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Tom Crosby Oral History Collection
Willie Mae (Jeter) Kelly Oral History Interview

Interviewee
Kelly, Willie Mae, 1925-2009

Interviewer
Crosby, Tom, 1940-

Date
July 18, 2007

Location
Santuck, South Carolina

ID Number
CROS 015

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Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, Willie Mae Kelly, discusses her educational experiences at Tinker Creek Elementary School in Union County, South Carolina, its physical layout, teachers and coaches at Sims High School, combined-grade classes and activities such as recess games, cake walks, spelling bees, and exchanging letters with students at nearby Poplar Grove School, challenges faced walking to school, favorite subjects and activities including clubs and sports, especially basketball. More broadly, she addresses the importance and role of education, including her own decision not to attend college and the decisions of her sister, who became a teacher, and her husband, also present during the interview, who enlisted in the U.S. Army. Willie Mae Jeter Kelly was born 1925 to Mary Peake and Clayton Jeter in Santuck, South Carolina, one of ten children. Tom Crosby interviewed Willie Mae Kelly at her residence in Santuck, South Carolina, on July 18, 2007. Interview covers Kelly's education at Tinker Creek Elementary School (of the town of Whitmire, S.C.) in the 1930s and at Sims High School from 1944 to 1947.
Tom Crosby Oral History Collection

Willie Mae (Jeter) Kelly Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Willie Mae (Jeter) Kelly
Interviewer: Tom Crosby
CROS# 015
July 18, 2007

Tom Crosby: Today is July 18, 2007 and I am in the community of Union County referred as Santuck. It’s spelled two ways. Sometimes persons spell it S-A-N-T-U-C-K. Others spell it S-A-N-T-U-C. I’m at the home of Mr. And Mrs. Willie D. Kelly and the person that I’m interviewing today her name is Willie Mae Jeter [Kelly]. Is that correct?

Willie Mae Kelly: Right.

TC: Willie Mae (Jeter) Kelly. What was your elementary school that you attended, the name of it?

WK: Tinker Creek.

TC: Tinker Creek?

WK: Yes.

TC: And how many rooms did it have?

WK: One.

TC: One room. Did it have a number of windows in it, do you remember?

WK: Yes, about four, I believe.

TC: About four, I see. Only on one side?

WK: On both.

TC: Both sides?

WK: Yes.

TC: I see. And they were kind of close together, each of those four, close to the other ones?

WK: Really—.

Willie D. Kelly: [Mr. Kelly speaks several times in the interview but he is too far from the microphone to hear what he is saying.]

TC: It was only a one-room school.

