, very strong emphasis on academics and those persons who wanted to go to college, even at that time they had a different curriculum for the ones who just wanted a vocational education.

TC: Now for females it would have been things like cooking?

WJ: Sewing, yeah, economics basically.

TC: Were any guys taking those courses too?

WJ: To the best of my knowledge, there were no fellahs taking, they were considered then courses for girls.

TC: And they had watch making?

WJ: Uh-huh.

TC: Did you take such a course as that?

WJ: No, I did not.

TC: So would you say the students were tracked or they chose their own courses to take?

WJ: Basically it was based on their interest and then the parents’ interest too because the parents always told the students, their children, what to take. They also had farming, which was very essential then because the school had a hundred and sixty acre farm that people who boarded, they worked the farms and grew crops and that provided a lot of the food that they served.
TC: Did you say earlier that they had canning and canned foods?

WJ: Canning came along later but they, well, when you say canning, they did can fruits and vegetables.

TC: With the glass containers?

WJ: Yeah, the glass containers.

TC: In metal cans?

WJ: That came later.

TC: Do you have any idea about what time it came?

WJ: Sometime during the ‘40s. At that time they would send the home economics supervisor and the Ag supervisor and they conducted it during the summer when there were a lot of fruits and vegetables available. They even made mattresses there.

TC: In the summer, you say certain things were done in the summer. Were the students involved in that as well or mostly parents?

WJ: Mostly parents and many times they brought their children but basically school was out. School only ran for eight months at that time for the regular academic work. Those who stayed on the campus and worked on the farm and so forth, the boarding students they stayed basically the whole year.

TC: So there were dormitories on campus?

WJ: Yeah, one for boys and one for girls.

TC: Any of those buildings presently in existence?

WJ: No, the last building was destroyed in the early 1950’s. The last dormitory there where they stayed I think was burned around 1947 or ’48. There are no buildings there now that existed at that time.

TC: Is there a historical marker on the property now?

WJ: We don’t have a historical marker but the lady who founded the school, Miss Emma J. Wilson, she is entombed on the campus and, of course, you know they have a marker on the tomb that they built and we maintain it.

TC: I see, so there’s a sign somewhere out on the highway or the street that’s pointing to the campus?
WJ: Yeah, in other words, the street leading into the front of the school, there’s an elementary school there now.

TC: On that property?

WJ: On that property. Back in the early ’50s the foundation leased or gave to the state Tanker’s of land where they built the elementary school and the school still exists today. But the other land is still under the jurisdiction of the foundation.

TC: I see. What kind of atmosphere and provisions were made, you might say, that instilled in the students to do well and to do their best?

WJ: Well, I think one of the things the founder, the first principal of the school, she just believed in education per se. Mary McLeod Bethune was one of the first students that she had. And, of course, the influence and people saw what Mary McLeod Bethune was able to do with an education and I guess she was probably the first who finished any kind of school in the Mayesville area and she went on to college and then she came back and worked at the school for a year or two and then she moved on. She went to Kindell Institute in the Sumter and taught in the daytime, then she came and taught the adults to read and write at nighttime.

TC: At McKinley and Booker T. you say?

WJ: Kindell Institute that was in Sumter, a Presbyterian school in the city of Sumter.

TC: I see. Do you recall whether Mayesville Institute had a curriculum to train teachers?

WJ: Yes, what they had, if you finished Mayesville Institute they had what you call a normal program where if you finished they would take you and give you a summer workshop to start you on the road to teaching. And a number of teachers, whose standards were high, they worked with high schools. Really the principal was required to have a degree but the teachers did not.

TC: You’re talking about some of the high schools, the principals had a degree but some of the teachers did not?

WJ: That’s right.

TC: So did they, some of them or all of them eventually become certified?

WJ: If they stayed in the system under the state system they had to go back. Some of them went to summer school for five, six, seven, or eight summers and stayed until they got their degree. Some went to Morris College. Some came here to Allen. Some, all over the state where they had a summer program.

TC: Now some of the students most likely did they come from home environments that were limited and needed a lot, the students themselves needed a lot of help?
WJ: Yes.

TC: Do you recall what kinds of things that some of the teachers did to meet the needs of the various backgrounds?

WJ: A lot of the students came to that school, they didn’t know how to use a fork or a knife. They’d grab for a spoon when it was time to eat something. They’d never as far as good graces and courtesies and that kind of thing and those who boarded on the campus they were required to go to one of the churches every Sunday. And what they would do, they would take to this church one Sunday, the Methodist church the next Sunday, the Presbyterian church the next Sunday, until they could get, you know. And so that’s the way it was.

TC: Often times I hear persons that attended the black schools during the segregated era, they often refer to the teachers’ dedication and caring, those kinds of things.

WJ: That’s true. I was looking in one of the old record books of the Institute and the salary that the teachers got was sixteen dollars a month and if they stayed on the campus and ate on the campus, they got twelve dollars.

TC: Do you recall or you would say they were very dedicated?

WJ: Much so.

TC: And showed the students that they cared?

