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Tom Crosby Oral History Collection
Willie Jeffries Oral History Interview

Interviewee
Jeffries, Willie, 1937-

Interviewer
Crosby, Tom, 1940-

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Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, Willie E. Jeffries discusses his educational experiences at McBeth Elementary and Sims High School (Union County, South Carolina) playing sports, the influence of his teachers, principals, and coaches, Rosenwald Day celebrations including a song, Indiana University, South Carolina State College (now South Carolina State University) Granard School (Gaffney, Cherokee County, SC), his career coaching football at North Carolina A&T University, University of Pittsburgh, South Carolina State, Wichita State University, and Howard University, becoming the first African-American head coach of a NCAA Division I football program (Wichita State) in 1979. Willie Edison Jeffries was born in 1937. In 1979, Jeffries became the first African-American head coach of a NCAA Division I football program (Wichita State). He was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 2010. Tom Crosby interviewed Willie Jeffries on February 14, 2007. Interview covers Jeffries' education at McBeth Elementary School from 1943 to 1951 and at Sims High School from 1952 to 1956.
Tom Crosby: Today is February 14, 2007 and I’m in the presence of Coach Willie Jeffries. Coach Jeffries, do you recall the year that you started elementary school, the name of that school?

Willie Jeffries: Well, it was Macbeth Elementary. When I started to school it was right next to Sims High. We had a common playground between the two schools and all you had to do was walk about ninety yards or a hundred from Macbeth to Sims High. You just had to jump up on the little bank there if you didn’t go in the front. But I think I started to school, I was born in ’37, and I didn’t get to start to school until I was almost seven, so I started in 1943. I’m almost sure that I started to Macbeth Elementary and Miss Cornelia Herndon was my teacher that my mother left her in charge, and I remember that year vividly.

TC: I see. Now you went to Macbeth as you say and what grade were you when you left that school?

WJ: Well now see they had, we were looking forward to going to Sims High. We’d look across the field and at one time they were taking eighth graders at Sims High. All the young ladies in our class had their eyes on the older young men, older boys I should say, and they really wanted to get over to Sims High. But when we got to the eighth grade they moved it up, you didn’t go to Sims High till the ninth because they had gone from eleventh grade, an eleventh grade graduation, to a twelfth grade graduation. So we got delayed another year and we went to Sims High in the ninth grade.

TC: I see. Now your principal at that time at Sims High, who was the principal?

WJ: I vaguely remember. It was either Reverend A. A. Sims or it was Mr. Moorer and I believe I was over there I believe a year or so, and you all would have to check the dates, but I believe Reverend A. A. Sims I believe he was principal because Mrs. Sims I took English under Mrs. Sims back there in the back of the, right behind the auditorium there. So I believe he was still principal at the time. But Mr. Moorer did take over as principal before I graduated.

TC: I see. Now what year did you finish Sims High School?
WJ: I finished Sims High in June of 1956, the first graduation class from our newly located high school.

TC: Okay and the original building was over on Cohen Street, the old Sims High, the first Sims High building?

WJ: That was Cohen Street. It sure was.

TC: Okay and the school opened in 1927, the old school, in 1927. Now in terms of athletics, when you went to Sims I know they had football. When you got to Sims in the ninth grade, there was football.

WJ: Yeah, I didn’t play my first year. I played in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. I also remember basketball was being played outdoors for about a year until Dr. Long, L. W. Long opened the Union Community Center and that was down at the end of Foster Street, the street I lived on, so then we started playing basketball inside. But I participated in football, basketball, and baseball and we would also help out the track team when they needed some of us to do certain events. So I played, really participated in three sports.

TC: I see. Now you say you played basketball outdoors at one point or the school was playing basketball outdoors. Was it on ground?