WK: No.
TC: Each side had four windows?
WK: Yes.
Willie D. Kelly: One window on each side.
TC: Oh, that’s how it was.
WK: No, the room was like that: there’s a window there, a window here, a window here.
TC: Yes, that’s what he was saying, a window on each side, four walls.
WK: Right.
TC: And a window per wall.
WK: Right.
TC: I see. Now do you recall your teacher or did you have more than one teacher?
WK: I had more than one. First, Kathleen Jennings Dawkins.
TC: Kathleen (Jennings) Dawkins.
WK: She was a Jennings but she married a Dawkins. Then her sister Inez (Jennings) Gist.
TC: Taught you also?
WK: Right, and also Miss Lonnie Beatty.
TC: I’ve heard that name several times, Lonnie Beatty. Was she from the Santuck area?
WK: No, she was from Sedalia.
TC: Sedalia, out towards Cross Keys?
WK: Right.
TC: I see. And I guess there was only one teacher in the building?
WK: Right.
TC: Per year or whatever?
WK: Right.
TC: I see.
Willie D. Kelly: Did Ethel teach?
WK: No.
TC: Yes, he was asking, did Ethel teach?
WK: No, she didn’t.
TC: And that was your sister?
WK: Right.
TC: About how many students were in your grade, do you recall? Or were you the only student?
WK: No, it was more.
TC: Don’t remember the names right now?
WK: I don’t recall how many it was.
TC: I see. Now do you remember some of the games that you played at recess time?
WK: At least—we played ball.
TC: Played ball, baseball?
WK: Played ball, right.
TC: Maybe a little basketball?
WK: Well, no, we didn’t have a basketball court at that time. And that’s about the only thing that I remember.
TC: I know the boys, they would sometimes play marbles. Girls didn’t play that too much, did they?
WK: No.
TC: I’ve heard some persons talking about a game in which they would get in a circle and they would go around.
WK: Around the marigold bush?
TC: Yeah.
WK: We called it Marigold Bush. Yes, we’d play that.
TC: How did that go? I really was thinking about something else. Go around the marigold bush.
WK: We’d join hands and I can’t say exactly how it went but anyway, go around the bush and there was a little song you’d sing. I’ve forgotten the song. Then you had to squat down and if you catch one standing, then they’d get out.
TC: Oh, I see. They would say something and everybody was supposed to go down?
WK: Right.
TC: And the person that was still standing would have to leave?
WK: Right, get out of the game.
Willie D. Kelly: [Unclear.] There was another little game, Pop Whip.
TC: Pop Whip?
WK: Yes, we did that.
TC: What was that, Pop Whip?
WK: What we would call Pop Whip, five or six would catch by each one’s hand and run.
TC: Oh, and try to sling the person on the end away?
WK: Right, that’s what we called Pop Whip.
TC: That’s one I hadn’t heard before. Come to think of it, I think I remember seeing that being played but I didn’t know what it was called. It was called Pop Whip, maybe eight or ten persons holding hands—.
WK: Hold hands—.
TC: —And then you run.
WK: They all have to swing around, and the one on the end—.
TC: —Would throw him off, or her?
Willie D. Kelly: They would try to throw him off.
TC: I see. Somebody else mentioned something called Hopscotch.
WK: Right, played a lot of Hopscotch.
TC: And you would draw something like a rectangle or something like that and you’d jump from one square to the next square?
WK: It’s three squares. Jump on one foot. Then another square, two you could square, then another one just one, and another one two and then you jump out. You just continue it over and over.
Willie D. Kelly: There was one here, one over there and one over there. Here you would jump with both feet and would straddle this one. The other one here would jump on one foot. And what was it, if you hit the line or something or other you were out?
WK: They’d call you out.
TC: I see. So you had these square-like areas drawn on the ground?
WK: Right.
TC: And you’d be on one foot and you would jump on that one foot to another area?
WK: Just like one, two, three. You would jump on one and then when you got there it got—.
Willie D. Kelly: You would start over here on the end here, I believe it wasn’t but one on the end, was it?
WK: What? It was three.
Willie D. Kelly: One on the end: step on it then you could go back to one, something like that, some kind of way like that.
TC: So you had something like maybe three squares you’re saying?
WK: Right.
TC: And then you jumped?
WK: Those three squares then a line goes through then you can jump with both. Then another square, jump with one foot, next one, jump with two till you jump out.
TC: I see. Hopscotch?
WK: Right.
TC: I see. Now I guess to raise money sometimes I think I heard persons say they had something like what was called cake walks. Do you remember that?

WK: We didn’t do too much of that at—.

TC: Your school?

WK: Our school. They didn’t do too much of that.

Willie D. Kelly: They had another one. They’d line up all the way around the walls and they’d turn it and call names.

TC: But you had this cake walk, you remember that?

WK: I remember it but we didn’t have that.

TC: At your school?

WK: At my school, no. If they did I don’t remember it.

TC: Now, in terms of food, was any food served at the school or you had to bring it from home?

WK: Most of the time we’d bring our food from home. We’d have baked potatoes and biscuits and have maybe sausage or ham or whatever in those biscuits. When they turn out for recess you’d get those and go outdoors and eat. And later on up in the years the government, or whatever it was, would give you food and they would have pot gut stoves sitting in the middle of the room and they would put beans in that and cook them and they’d serve that.

