In this oral history interview, Roosevelt Gilliam discusses his educational experiences in South Carolina in the 1940s, his teachers and coaches both in general and in particular, Sims High School, Prof. Sims, Coach Moorer, activities such as fraternal clubs and the athletic program, anecdotes about playing football, attending Allen University, serving in the Army, coaching football at Sims High School, noteworthy games, his career as a football coach and college administrator, and the importance of education. Roosevelt Gilliam was born September 9, 1932 in Union, South Carolina. Tom Crosby interviewed Roosevelt Gilliam at his residence in Lancaster, South Carolina, on March 20, 2007. Interview covers Gilliam's education at St. Paul's Baptist Church and McBeth Elementary Schools from the late 1930s to the late 1940s, and Sims High School until his graduation in 1950.
Tom Crosby: Today is March 20, 2007 and I’m in Lancaster, South Carolina, at the home of your name, please?
Roosevelt Gilliam: Roosevelt Gilliam.
TC: Where were you born?
RG: In Union, South Carolina.
TC: And your date of birth?
RG: September 9, 1932.
TC: What was your elementary school, or where was your elementary school that you attended?
RG: McBeth. I do remember McBeth School because our grammar school, or first grade school, burned and we started school at St. Paul Baptist Church. And then I went from St. Paul Church to McBeth School, and then to Sims.
TC: Let’s see, yes, I had heard that McBeth burned at one point. And you were in the first grade?
RG: First grade. I started to school at St. Paul Baptist Church because McBeth burned previous.
TC: So McBeth burned around 1937 or ’38, or something like that. Anyway, I can figure it out. And then after there you went to?
RG: After McBeth, went to Sims and I graduated from Sims High School.
TC: And the principal when you went to Sims was?
RG: Reverend Dr. A. A. Simms was my principal.
TC: Was he also your principal when you graduated?
RG: From Sims High School, yes.
TC: You graduated from Sims High School in ’50?
RG: In the class of ’50.
TC: Now, how would you describe Professor Simms, often called Prof Simms?
RG: Everybody called him Prof Simms. He was a dynamic leader, great motivator, and an excellent principal.
TC: In terms of motivator, can you maybe give some examples of his strategies of motivation?
RG: He took every student as his “pride product.” What I mean is, he would make sure that every child had the opportunity to participate, even in his classes. Everyone would make sure they got Prof’s class because he would always make it very easy and a lot of fun. His method of teaching, I guess, was just so good for that time.

TC: So you were in some of his classes?
RG: I was in his economics class and he had some very good stories to tell us about the economy. And then his chapel program; the youngsters during that time always enjoyed Prof’s morning chapel services, and that was another motivation.

TC: How often was the chapel? More than one day a week?
RG: I think so. I think it was once or twice a week. And then we had some special occasions when he called a special meeting, or the school had special programs and things that he would make comments.

TC: In reading the Union Daily Times through the issues over the years, I noticed that he would bring some noted persons to Union. For example, he brought the Fisk University Singers there. This was way back in the ’20s I’m talking about. So my question is, do you recall his bringing some maybe noted persons to the school or the chapel program or maybe some college choirs?
RG: The Benedict College Choir was frequently invited to come but I wasn’t around in the ’20s.

TC: Not sure about those kinds of things?
RG: No.

TC: You played football at least one of the sports, right?
RG: Played football at Sims, yes.

TC: Any other sports?
RG: Basketball and baseball.

TC: Who was your coach or who were your coaches when you played football?
RG: James Moorer was my high school athletic director and coach. In fact, for all three sports: basketball, football and baseball.

TC: He did them all?
RG: He did them all.

TC: What were some of Mr. Moorer’s strategies, or you might say discipline techniques, that he may have used as a football coach?
RG: Well, he was a great innovator. We would always change things for the next opponent. He would make a new formation or do something different. He didn’t just sit still, running the same old forty-four. He was always changing. And another thing: he would carry us to see the major college teams from that era and if they had anything
good, Sims High School would be running it when they played. He was never one to put the brakes on the learning. He always made sure that we had something else going. He was a great teacher, too.

TC: That reminds me of two things here. One, I recall reading an article about Sims playing Sterling and for the first half they were dressed in purple and the second half they changed to gold because, of course, the school colors. So that kind of relates to what you said about changing uniforms and things like that. Would the numbers also change?

RG: We didn’t change the numbers.

TC: The numbers remained the same, just the color?

RG: Of course, the numbers remained the same but we would change the uniforms even in basketball. At halftime we would put on another uniform and I kind of put some of that into my coaching to instill the spirit of the team. But the game that I think you were talking about we played in Greenville at the Greenville Stadium and both teams were undefeated and at the half it was 7-7 or 6-6, something of that nature, and I have an article and please don’t ask me where it is. I’ll have to find it. But we won the ballgame 14-7 or 6 in Greenville and at that time that was the largest black football game attendance in the area.

TC: Something like ten thousand?

RG: Ten thousand or more fans at Greenville Stadium that night. So that was a great win for us, Sims High School.

TC: I remember reading about it in the article.

RG: I won’t tell you who scored the winning touchdown. I won’t even mention that but I played in that football game.