WJ: It was right behind where the boy’s bathroom was. There was right next to where the old shop used to be, Mr. Rollins’ shop, but later on they built him another building across the field over there, but I think I must have been in the eighth grade when Sims High, or seventh, when they were still playing on that court. It was just a court of red, it was red clay. They’d lined it off. They had two goals out there. I won’t say it was a regulation court but they played out there, dust flying everywhere, and other high schools came in to play. And then as soon as Dr. Long completed the center, we played over there indoors and it was a great and a beautiful court compared to what we’d been used to playing. And also Dr. Long opened that swimming pool where African American kids had a chance to go swimming, and it was a little high, fifty cents. At that time fifty cents was hard to come by but you’d go and cut grass and pick blackberries or whatever to earn that fifty cents to go swimming. But I remember back, digressing a little bit, I remember when Sims High played out of doors in basketball, but when I started playing we were in the community center.

TC: I see. Now Prof Sims, Reverend A. A. Sims, he may have been, as you say, your principal for a short period of time, but of course, you knew him through the years because he was always at Sims High School for various reasons. So how would you describe Prof Sims?

WJ: I think he was first of all very, very interested in his students. I really believe that because if he had to embarrass you a little bit to get you to straighten out, he would do it. You remember those, anyone going to Sims High remembers those chapels, convocations, whatever you call it,
and we had them look like every other day or once a week when you went in there. The whole school went into that auditorium and he would get on you; he would point you out personally if you did something that you shouldn’t have and if you weren’t studying your lessons, he would get on you. And I would never call a name but he told one young man one day in chapel, in convocation, he said, “Don’t you go to school. Tell your daddy to send the mule and you stay back and pull the plow.” And what he was doing he was inspiring this young man. This young man started making better grades and went on to college and graduated.

But see, in those days kids would look for you to come down on them. You don’t do that nowadays. Oh no, you don’t do that nowadays. The kids will tell you if you want to talk to me about that, why don’t you pull me aside. But in my day a kid, it was nothing said by the parent or anybody. In fact, the kid wouldn’t go home and tell the parent that Prof Sims had to get on him in chapel. We called it going to chapel but it was really might have been a convocation where Prof Sims talked to the whole student body. And you know, what I like about those days, he was a hands on principal where he had those meetings. All the teachers came and all the students and the custodians, everybody connected with that school, you were in there. And Prof Sims, as we called him, he was hands on and no better lady in the world than his wife, Mrs. Sims, and I think we just felt that they loved us, they cared for us, and he was an outstanding principal.

TC: If we may go back a moment, you made reference to having chapel in the auditorium. I’ve been reading articles in the Union Daily Times newspaper and something else that you might agree or recall, when Sims High opened in 1927, the article stated that the public had been invited to attend the dedication and the auditorium seated around five hundred or six hundred persons. And the article also stated that he had reserved half of the seats for white persons. And there are other programs I have read through the years that when he was principal he also invited the white persons to the events. So my point is it seems that he was very astute and very political in knowing how to get things done.

WJ: You call that astuteness and we might want to call it political, but astuteness on behalf of the principal. Although some of the people might not have cared a whole lot about that, but once he invited them, when we needed something, certainly it would be provided because the head of the school, the principal, thought enough to invite them and let them see the building or auditorium, and that was astuteness and also delving into politics, and what a great move.

TC: That’s true. And something else that I saw in this article indicated that Sims High was a Rosenwald School. And the Rosenwald Fund gave twenty-one hundred dollars and the county had a special levy or tax to also provide money for the building of the school. So all those things indicate what it was like back then and how the school got built.

WJ: And I remember the Rosenwald day. Now we had a Rosenwald day where we wrapped the May pole and, of course, it was a chance for the school to raise money. We would churn ice cream and make hot dogs and we’d sell as fundraisers. We didn’t call it fundraisers then, it was just raising money for things we needed at the school, for equipment or whatever. And I remember Rosenwald day so well. Rosenwald, we sing of you, Rosenwald so great and true.
There’s more to that song but I remember it and certainly how great it was that we paid tribute to Mr. Rosenwald.

TC: Okay now the second principal at Sims High School was Principal James Moorer and he came, I’m not sure what year he came to Sims High, I believe it was ’46 and that’s when he started coaching football in 1946. Now as you know, there’s a great history and record with reference to football at Sims High School. What are your thoughts or memories of Coach Moorer?