TC: I see. So of course the teacher seasoned the beans?

WK: Right.

TC: Do you remember what she seasoned them with?

WK: Well, just the same old thing—like salt.

TC: Pepper?

WK: Uh-huh, and maybe put whatever kind of meat they would use.

TC: Some type of meat?

WK: Right.

TC: And the bread, would they bring it or buy it from the store? You don’t remember?

WK: I can’t remember.

Willie D. Kelly: No, they wouldn’t buy it from the store because Paul Adams’ store wasn’t there.

TC: So maybe the teacher cooked some bread.

WK: Maybe, but I can’t remember.

TC: Yeah, I understand. Oh, did they have spelling bees?

WK: Oh yes.

TC: How often would they have the spelling bee, maybe once a week, somewhere like that?
WK: Tell you the truth, I don’t know.
TC: Don’t recall, I see. I used to like that. Willie D.
Kelly: We had spelling bees.
TC: Right, you’d sit them down.
WK: Right, right, but I can’t remember just how often we had that.
TC: Yeah, it may not have been every week. It may have been dependent upon the teacher.
WK: Right.
TC: Do you remember any particular way that the teacher taught the students?
WK: Well you see, it was from first grade to eighth, they taught us all.
TC: Eighth grade, your school ran through eighth?
WK: Seventh. You started eighth grade at Sims High School. And each one, she’d call on the first classes, fifth or sixth grades. Then she’d call on the next classes and on and on.
TC: But she did combine classes?
WK: Right, right.
TC: And the other students had to be quiet?
WK: Right.
TC: And if they weren’t quiet?
WK: No, they sure wasn’t because they’d be fooling, some of them maybe throwing spitballs or doing something like that.
TC: Did she have a strap?
WK: Oh, she had switches. They used switches at that time.
TC: And she would use them?
WK: Oh, she would use them. But I don’t think I ever got any.
TC: You were a good little girl?
WK: Always.
TC: Okay, anything else you remember from elementary school that kind of stands out in your memory that was interesting or it may not have been interesting.
WK: Well, I know one thing, we didn’t learn too much in that school because we were sitting down there writing letters and things.
TC: Writing letters must have been about in the sixth and seventh grades. Writing letters to whom?
WK: Well, see, the people at Poplar Grove, a lot of the children went to Popular Grove. We went to Tinker Creek. There was an old house (unintelligible) we would bring our letters and put them in there and they would pick them up and take them to Poplar Grove.
Poplar Grove children would write and send them and we’d pick ours up there.

**TC:** Who’d do a lot of this writing, girls writing the boys and boys writing the girls?

**WK:** Boys and girls, right.

Willie D. Kelly: I know a little rhyme, “Sure as a vine grows around a stump, you’re my darling sugar lump.”

**TC:** How did the rhyme go again now, slowly? Say it again.

**WK:** Sure as a vine grows around a stump.

Willie D. Kelly: Sure as a vine grows around a stump.

**TC:** Sure as a vine grows around a stump.

**WK:** You’re my darling sugar lump.

**TC:** You’re my darling sugar lump. I see. Do you know if the teacher was maybe encouraging those letter writings, to try and improve?

**WK:** No, she—.

**TC:** She knew nothing about it?

**WK:** Yes, we would get on a back seat and while she was teaching, we’d write a letter. No, she didn’t know.

**TC:** She wasn’t using it as a teaching strategy, teaching method?

Willie D. Kelly: There were so many children in that school and she couldn’t watch them all.

**WK:** Get on the back this way she couldn’t see.

**TC:** And writing your boyfriend?

**WK:** Writing our letters.

**TC:** That’s when you were about in the sixth or seventh grade?

**WK:** Must have been.

**TC:** Okay, so then you finished Tinker Creek Elementary. There is one other question before we move to the high school level. Did you walk to school?