TC: Congratulations.

RG: Yes, it was a great victory. I have it somewhere. A sports writer in the Greenville area wrote about that game and sent me an article.

TC: Wasn’t there some other game that was played and something about Moorer making football players walk from Spartanburg or something? Is that true?

RG: I’m not sure that’s true.

TC: You haven’t heard that?

RG: I heard so many stories about it but he didn’t make the football team walk from Spartanburg that I know of. But I do remember after somebody tied us, one of the games Newberry tied us 6-6 I think it was or we didn’t do well in the game and we came home and practiced after the football game. I remember that.

TC: So you do remember that?

RG: Of course.

TC: So you got home probably around eleven o’clock at night?

RG: Something like that; and we practiced.
TC: For at least an hour or two?

RG: At least thirty minutes to get the point over. He was tough.

TC: So I think you mentioned one of the things that you learned from Mr. Moorer as a coach was that you used it earlier, do you recall? Do you have any other comments with reference to things that have been valuable to you as a result of having had Mr. Moorer as a coach?

RG: Well, preparing the team, the discipline, I’m sure that we took a little bit of everything that he used when he was coach in our careers, athletic and others. Other men who went through the Moorer era, I’m sure that there are some things that we’ve done.

TC: Now also with reference to the teachers at Sims High School, some of those you definitely remember, right? Maybe you could mention some names or just state in general in terms of their value to us.

RG: Are you talking about as students?

TC: As students.

RG: Of course, Mrs. Sims, who just loved to work with us and when I say that she loved it, she was the principal’s wife and the care, we didn’t have a cafeteria but she provided a little lunch for the youngsters to purchase something for the noon day meal. I remember Mrs. Sims, Mr. Moorer, and Mr. McAllister, but there was a lady that I thought was just as tough as nails and her name was Bertha Glymph. Oh Lord, I’ll tell you, she gave me a fit but I respected her. The hardship I respected in her because today I do remember everything that she had us to learn or participate in as a seventh grade homeroom teacher, and of course, she taught other things. And McKissick, I remember McKissick, a local person that taught there.

TC: Now with reference to their influence over us and their concern and so forth, what are your thoughts about their dedication and things of that nature?

RG: You know, even as I speak to youngsters now I always talk about my teachers because there was a little bit of fear as a student. To me I mean I’m engaged with a teacher. Our respect for them far exceeded a normal walk of the mill students with teachers, because we held in high regard for our teachers. And I think they had great dedication. See we worked with very limited facilities as we know schools today. They worked hard to make sure that we had a good chance. I’ll give you one example. Our chemistry lab, I’m trying to think of the chemistry teacher when I was in school.

TC: Mr. Whitney?

RG: No, Mr. Whitney was involved there.

TC: Henry?

RG: Henry was after me. Anyway, having the necessary tools to work with, in biology, the microscope we had only one. We had to take turns looking for it.

TC: One?
RG: One and then we got two and three, but it wasn’t the whole class working at the same time with his or her own. So they worked with us very, very hard and I can’t think of, Mr. Gibbs.

TC: I’ve heard that name. He wasn’t there when I was there. Now one thing that I forgot is when we started, who were your parents?

RG: Roosevelt and Lillia Gilliam and we lived at 111 Wallace Street. The house is still standing there today right across the street from the ice plant. My mother was a domestic worker and my father was employed as a truck driver right across the street at the ice plant. So I had a great, great family.

TC: Did you have siblings?

RG: No, just me.

TC: Only child?

RG: Only one.

TC: Now after finishing Sims High School you attended Allen University, is that correct?

RG: That’s correct.

TC: The one thing I’m going to digress again. There were clubs at Sims High and there was one for men and one for females.

RG: UDC.

TC: Were you a member of the one for guys?

RG: Pledge week, we had to do things similar to what a college fraternity. It was based on that premise.

TC: That’s what I thought.

RG: Just like college we went through hell week and then they had graduation at the end of that week and a chapel program. I remember that song, “Sims High.” I can’t remember the words but then it was very, very popular.

TC: You don’t have those words written, do you?

RG: No, I’d have to think of them.

TC: I have a picture, in fact, I’ll send you a copy, of the original charter of the UDC and some of the persons on there: Louis, William Shelton’s brother. There was a lady that I’ve heard so much about at Sims High School through the years. I think she was there when you were there. The last name starts with the letter P, P-R-I.

RG: Miss Pride?

TC: Pride.
RG: I do remember hearing about her.

TC: She wasn’t there when you were there?

RG: No.

TC: She is the person that started the clubs.

RG: Yeah, Shelton would know about it.

TC: All right, so after those clubs were very, very popular and quite selective?

RG: Very selective.

TC: A certain grade point average?

RG: Grade point average, as I said, it was similar to a fraternity, had to make.

TC: Certain grades?

RG: Yeah.

TC: Dress, behavior?

RG: Dress, oh man, that was key.

TC: So it was a great motivation?

RG: It was.

TC: So after finishing Sims you attended Allen University.

RG: I attended Allen.

TC: And I assume you most likely got a football scholarship?