WJ: Mr. Moorer was a father to all of us. And, you know, I don’t want to say that I was one of his special ones but he did so much for me personally. I would like to call some of the things off and I guess I will, but he was a father to all of us. He would laugh with us and tell jokes but we knew he meant business. He was ahead of his time as a football coach. He was an outstanding administrator. He just seemed to know more about football; football was in his blood. Of course, he coached other sports also, but what he did for me, we played on Thursday nights because we were playing over at Union High School and Friday nights he would allow me to go scouting with him, because we were scouting the team on Friday. All the other white schools played on Friday night. Sims High played on Thursday night so we would play on Thursday night, get up and go to school, got to be present at school the day of the game, and Friday you had to be in school everyday. He would take me along and sometimes Mrs. Mary, Mrs. Sims would go, I mean his wife, Mrs. Moorer, Mrs. Mary Moorer. She would go along with us sometimes and we would go sit in the stands and he would let us help scout.

I remember we went to see Gallman High. It might have been Drayton Street then but I believe Gallman, and he would let us write down things. He would take me and a couple of more guys, maybe a total of three, and he would buy us food and we could really eat in those days. I don’t know if we ever got enough to eat but Mr. Moorer would buy us food. We would get there early before the game so we could go and eat. And Mrs. Moorer would always save me a piece of her pie because she wouldn’t eat it all and she said, W. E., that’s what they called me for Willie E., she said W. E., I saved this, I know you want it. Yes ma’am, Mrs. Moorer, and I would tear it up.

But what he did for me later on, he and Mr. Floyd White got together and told the coach down at South Carolina State about me and the coach came up to see me play, Coach Roy D. Moore. And then Mr. White and Mr. Moorer took me down for a visit. They took me down. Universities and colleges weren’t having official visits where they would pay a player’s way to visit the campus and let them stay from Friday night till Sunday. They weren’t doing that then so they took me down there. The players were so nice to me and just greeted me with open arms. So that’s why I went to South Carolina State. When I got married in 1962 Mr. Moorer was there. Excuse me, I got married in 1961. I hope my wife doesn’t listen to this tape but that’s alright. We got married in June of 1961 to Mary [Cauthen] in Lancaster, a young lady that I met when I coached at Barr Street High School. She was attending Johnson C. Smith. Her sister was in my class, in my algebra class, that’s how we got introduced and that was forty-six years ago and she’s still my first wife, so I feel blessed.
Mr. Moorer and Mrs. Moorer came to the wedding. Now you know that’s a plus for a young man who was just a student. I guess they saw something in me where I would; I studied my lesson all the time. I was very obedient. I mean I did a lot of devilish things around the school but I was very obedient when they caught me and Mr. Moorer perceived me in that light. So when they came to that wedding in Lancaster that really told me something about the Moorer’s and they were interested in their players. Also he got, he got me my first head coaching job through his friendship with Mr. H. G. Simpson at Granard High when Mr. Johnny Webb left Granard to go back to Columbia to remain there and not work in Gaffney and commute on the weekends. Mr. Moorer told Mr. Simpson, I know just the guy. He’s got one year of experience at Barr Street High School. And I mean Mr. Simpson recruited me hard and that’s how I ended up at Granard and amassed a great record because of all those good players they had. So Mr. Moorer has been just an integral part of my life.

**TC:** Now let me go back to your playing football at Sims High. Do you remember let’s say one game that was one of the more noted games maybe in terms of how the game was won or the facts associated with winning that game?