**WK:** Yes, had to walk.

**TC:** You walked to school?

**WK:** Cold; that’s why I can’t walk now. We walked in the cold, across the creek, sometimes in the rain.

**TC:** Creek was up.

**WK:** Up and we put a pole or something and one would step on it and down you go in the water.

**TC:** Really?

**WK:** So yes, we didn’t have it easy going to school.
TC: No, you didn’t. So the creek would be up and you’d get a log or something like that and try to walk on the log to get across the creek?

WK: Well, finally my dad cut a tree down over the creek and put a handrail up there so we had a way to go across.

TC: That’s amazing. So your father cut down a large tree, I guess, and then he put a rail on each side.

WK: Right.

TC: And you’d walk across that like a little bridge?

WK: Right. And as we would go to school and come back the white children would ride on a bus. We had to walk. They came around there and threw up dust on us.

TC: Paper and trash and so forth?

WK: Uh-huh, and holler.

TC: Right.

Willie D. Kelly: You know how (unintelligible) walk (unintelligible) just cracking ice.

By the time you’d get to school.

TC: This is Mrs. Kelly’s husband who is making a comment now and he’s referring to walking to school when it was very cold and there would be something like icicles that would form on the ground. It would be something like icicles but it’s all over the ground and they called that dog ice. Was that what you said the first time? I think they called this ice that was formed like icicles sticking up from the ground, they called it dog ice. It’s frozen in the form of many icicles and they called it dog ice. And they would walk on it and it sounded as if you were walking on extremely cold snow—very, very cold snow.

Willie D. Kelly: We’d get to school sometimes you didn’t know whether you were walking on your feet, it was so cold.

TC: Yes, and they would walk to school and said their feet would be very, very cold and their hands were very cold too. And what would they do when you got to school if their hands were just—children were crying, maybe, and the hands were just so cold?

WK: They were so cold and warming them by the heater would make it worse. So we’d wash them in cold water and try to put them in our coats or whatever.

TC: So they would slowly increase the temperature by putting their hands in cold water and that would increase the temperature a little and then you’d take the hands and put them in your jacket or your blouse against your body to warm your hands?

WK: Right.

Willie D. Kelly: (unintelligible)

TC: He’s saying that sometimes when they got to school there would be no wood there for them and they’d have to make the fire, but first they’ve got to go out into the woods and gather the wood to make the fire in the stove.
So you finished the seventh grade at Tinker Creek and then you went to Sims High, I think it is, for the eighth grade through the eleventh grade?

**WK:** I think eleven or twelve.

**TC:** I think it was eleventh grade because the twelfth grade in South Carolina was added in 1948. I think I’m correct. And you graduated in ’47, right?

**WK:** Right.

**TC:** Did you get a high school diploma?

**WK:** Yes.

**TC:** You did? Someone was telling me about—I think what it is, you could get a high school diploma after eleventh grade, but then in 1948 they added another grade and that gave you twelve grades.

**WK:** Right.

**TC:** And I think some of the people that graduated in the eleventh grade, they didn’t go back that additional year to get the twelfth-grade diploma.

**WK:** I really don’t know how it was. But I was looking at my diploma the other day.

**TC:** I see. You didn’t know I was coming.

**WK:** I sure didn’t.

**TC:** Okay, now you recall some of your teachers at Sims High?

**WK:** Oh, Lord.

**TC:** Just one or two.

**WK:** Miss Rhodes.

**TC:** R-O-W-E?

**WK:** Rhodes.

**TC:** Oh, Rhodes, R-H-O-D-E, Rhodes?

**WK:** Rhodes, I remember her.

**TC:** I asked you earlier about Mrs. Pride, P-R-I-D-E. I understand she was a very demanding lady and she formed two clubs. [Break in recording; brief telephone interruption.] Okay, I was asking you about a lady, a teacher at Sims High known as Mrs. Pride. She may have come to Sims High after you finished. She formed two clubs that were almost like fraternities and sororities in college. I think the one for the guys was called UPC and the one for the girls was called TPC. And that may have started after you finished Sims High in ’47 because I’m not sure when she came.

