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Tom Crosby Oral History Collection
Kay Patterson Oral History Interview

Interviewee
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Interviewer
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Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, Kay Patterson discusses his educational experiences in South Carolina, descriptions of segregated schools, walking to school, the sports program at his high school and wearing uniforms passed down from white schools, teachers and their teaching styles, his favorite teacher in high school, the beginning of his journey to becoming a state senator, attending Claflin University, servicing in the Marines, finishing school and becoming politically involved at Allen University, some of the people he met, and participating in the movement that removed the Confederate flag from the South Carolina statehouse. The Honorable Kay Patterson was born 1931 in Round Oak, South Carolina, to Leila Prince and James Patterson. Tom Crosby interviewed Kay Patterson in his office in Columbia, South Carolina, on June 23, 2008. Interview covers Patterson’s education at elementary schools, including Savage Glover (grades 4-7 in Sumter, S.C.) during the 1930s, at Lincoln High School (Sumter, S.C.) from 1946 to 1949, at Claflin University from 1949 to 1951, and at Allen University from 1954 to 1956.
Kay Patterson: 3:20 p.m.

TC: 3:20 p.m. And I’m in the office of Senator Kay Patterson. Senator, where were you born?
KP: I was born January 11, 1931 in Darlington County.

TC: In Darlington County?
KP: Round Oak Community.

TC: So that was the suburb?
KP: Yes, sir, seven miles outside of town.

TC: Now Senator, how did you get to school? Did you walk or?
KP: If anybody got to school back during those days they walked because very few people had cars and no such thing as a bus for black children. Now the white children had buses. They rode the bus but black children walked the dusty roads.

TC: Uh-huh, or the muddy roads.
KP: Yeah, muddy when it was raining and dusty when the sun shined.

TC: How many miles would you say?
KP: I know what it was. It was seven miles one way so if you walk seven going you got to walk seven coming back and that give you fourteen miles a day.

TC: Seven miles?
KP: Yes, so fourteen miles a day walking.

TC: That was from first grade?
KP: First grade through third grade while I was in Darlington, first through third, yes, sir.

TC: First through third?
KP: Yes, sir.

TC: I forgot to ask you and may I at this point, the name of your parents?
KP: Oh, my parents: Mother was Leila Prince and my father was James Patterson. And it just so happened that in 1944, I think it was, they got married in 1944. I was born in ’31.
So they got married and I was raised by both of my grandmothers. I call them grandmammas, Mrs. Meta B. Patterson, who is my paternal grandmother, my father’s mother, and Miss Emma Joseph, my mama’s mother.

TC: Senator, I’m really amazed that you being in the first grade having to walk seven miles to school each way, to and fro. That’s really something. And that occurred until you were about in the third grade?

KP: Yes, third grade.

TC: Okay, and after the third grade?

KP: I moved to Sumter, South Carolina with my paternal grandmother, Mrs. Meta B. Patterson, 420 S. Main St., across the tracks.

TC: How would you describe your teachers, let’s say the first thru third grade?

KP: They were A-1 like that steak sauce, A-1 and, of course, needless to say, that was a segregated society so they were all black. You had black schools and white schools and our teachers were A-1. You didn’t have teachers coming to school to draw a check. You had teachers coming to school to teach, teach the children, and there is a helluva difference you know.

TC: Right. What are some of those attributes you would ascribe to them as being A-1?

KP: They took every minute of the period teaching the children and not lollygagging and bull jiving, you know. They took their time and they taught the children. They were punctual, on time, and made sure that you were punctual and on time. They kept you on task, wasn’t no time for, playtime was recess and that’s what the school set up for, recess time to play. The other time wasn’t no damn playing.

TC: It was serious business?

KP: You were down at it. So that’s why I consider them as A-1 teachers and also back during that day, you know, our teachers they couldn’t go to these white institutions like USC where you’re the professor down there. Hell, they couldn’t even walk thru the campus. They had to go, now I’m talking about for summer school to get their master’s degree, they went to New York University, Columbia University, University of Indiana, all of the big schools, they went there and got their master’s during the summer and came back and worked during the winter, you know, during school session.

TC: And, of course, got teaching strategies and all of that is part of their training.