**WJ:** Well, you know we won the state championship in the fall of ’55, which was my senior year because I graduated in the spring; the year changed to ’56. So my last year playing football was 1955. But you know one game I remember, we were playing for the upper state championship. The winner of this game would go to South Carolina State’s Bulldog Stadium to play Alston High from Summerville for the state championship and we played Easley. And the ironic, what’s ironical about it we played in Gaffney. We played on a neutral field that would be so no one would have the home team advantage and Mr. Willie Little, Willie Ed Little was the head coach at, excuse me, Easley, we played Easley and I think it was Clearview, the name of that school. And I mean they had a great team and we were leading by must have been about by four points, to show you how good this team was. We were leading by four points and they had a drive going and they got down to our four yard line. They ran a play and fumbled and I recovered. I just couldn’t believe I saw the ball coming out and I mean I was on that ball like ants on a meat skin. I was on that football and we were able, only one minute left in the game, we ran out the clock. Now to show you the difference between the upper state and the lower state, we defeated Alston High forty-one to six. We needed to get to the state championship game to play that lower state team. But I’ll always remember that Clearview High School team from Easley and how the game turned out. And ironically we were on a neutral field and in Gaffney where I ended up being a head coach for seven years and, believe it or not, I remember that locker room we dressed in that night because it became the locker room for my team when I went to Granard. And you know, I thought that I was in a spell or something, to go to Gaffney, dress in that locker room that we had one of our successful nights, and I just thought it was something special.

**TC:** Hasn’t something been done in your honor? Wasn’t something done recently at Granard with reference to you?
WJ: Well, what they did at Granard, they named the gym after me, since there was not a football field to be named because we never had a football stadium. We had a practice field and you’re looking at the guy who used to cut the grass and keep it, although the band would come and trample my grass down but that was alright. Because Mr. Gardner had one of the greatest, he had the best band for twenty years in the state of South Carolina without a doubt, so it wasn’t much I could say about them trampling down my grass, I call it my grass, on the practice field. So since we didn’t have a stadium, a field, you know, and a stadium, they named the gym after me at Granard High, so it’s the Willie Jeffries Gymnasium at Granard Middle School now. And I want you to know we had to fight, not fight literally, but we had to really work hard to get the name back because at the advent of integration in 1968 they named our old Granard High, West Middle School or something. It was West Jr. High. Excuse me, that’s what it was, West Jr. High. And we got together with the help of Mrs. Gloria Roseman, who was a board member and the late Mr. Fleming Means and Steve Littlejohn and a bunch of the people there around, we got that name back. We had to raise some money to get our colors back and things of that nature, but we got it back to Granard Middle School or Granard Jr. High, whatever they operate on up there. Ironically again, one of my former players, Charles Wright, is principal of Granard Jr. High so things just went around and they named that gym after me, had a great ceremony. Charles Wright, the principal, his roommate was Buddy Pugh, our present head coach at South Carolina State. That was a grand affair and I certainly appreciate the city of Gaffney, well, the Board of Education, they approved it. It had to go through the board and they approved it and I’m happy for that.

TC: I see. Now can we come to the long streak of games having been won at Sims High and the night that streak was discontinued?

WJ: Now here’s the way I see it. You know, all the people say and we’re going to get some documentation on this, but most people say and I believe it happened, he didn’t necessarily win his first two or three games in ’46, but he started at a point in ’46 to amass ninety-two straight games by 1954. I’m not saying he won his first or second but from one point in ’46 when he started winning and did a string of wins.

TC: He lost the first two or something like that.

WJ: He might have. He might have so that’s why I know it dates back to 1946 but not the whole season. You’re absolutely correct. And what actually happened, in those days you only played, you were playing a lot of games if you played nine games. You didn’t play ten games and eleven like they do now. We probably played maybe, knowing Sims High we would play that ninth game. We played any game we could play, anyone who wanted to play. So I’m sure when I came out for the team in 1953 that we knew the streak was going on. We knew it dated back to 1946, some parts of the 1946 season. Nineteen fifty-three we won the championship again of the old Piedmont Conference. That’s what they called it, the Piedmont Conference, and that was all the upper state teams really. In 1954 Mr. Roy Henderson, the assistant coach at Carver who did most of the coaching, the head
coach was Mr. Bud Campbell. Also assistant was Mr. Waddell Pearson, who was an A&T grad. Campbell and Henderson had finished South Carolina State. They had a couple more assistant coaches there. They broke our record over in Duncan Park. Later on they got a field that they could play on at Carver for a game of this magnitude.

TC: You mean they stopped the streak?