**WK:** I know I was in a club. I can’t remember the name now.

**TC:** And they had to dress up at least once or twice a week.

**WK:** And then this club we had to dress a certain way, maybe put on their clothes dressed wrong side outwards or maybe plait your hair.
TC: Oh, that was the pledging process. That was initiation process.

WK: Yeah.

TC: Yeah, you just don’t remember the name of it.

WK: No, I can’t remember the name.

TC: You were one of the best students at Sims High because you didn’t get into that club unless you had a good average and unless you carried yourself in a certain way, in a certain manner. So I congratulate you on it, because—see, when you’re talking about wearing a dress backwards, inside out, that was part of the process of becoming a member of that club.

WK: Right.

TC: And if you didn’t conduct yourself properly after getting in, I understand that they would put you out.

WK: Right.

TC: So what was your favorite subject in high school would you say, English or math?

WK: Well, you can see right now I’m not a very good English speaker.

TC: Well, no, I wouldn’t say that.

WK: I was very good in math.

TC: You liked math?

WK: I liked math.

TC: So if you had gone on to college you may have majored in math.

WK: Maybe. I had the opportunity to go but I didn’t.

TC: You met somebody.

WK: That’s right. [Laughter.]

Willie D. Kelly: I tried to get her to go but she wouldn’t.

TC: I see. Her husband said he tried to get her to go but she wanted to stick with him.

Willie D. Kelly: She could have went to [South Carolina] State [College].

TC: And she could have gone to Allen [University]. Yes, but anyway, that’s part of life, isn’t it?

WK: Right.

TC: So any other interesting things about when you were at Sims High School like going to the game or?

WK: Well, I played basketball when I was there.

TC: Did you?

WK: Uh-huh.

TC: Who was your coach?
WK: Moorer.

TC: Mr. Moorer? Oh, now that reminds me of something. Mr. Moorer came to Sims High. So Prof. Sims was your principal?

WK: Right.

TC: Then Mr. Moorer became your principal?

WK: Right.

TC: Okay, Mr. Moorer became principal—no, excuse me. Mr. Moorer came to Sims High in 1946 and he coached all the sports. He coached basketball, football and probably baseball, too.

WK: And who else? What’s that boy’s name? Shelton was there.

TC: As a teacher, William Shelton?

WK: Uh-huh.

TC: He was a student, wasn’t he?

WK: Well, he helped with football.

TC: Oh, he did? I see.

Willie D. Kelly: Football and baseball.

TC: I see, and he probably was a senior, William Shelton. So you remember one tough game you played in basketball? Was it Carver High School or Sterling or?

WK: When you come down to those schools and things I don’t remember.

TC: Don’t remember them right now? But you remember playing Carver High School?

WK: We went several places. We went places like somewhere in Greenville, we would go but I can’t remember.

TC: Okay, well the name of that school in Greenville most likely was Sterling High School.

WK: Probably so, but I—.

TC: Can’t recall right now.

WK: Right.

TC: And then the one in Spartanburg, that was Carver High School.

WK: Our children went to both of them, Spartanburg and Greenville.

TC: Right. Now I’ve seen an article, actually a photo, of your brother T.B. He played football.

WK: Right.

TC: Okay, well, Mr. Moorer came to Sims High in 1946 as a coach of the football team. And in that book there, I’ll show you later, T.B. was on Mr. Moorer’s first football team that he coached. And Sims High did not lose another game after 19, I think it lost the first two games in 1946 but from ’46 other than those two games they didn’t lose another game until 1954. That was that streak that you hear about Sims High having played ninety-six games without a loss. So
your brother T.B. was one of the persons on that first team. Now anything else you’d like to say about our dear alma mater Sims High School?

WK: You know, when your mind gets—you can’t think like you used to think.

TC: But you remember some of those homecoming games?

WK: Oh yes, because Jesse and what’s his name, his brother, they were players then.

TC: Now Jesse who?