WJ: Oh, yeah. They basically and they would visit the students’ homes almost every month. Some of them walked and others they had an old ’33 Chevrolet that I remember the principal had. She would get a load of teachers and go one direction one day and the next day she’d go another direction.

TC: Visiting the homes?

WJ: Visiting the homes, yeah.

TC: What were the objectives of visiting the homes?

WJ: They wanted to see where the students lived and wanted to get acquainted with the parents. A lot of parents couldn’t come to school because they didn’t have any transportation and they had to work all the time. So they would take afternoons and they’d ride. They went in one direction and they could see. The school took in students within a radius of about three or four miles and so it wasn’t very difficult for them. And then those who lived in the town, they just walked.

TC: Now you have also been a high school principal?

WJ: Yeah, that’s right.
TC: What was the name of that school?

WJ: Where I was high school principal?

TC: Yes.

WJ: That was Dennis High School in Bishopville and Mt. Pleasant High School in Elliott.

TC: Do you know whether either of those schools was a Rosenwald school or not?

WJ: Neither was a Rosenwald school. Mt. Pleasant came into existence in the middle '50s. Dennis was there for a number of years but I’m not sure that part of it wouldn’t have been a Rosenwald school but I never found any information where it was.

TC: Now Mt. Pleasant was located in what town?

WJ: Elliott.

TC: Elliott and that’s what county?

WJ: Lee County.

TC: Lee County. And your last principalship was at?

WJ: At Mt. Pleasant and I left there and went to the district offices as the assistant superintendent.

TC: That was when integration came?

WJ: I was at Mt. Pleasant after integration. Integration came and they combined the schools, Bishopville High School and Dennis. They left Dennis as junior high. I stayed at the junior high for about three years and then I went to Mt. Pleasant High and stayed eight years until I went to district office and I stayed there (unintelligible).

TC: What year did Bishopville or that was Dennis High?

WJ: Dennis High in 1970 was the year, that’s right, integration came.

TC: What were some of the kinds of conditions, you might say, that you worked under when Dennis was existing as an all black high school at that time period?

WJ: Well, that’s true, the condition was that we were overcrowded and the average teacher had to, the average class size was thirty-five to thirty-eight. The money was slim, as you know, and
so we raised money and the parents were very supportive. I kind of enjoyed, you know, working.

TC: The challenge?

WJ: Yeah, the challenge really.

TC: What kinds of activities, you say the parents raised money but I guess you had some school activities raising money too.

WJ: The first year I went to Dennis they were playing football in the afternoon. They would get out of class early because they didn’t have any lights to play at night. That was the first big project we took on. We raised enough money in four months to build the lights, to put lights in the stadium. They had a nice stadium, seats and everything, with a fence around it, a block fence all the way around it, but no lights.

TC: Now in terms of raising money, what kind of things do you recall that the parents did to raise?

WJ: Well, they put on contests and drives and parents knew a lot of the people in the area that had money, you know, and they would go to them and give them three hundred dollars, which was a lot of money at that time, and a hundred dollars and so forth. We raised about twelve thousand dollars in about four and a half months.

TC: I see. What were some of the activities at the high school itself to raise money?

WJ: Well, they had homecoming activities where they raised a good deal of money.

TC: Various classes would raise money?

WJ: Yeah, they were competing for Miss Homecoming. And the class that raised the highest---it would select Miss Homecoming. We had that kind of thing going.

TC: Yeah, I’m from Sims High School in Union, South Carolina and I recall hearing persons say that they would have fish fries and things like that to raise money for uniforms for the band and so forth.

WJ: Chicken dinners, had an all state rally.

TC: Yeah, I’ve been reading the Union Daily Times, the newspaper in Union, and I have seen in there announcements with reference to what they call box suppers.

WJ: Yeah, box party.

TC: I never saw the term box party. They called them box suppers and people would bring I guess and then sell the food?
WJ: They’d fix a box of food with all kinds of goodies and stuff.

TC: Different kinds of food and people would purchase it?

WJ: Yeah, people would purchase it. They would bid on the boxes.

TC: They would? So they’d give them a chance to open the box and look into the box I guess?

WJ: I don’t remember how they used to do it. I don’t know whether they felt or not but then they’d buy it and they’d raise good money that way.

TC: Now I guess you would say that your teachers, how would you describe them with reference to working with the students?

WJ: I’ll tell you, the dedication was just awesome. You’re talking about before integration?

TC: Yeah.

WJ: Yeah, it was awesome. In fact, when we integrated the schools what we did we just kind of paired all the people who were working in grades ten through twelve they went over to Bishopville High.

TC: That was the white school?

WJ: Yeah, and then they sent, they had seventh and eighth graders and ninth graders over there, they sent their teachers over to us and that’s the way they did it.

TC: I see. Would you repeat that please how they facilitated the schools?

WJ: Yeah, we paired as to, and really the principal, Teel was the principal of the high school when I was principal at Dennis, and we sat down and we saw the roster and then the teachers that we had in grades ten through twelve they went over to Bishopville High. The teachers they had in seventh, eighth or eighth and ninth they came over to Dennis.