WJ: That’s when they stopped the streak, 1954, and it was in Duncan Park because they needed a huge stadium anytime Sims High played Carver because of the rivalry and the close proximity of the two schools. Let me add to this. I remember what happened. Charles Littlejohn was a great player for Carver and a guy by the name of Black; that was his last name. The game went back and forth and I know Lemmie and Jimmy, two of our main players, they were catching cramps because they hadn’t been long, you know, gotten back from Philadelphia because they had to work during the summer to earn money to go to school during the fall and winter. And they were going in and out of the game. I do remember Nate Meekins threw a pass to Paul James Stevens. That might have been our only touchdown. I think they beat us either nineteen to seven or nineteen to thirteen, something of that nature.

TC: Twenty to six.

WJ: Twenty to six, okay, thank you. It was just disappointing. Great day. I guest on your ninety third try you lose, but so what, it was sad. It was just like time stopped. We just didn’t lose football games but I remember the feeling and especially of all those great players before you, Joe Jeter, Jesse Jeter, Goo Goo Rice, Bowling Jeter, all those guys. I hate to leave out any but just to name a few, Jeter, all those guys, for you to be a part of the team that loses to let the chain be broken, it was hard. I mean that was why we came back the next year and went all the way.

TC: I can imagine. Now if we can move to your college coaching career, what was your first job on the college level?

WJ: My first job on the college level, you’re going to the college level because we just left Granard.

TC: Right.

WJ: When I left Granard High I went to North Carolina A&T in Greensboro, assistant coach to Coach Hornsby Howell. I still give him credit today for giving me my first college job, fall of 1968. I had to have my master’s and, you know, people just shouldn’t, you don’t envy people that are successful. I’m not saying it because it’s myself but heights of great men reached or kept were not attained by certain flight, while their companion slept, were toiling up within the night. I had to get twelve hours the summer of ’68 in order for A&T to employ me. How did I get my twelve hours? I had to go to Indiana University for the pre session in May, late May. I had to get on a bus. Bill
Davis, the late Bill Davis, my dear friend, drove me from Bloomington, Indiana to Cincinnati and I caught the bus from Cincinnati all the way to Orangeburg, skipped by Gaffney where my wife was and enrolled in nine hours at South Carolina State. Passed the nine hours, had passed the three, took my comps and the oral and got my master’s because Dr. Dowdy, who was a native South Carolinian, told me said you got to have your master’s, because I went from making six thousand all the way to eleven thousand. That was quite a raise and now I was a college coach, assistant coach. We went ten and one that year at A&T. We won the national championship. So I stayed at A&T four years and then I went to University of Pittsburgh. I coached under Carl DePasqua for one year. He was our head coach. And the next year I coached under the legendary Tennessee star, who finished second in the Heisman to Paul Hornung or Johnny Majors. And then in 1973 I got the call to come to South Carolina State, my alma mater, to be head football coach. And I was making twenty-four thousand a year at Pitt, University of Pittsburgh as an assistant. I went to South Carolina State as head coach for sixteen thousand. But the eight thousand dollar difference but it’s not always the money. They did offer the coach a free house on campus and free utilities, so that helped quite a bit and I don’t regret the five great years, six great years that I stayed at South Carolina State. In the first six years we won five Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference championships. Didn’t win my first year but we won five in a row. And then I went to Wichita State in Wichita, Kansas, becoming the first African American head coach at a major university. I stayed there for five years and when our president retired, Dr. Clark Ahlberg, and when the athletics director who brought me there, Mr. Ted (Bradyhoff ?), when both those guys retire, it’s smart for a coach to move on. So I went to Howard University in 1984, stayed there till 1989 and won Howard’s first ever Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference championship in 1987. In 1989 I returned to South Carolina State and I coached from ’89 till 2001 and I retired from coaching back where I started on the college level at South Carolina State University in 2001.

TC: Coach Jeffries, you have brought great honor and prestige to positions that you have held after Sims High School. One thing that I haven’t mentioned with reference to Sims High School, you may be aware or you may not, Sims High was one of the first three black high schools in South Carolina to be accredited to award high school diplomas. That was 1929, two years after the school started. And also it was the first accredited high school in the upstate, the first to be accredited in the upstate.