KP: Yeah and also back during that time rather than let the teachers go to school with white teachers; they paid them a stipend, out-of-state stipend, to go to New York University, Columbia University, Vanderbilt, those other schools to get master’s degrees. They paid for them.

TC: Clarity for me, when you say paid them a stipend and I’ve heard, did they pay the tuition?

KP: They paid the tuition, fees, and everything for them to go to school to keep them from going to USC and Clemson.

TC: I see.

KP: And that was a blessing in disguise because during that day, what in the hell was USC and Clemson, compared to New York University and Columbia University?
TC: Do you know whether they paid for the housing for them, everything?
KP: Yeah, they stayed on campus.

TC: So they paid for everything?
KP: Yeah. Of course, some of them stayed with relatives and families, you know, in the city. But South Carolina paid for their education, I know that.

TC: Right, let me go back to the elementary level. Do you recall some of the teaching strategies that the teachers used in the classroom in general?
KP: All I can remember is working hard, buddy. When you start talking about strategies, hell, I wouldn’t know about that. I know they taught us the ABC’s. They taught us to learn poems and, you know, learn poetry. We even learned Bible verses, you know. You had to memorize certain things that today our children can’t seem to do unless it’s some vulgar hip-hop rap song. Now they can remember that, all the B’s and the O’s and all that.

TC: So they did a lot of drilling and reciting?
KP: Yeah

TC: Reading and those kinds of things?
KP: That’s correct.

TC: Do you recall maybe a teacher using other students sometimes to assist in the teaching of other students?
KP: Yeah, I remember that too, yeah.

TC: I see. Okay, and then the fourth thru the seventh, I guess it was, you were?
KP: At Savage Glover Elementary School in Sumter.

TC: The city of Sumter?
KP: Yeah, across the tracks.

TC: Across the tracks?
KP: Now when you say across the tracks that means the hood. In Sumter across the tracks (unintelligible) men, they looked down on us just like we were roaches or something, you know.

TC: Yeah. And high school you were?
KP: Lincoln High School.

TC: Lincoln High School?
KP: Eighth thru it was eleventh but they added, I got caught in the first twelfth grade class to graduate. It used to be, as you know, eleven grades then in ’49, the year I finished Lincoln High School that was the first year of twelfth graders.

TC: I see. Now how would you describe the high school teachers in general?
KP: They were just as good or better than the elementary because they too went that same route of Columbia and New York University, Indiana University and that type of thing, Northwest
University, Northwestern and they got their master’s degree. As you know, back during that time that’s the only, we couldn’t do anything besides teach and preach and one or two lawyers. The rest were undertakers or barbers or car porters on the railroad and during that day car porters on the railroad, that meant you had a solid job, pension, retirement, and they were the leaders, as you can recall, in the black community, the railroad car porters, like Randolph, you know.

**TC:** Uh-huh. When you were in elementary school were you involved in programs and had roles to play and let’s say things like that?

**KP:** Not in elementary school, no, I don’t recall that. As a matter of fact, I know I didn’t because when the bell rang at 3:15 or whenever it was, you had to start that seven mile journey and there wasn’t no hanging around talking about extracurricular activities, none of that.

**TC:** But did they have school programs known as school closing?

**KP:** The big thing I can remember they had May Day. Lord, I mean everybody, their mama, and their dog came to May Day.

**TC:** What kinds of things went on?

**KP:** And we would wrap the pole, you know.

**TC:** Yeah, I remember that.

**KP:** Long ribbons wrapping the pole. Oh man, now that was something, and we’d march, you know.

**TC:** It would be beautiful too.

**KP:** Yeah, yeah, nice. That was the biggie.

**TC:** What other kinds of activities were there?

**KP:** I don’t recall any other.

**TC:** Baseball games?

**KP:** No, man, it ain’t nothing. You talking about elementary school, no, man. I told you when that bell rang that your baseball—

**TC:** No, no, May Day.

**KP:** Oh, May Day, oh. You might have had a little baseball or something like that. I don’t recall. The thing I remember is wrapping that pole, yeah.