RG: Football scholarship, I played for the Yellow Jackets, played quarterback. Played one year in baseball and was drafted to play basketball one year and I finished in three years. Finished in three years and made my coach really, really upset with me. My coach was W. W. Lawson.

TC: I’ve heard of him. So and then after graduating from Allen, where did you go after that?

RG: I went back to Sims to coach and I stayed there a year and a half and then I was drafted in the Army.

TC: So when you were coaching at Sims, during that time period, that era, you were one of the coaches that when the football streak at Sims High School ended, is that correct?

RG: That’s correct but it wasn’t during my first stint there, it was when I returned in ’54, when I got out of the Army and went back and we lost again to Carver in ’54. I’ll never forget that.

TC: Were you were there in ’53 for the tie?

RG: No, I came back ’55.

TC: I see, so would you like to give me a description of what it was like the night that that streak was broken? Would you like to tell us what that streak was?
RG: It was a terrible, terrible night for Union and for Sims because we were rated over them as a football team and we just didn’t perform as the coach would have us to. I thought so too. We couldn’t get it together that night and I was assistant to Mr. Moorer. But Carver, Campbell, Rowan put together a good package and they won the football game.

TC: And that was the end of it?

RG: That was the end of it.

TC: Now another school, I guess two of the other schools that were major competitors for Sims was Granard to some extent but the larger ones other than Carver was probably Sterling in Greenville?

RG: Sterling in Greenville, Stephen Lee in Asheville, of course Carver, Granard High School in Gaffney, and Gallman High School in Newberry and a school in?

TC: Now after Sims High what was your next high school coaching?

RG: My career went to Spartanburg and I worked with Boy Scouts of America. And let’s see, I left there and I came here to Lancaster.

TC: And the name of that school was Barr Street High School?

RG: Barr Street High School.

TC: And after Barr Street High?

RG: I went to Maryland and I was head coach at Maryland State College.

TC: Which is now University of Maryland Eastern Shore?

RG: University of Maryland Eastern Shore. And I left there and I went to Denver Broncos, to Denver and worked with the Denver Broncos as a professional scout. And I left there and I came back to Lancaster and I worked with Springs Industries as a corporate person for the mills, Springs Mills. A good friend of mine offered me a job in Columbia and I started to work for the Department of Social Services as an executive assistant. And my next stop was at South Carolina State University and I became vice president of development at South Carolina State University until my retirement and I retired from South Carolina State as a special assistant to the president in charge of governmental relations. That will do it.

TC: Okay, do you have any final comments about your life in general, some of the major achievements you might say that you cherish most?

RG: I guess probably Doctor, I cherish the fact that we’ve been able to raise three youngsters and God has blessed us to have them earn their way through school. They all are doctors. My oldest son is a cardiologist, just moved to Arkansas. My middle child is a doctor here in Lancaster, local dentist. And my baby is a school administrator in Lancaster and she graduated where you work, at the University of South Carolina. That’s my greatest, I believe is our greatest accomplishment. But as far as halls of fame the things of that nature that I have been fortunate to be in, South Carolina Hall of Fame, Allen University Hall of Fame, Maryland Eastern Shore Hall of Fame. I’m just proud.

TC: You’ve been blessed.
RG: Been very well blessed.

TC: We have been blessed.

RG: We have.

TC: I’m sure you’ll agree that our beginnings started with the schools, elementary and high schools, schools of Union County, and elementary teachers, high schools teachers, college teachers, were great.

RG: We were talking about Mrs. Herndon. I’m sure if you’ve ever been in Union County you’ve heard about Cornelia Herndon. That was my first grade teacher. I was so afraid of that lady but she was super. Until her death she was one of my favorites and I was one of hers. Mrs. Talley lived right over there in front of New Primary School and her family and Mrs. Talley. And then Janie G. Douglas, you ever heard of Janie G. Douglas?

TC: Oh, yeah, she was my eighth grade principal.

RG: Lord, she was something else. Again we’re talking about that fear and I like paying respect to those teachers because they carried themselves in such a manner that we had to respect them.

TC: Would you elaborate a little more on your statement about fear? Would you expound on that a little? I think I understand what you’re saying but I just want to be sure.

RG: I’m not really talking about physical fear but I believe that as a youngster if I was doing something wrong, other than my parents, I would not want to do anything where a teacher was. That’s the kind of fear that I’m talking about. The respect that I have for them, and to see them, would just bring a shock wave over me and I think that’s good.

TC: Because they were very impressionable.

RG: Very impressionable and I always thought they were the smartest people in the world.

TC: And they were.

RG: That’s right.

TC: Because they had been trained mostly to teach.

RG: Absolutely.

TC: They had come out of teacher training institutions.

RG: They were very good at that.

TC: They had prepared them well and they showed caring and concern.

RG: And I thank them.

TC: Okay, well, unless you have additional comments, I certainly enjoyed this.

RG: I’m sorry it took me so long to get together and I do appreciate you traveling and coming by to see me and thank you so very much and I wish you and the University and your article and your book much success.

TC: Thank you, sir. Thanks again.
RG: Okay, thank you, Tom.

End of interview