WJ: That’s great to hear. That’s great.

TC: And that record, what about that record, the football record?

WJ: Well, the football record was great but you know, Mr. Moorer and Professor A. A. Sims and all those teachers, especially Miss Janie Wesley.

TC: The record still stands.

WJ: Well, I think the record still stands.
TC: In South Carolina.

WJ: In South Carolina, right. You know, even John McKissick down at Summerville, no one has a string of games in this state. There was some guy out in California, you saw the big write-up, that might have surpassed the record, but it’s hard to get a record like that to span over the whole United States, but I’m sure it still stands in South Carolina and we’re very, very proud of it.

TC: Right. Now you started making reference to certain teachers and so forth with reference to Sims and you might conclude this by whatever you wish to say.

WJ: Well, you know, I want to say this about my Aunt Janie. She was a Glymph and our close kinfolk, Glymph then a Wesley, then a Williams, then Goree, her different marriages. But I’ll tell you one thing and I want to have this on record. The students thought she was mean. She was not mean. She meant for you go get that geometry. And now the students graduated they come back and they hug her. And you know most all the teachers were like that. Great day, Miss Ethel Sims, all the ones that taught us at Sims High and, Tom, you know they were interested in us, not only that football team, not only just sports.

TC: Academically.

WJ: Academically and socially, they were on our behinds and we didn’t want mama or daddy to get a call from Prof Sims or one of those teachers over there because we were going to get it. And, you know, that’s why we were so disciplined. I mean boys will be boys. We did little things. Girls will be girls. But one thing we had, we had respect, we respected our teacher, but first of all you got to respect your parents. See the family is the core and the nucleus of the society and if you’ve got a strong, I know this is repetitive, but our parents told us when they dropped us off at school, now listen boy, or listen daughter, the teacher going be right. Now don’t come home telling me the teacher did this to me, because I’m going to get you. And you know that is what made us the people we are today.

TC: That’s true.

WJ: The average child will go home crying, make up like they’re crying, and say the teacher did something, some parent over there all over the teacher. We knew when we walked inside that school that the teachers were in charge and I really feel, I wish it could get back to those days.

TC: Right. So in conclusion, as comments with reference to the Rosenwald School, that particular one, what it did for us, do you have any final comments and also the principals, I’m sure it might be somewhat redundant.

WJ: You know, I don’t know a lot about, all I can say, and you know, I didn’t know until you and my wife told me what Mr. Rosenwald owned.
**TC:** Sears & Roebuck.

**WJ:** Sears & Roebuck, that’s right. Boy, we ordered everything out of there. I just all I can say is I appreciate it. All I knew we were singing Rosenwald, we think of you, Rosenwald so great and true, and I knew we were speaking of this man a little bit before we had the May Day. But I just appreciate someone with that magnitude with that type of money, who I assume he was a northerner, I don’t know.

**TC:** He was.

**WJ:** And to him to think that much of furthering education of, I don’t know if we were in poverty. I don’t think, we ate. I don’t think we were in a poverty area. There were things we couldn’t afford that he assisted in building and doing. So all I can say about it is that I appreciate it and I think this. I think he didn’t just throw his money up into the wind. He helped a lot of students become successful.

**TC:** That’s true and he built over five hundred Rosenwald schools in South Carolina.

**WJ:** That’s outstanding to know and you know, Tom, I appreciate you so much in doing this, in getting these archives or whatever together and us talking about different things. I’m going to certainly read up on that. Just like I was talking to you about the Penn Center down in Beaufort, down there, St. Helena, down in that area, Port Royal, those type of things we can’t even do anything for the future until we understand the past and I think that it’s great that we’re delving into and going back to see how education evolved and also how we evolved as a people.

**TC:** That’s true. Well, it’s been an honor and a pleasure to have interviewed you today. We certainly thank you for your time and interest. Thanks again.

**WJ:** Well, thank you so much, Tom. I appreciate it.

End of interview