**TC:** I see. Now how about in high school, how would you describe the kinds of things that you participated in?

**KP:** Everything in high school, man, football, the choral club under Miss Edith Pleasant, those are the two biggies I can recall, and those took up all your time.

**TC:** You were a participant in them?

**KP:** Oh, yeah, the glee club under Miss Pleasant and football under Coach Thompson, who later became principal.

**TC:** Do you remember Lincoln winning any championships in football?
KP: Now you were at Sims? *(Laughter)* Now you’re looking at me smiling now.

TC: Want to start jabbing, huh?

KP: Yeah. Now you know ya’ll used to beat us like you owned us. *(Laughter)*

TC: Yeah, did they?

KP: See we, we would have coach after coach after coach. In a sense, we really didn’t have a coach. You would coach this year and next year somebody else would come, almost like they were doing it, contributing, just donating their time.

TC: No stability?

KP: No, no stability and also I guess you know about this, the materials you played in was the stuff handed down from the white schools. Now you remember that now.

TC: I don’t. I don’t think Sims.

KP: Sims didn’t do that?

TC: Yeah, you have to ask Jeff about that.

KP: *(Laughter)*

TC: He’ll probably lie, is that it?

KP: Yeah. And we had the band and they sent them old instruments over from Sumter High.

TC: So you were in high school in the?

KP: Graduated in ’49, twelfth grade.

TC: Forty-nine, yeah, so football wasn’t too good at that time?

KP: In our school it wasn’t but it was good at other schools what had coaches. See other schools had continuity like Wilson and Booker T. Washington and Avery and Burke, oh man, they used to beat us mercilessly, you know.

TC: Really? Then it had to be continued with Sims High of Union?

KP: Yeah. *(Laughter)*

TC: What were the courses that you liked best in high school?

KP: In high school I liked social studies and U.S. history type of thing under Mrs. C. A. Lawson. That was my favorite teacher.

TC: Now often times people, many students don’t like social studies, you know, history and so forth. Was there some particular way that she taught?

KP: Yeah, she made us learn all the cabinet, U.S. cabinet officers, made us learn all the U.S. Supreme Court members, and she made it interesting the way she taught it. She’s the one that got me to reading the newspaper. I can’t start the day off without reading the newspaper.

TC: So is that one way you would say that she made it interesting, the newspaper?
KP: Yeah, that was the way and she would, you had to come in and tell her what was happening in the world, what was going on in the world. You don’t get up shucking and jiving now because she knows, you know, so you had to get it. And you had to know the members of the Supreme Court, have pictures of them and know them when you see them and we didn’t have no TV either.

TC: If I may interrupt, we had to learn all the members of the Supreme Court, their age, the state from which they came; yeah, age and state from which they came. I must admit maybe she explained to us why that was important to know that but I remember it because I didn’t, I did it, but to me I couldn’t see it at that time and maybe she told us and I’ve just forgotten.

KP: Just personally I don’t see any, and we didn’t have to do that, I don’t see any significance in knowing someone’s age and where they are from. I just had to know Douglas.

TC: I think as time has passed, I can understand now why she had us to do it because, you see, the age of a person, nothing beats wisdom, you know, if that’s part of wisdom. And then the state from which they came, let’s say southern judges might act on a bill, render a decision differently from let’s say, depending on what the issue is, from those from the north. That’s how I look at it now. That may be why but back then I couldn’t see it. Okay, so do you think of anything else other than that newspaper that her manner of teaching?

KP: She made us subscribe, as well as I know that paper and I can’t think of it, something junior scholastic and senior scholastic. It was a national school newspaper and you got it and you read that and you had to subscribe to that and then you had to read the newspaper. You had to listen to news. Like I say, wasn’t no, don’t get this confused with TV now. Now you might know something about TV in school. (Laughter)

TC: But that radio.

KP: Yeah, that radio, you had to listen to the news and know what’s going on. Those are the things I do when I was teaching social studies. I made kids listen to the news. Matter of fact, I carried a little radio this size, battery, and when the hour comes like two o’clock or three o’clock, whatever hour it was, when the news was coming on I’d flip and we’d listen to the news and after it go off, see can someone summarize what happened, that kind of thing, learn the members of the Supreme Court, the same thing she did for us. And I made them learn maps. They learned all the countries in the world, where they’re located.