WK: He was a Jeter.

TC: Jesse Jeter and Joe—oh, I’ve heard those names, Joe Jeter, the Jeter boys.

WK: Right.

TC: And they were good?

WK: They were very good.

TC: And you did all right in basketball?

WK: Well, pretty good, I’m not going to say I was the best but I was pretty good.

TC: Sims won some games?

WK: Right, oh, yes.

TC: And if you didn’t win then what would Moorer do?

WK: You know he always would take his hat off.

TC: Take his hat off?

WK: You know, he always would pull his hat off and walk around and stomp his foot.

TC: Really?

WK: But anyway, he was a good coach.

TC: So just very demanding?

WK: Right, right.

TC: Made you do a lot of laps around the—no, you played outdoors, right?

WK: We played outdoors but we played in some buildings, too.

TC: Did you play in a building in Union?

WK: No.

TC: But when you went to other schools?

WK: Right.

TC: You played inside?

WK: Inside.

TC: So when teams came to Union you played outdoors?
WK: We had to play outdoors.

TC: You know how Sims High eventually stopped playing outdoors and started playing indoors? Do you know how that happened?

WK: No, I don’t.

TC: Dr. Long built the center, the community center they called it, and that’s how Sims High started playing indoors. I don’t know what year that was. I have to find out what year he built that community center. Now, you remember some of the Miss Sims Highs? Do you remember the Miss Sims High for your class or you don’t recall right now?

WK: I can’t recall.

TC: Okay, well let me ask you about your sister that taught, Ethel?

WK: Ethel Lee.

TC: Ethel Lee that taught elementary school. Do you recall about how many years she taught?

WK: I don’t recall.

TC: When you were at Sims High did they have one or two courses that students took, those who thought they wanted to teach took those courses? Do you remember any certain courses that they taught?

WK: I don’t think so. I don’t remember it. I don’t think they had any certain—are.

TC: Courses that you took?

WK: Uh-huh.

TC: That a person took to go out and teach?

WK: No, I don’t think they had those.

TC: I see. Your sister just wanted to teach after finishing Sims High?

WK: Right. And then you could teach at that time.

TC: At that time. Do you recall the year that she finished Sims? You don’t remember? She finished before you, right?

WK: Right, right, right. She finished maybe a year or two before I did.

TC: Okay. Now she’s the oldest child?

WK: She’s the oldest.

TC: Okay, and are you the next after her?

WK: I’m the next.

TC: So she probably finished in ’45 or ’46.

WK: She died in ’45.

TC: So somewhere before ’45 she was a teacher?

WK: Right, right.
TC: I see. Somewhere like that.

Willie D. Kelly: About ’42 or ’43? Somewhere along in there because I was in the Army myself when she died.

TC: So do you know how she became interested in teaching or do you know whether some of the teachers encouraged her to go out and teach or you’re not sure?

WK: I’m not sure.

TC: I see. So at that point Sims High did not go through the twelfth grade and she was teaching at the end of her eleventh grade?

WK: Eleventh.

TC: Okay, well if you don’t have any additional questions or comments, we will discontinue our discussion here. I thought maybe you might remember something about the Miss Sims High pageant, how a person became Miss Sims High, but you don’t recall at this time?

WK: When your mind get old—it’s been sixty years—it’s kind of hard to think about those things.

TC: Yeah, well let me ask you, my interest is in biology—you know, plants and animals, for example—so how did you like that at Sims High? Did you have biology?

WK: No, I didn’t, no.

TC: You don’t recall having that?

WK: No.

TC: Okay. Well, I have enjoyed our discussion here. You remember a number of things but nobody can recall everything, right?

WK: I’m sorry I can’t remember that much to tell you about Sims High.

TC: No, you’ve done well.

Willie D. Kelly: There are a whole lot of things we can’t remember.

TC: That’s true, yeah. But I’ve enjoyed it.

WK: I enjoyed talking with you.

TC: Thank you very much.

End of interview