And so that’s the way it was.

TC: I think that Sims when integration came, I think that certain people, I don’t know how they were selected, went over to Union High and prior to that integration I think the last two years of Sims High School I think there were two white persons at Sims working with different classes.

WJ: The strange thing when we integrated schools the white principal there he came over about Christmastime and we sat and just kind of talked. He said I did not know that you had the quality of teachers that you had that you sent me. And you know what he did, that next summer he drove all over the place searching for black teachers because he said they were so thorough and you didn’t have to ask them to do their work. All they wanted was to know what you wanted done and it was done. And when it ended up his faculty was about sixty percent black.
**TC:** What were the populations or ratio at Bishopville High School at that time, more white students or black or about equal?

**WJ:** Well, the strange thing, they were thinking because I was a black principal those parents who had eighth and ninth and seventh grade students would not send them over to us. We had about thirty percent whites at that time. It’s not that way now though. And then they tried to keep the administration over there intact with the white principal and everything. He was not popular and they figured that the students would cling to him. It didn’t happen. They left and went to a private school. What happened the superintendent that we had, he had vowed the integration would never come and when he saw it was coming he resigned and became the headmaster at a private school. So I saw him after he retired. I went by the drugstore and he was sitting in there drinking a cup of coffee, he saw me and he called me he said have a seat. I sat for a moment; I didn’t have much time. He told me he said, Jefferson, said I did the damnedest thing when I left the public schools. Now over there they didn’t have a retirement income over there for them. He said I can’t make it off social security. I said, I’m sorry, but he’s the one that brought it on himself, you know. And he was sitting there like a pauper almost because they just couldn’t afford to pay and that’s when the salary started.

**TC:** And probably had more pressure from the parents, you know, later, a different kind of pressure.

**WJ:** Yeah, that’s true.

**TC:** Do you have any additional comments that you might like to make with reference to your life as you went through in elementary school or college, and your college, what it was?

**WJ:** Well, after I finished Mayesville Institute I came to Allen University and I came here, green fellah, sixteen years old, you know, you almost felt that you were in another world. I said I’m not going back to that school. I’m going to stay here. I’m going to fight this thing and in about two or three months I was pretty much adjusted. I tried to stay involved because there was so much here at Allen to be involved in and be a part of. Every time you’d have special program over in the auditorium I made myself there. I even went to Dr. Garrett’s funeral. When he died they had his funeral there in the auditorium. I guess I was one of the few students. I guess I was just nosy. I wanted to see how they were going to treat somebody like Dr. Garrett, who was a professor here for so many years. And then they had a Bishop Monroe Davis, who had finished here, and went on to become a bishop and he came back to do the eulogy.

**TC:** I see. Now for years black colleges, many of them, their major focus was on teacher preparation.

**WJ:** That’s correct.

**TC:** So would you say that they, the people that they put out I guess some of them taught at your school, that those kids, the high school job was preparing people for teaching and maybe that’s why some of those that went over to Bishopville, they were well prepared with their teacher preparation from college and didn’t have any problem.
WJ: They had a very strict program, teacher education program here. They would select students and try to match them with the schools. I ended up going to Booker Washington to teach school as opposed to somewhere else here in Columbia and you didn’t go to Booker Washington unless you were pretty much prepared. I remember a hard boiled teacher, man. (laughter) She had finished State and she had just gotten her master’s from New York and she had gotten her master’s in education or mathematics. And she was twenty-three years old.

TC: And you were?

WJ: I was twenty. (Laughter) She was no nonsense. She goes down there to Bethel now. She was Ethel Byrd then. She is Ethel Byrd Nance. And she didn’t let you get by. You talking about work, I never worked that hard in my life. I should have gone crazy. I stayed up till two and three o’clock in the morning.

TC: Preparing for her class?

WJ: That’s right, had to do three lesson plans every night.

TC: Three different courses?

WJ: Yeah, she was tough stuff. Had to write them, one for the principal, one for her, one for me.

TC: So you’ve had some interesting experiences and background.

WJ: I’ll tell you, it paid off because when I left Allen I had two jobs and I had decide which one I was going to take. And I went to, that’s how they were, they used to have a principal here and they’d be lined up. The principal down at Frogmore and the one down at Andrews they had been, at that time they didn’t have all this thing about advisors and stuff. For years Pegues(?) allowed a lot of them to examine my record and everything they knew what they wanted.

TC: Mr. Jefferson, I have really enjoyed this interview.

WJ: Thank you.

TC: You have given us some interesting information about your life and career and we appreciate it. Thanks again.

WJ: Well, thank you. I hope you much success in your work. You’re doing something that most people wouldn’t even dare try. I think it’s remarkable that you have undertaken such a job which is needed and I hope that when you finish it you will become a best seller or a good reference book or whatever. But you’re digging up some stuff that nobody talks about very much.

TC: Well, thank you, I appreciate it.
WJ: Yes, sir.

End of interview