TC: And it’s true, you tend to teach as you have been taught to a great extent.

KP: Yes, sir.

TC: Now so I guess you agree that maybe the things that she did in that class have inspired and contributed greatly to your majoring in social studies I think you did?

KP: Yeah.

TC: And then maybe becoming a senator in the South Carolina state legislature.

KP: I attribute all that to Mrs. C. A. Lawson, yes, sir.

TC: I see.
KP: Mrs. Mary Lawson, she married C. A. Lawson, who was the principal at that time of Lincoln High School so we called her Mrs. C. A. but she was Mrs. Mary Lawson out of Laurens and that’s up there close to you, ain’t it?

TC: Yes. Now then you eventually started college at Allen University?

KP: Claflin.

TC: Claflin?

KP: Forty-nine thru fifty-one. I went to Claflin because they gave me a music scholarship. I was on the band.

TC: What instrument?

KP: Tenor saxophone. I was on the band and they announced in chapel during graduation that Kay Patterson has a scholarship to Claflin College and he’s going to Claflin and people just stomped their feet and clapped their hands and they were so proud of Kay going to Claflin on a music scholarship. And when I got down to Claflin the music scholarship was one hundred dollars annually. (Laughter)

TC: Really? One hundred dollars annually, quite amazing.

KP: Fifty dollars per semester. (Laughter)

TC: They thought you had thousands and thousands of dollars.

KP: They thought and I thought that I was going to school on a music scholarship.

TC: I see. Now how long were you at Claflin?

KP: Two years, freshman and sophomore. I left there in, freshman, ’49–’50, ’50–’51, first two years, which I enjoyed. I went in the Marines in September ’51 and stayed in the Marines two years, ’51–’52, ’52–’53 and came out in ’53. And then when I got out I went to New York and worked a year at Republic Aviation Corporation making jet airplanes for the Airforce and worked a year and then I left to come back home to finish my last two years in ’54. But see I was supposed to graduate in ’53 but the U.S. Marines and work stopped that. I missed three years. So when I came back I went back to Claflin in ’54 and when I got there in ’54 my class had finished in ’53, a year earlier and I looked around on campus and I didn’t know a damn soul on campus, not one person that I know. (Laughter) And so I thought about that thing and I said my girlfriend is at Allen University.

TC: Oh, so that’s how you got to Allen.

KP: Yeah, who is now my wife, she was Jean James at that time. Now she’s Jean James Patterson. I said hell, if I’m going to start at Claflin as a freshman; I know where I can enjoy freshman year much better than this. So I came back to my, I was really a junior but I call it my freshman year because I didn’t know anybody. So I came to Allen in ’54 and finished August 10, ’56, B. A. degree, social sciences.

TC: I see. That’s Lizzie Bell?

KP: Yeah, Lizzie Bell was right along with me.

TC: Ivey, what’s her name? Lucille.
KP: Lucille Ivey, yeah, that’s my classmate. All of them my classmates.
TC: And James Edwards?
KP: Yeah, Edwards was singing on the choir, chorus.
TC: The reason I know this is because—
KP: Floyd Brelan.
TC: The reason I know this I was looking at Bishop Higgins’ report to the board of trustees and he was boasting about two singers, Lucille and Edwards. So now this is Allen University and you were there for two years?
KP: That’s correct, junior and senior year.
TC: I see. Of course, you had some social studies to take there.
KP: Yeah.
TC: Do you remember the name, of course, of one or two of the teachers?
KP: Dr. Poe was one of them.
TC: He was there when I got there.
KP: Yeah, Dr. Poe, I enjoyed him. Dick Minor was there for a short while and Mrs. Minor. They went to Ohio I think. They were Bishop Reed’s nephew. She was Bishop Reed’s niece.
TC: I see. Now there’s a guy from Newberry he was there most likely.
KP: Fred James?
TC: Yeah. Was he teaching then?
KP: No, Fred.
TC: No, I mean a social studies teacher from Newberry, tall guy, last name begins B-UT, Butler.
KP: Butler.
TC: Was he there, A. T. Butler?
KP: No, no, A. T. wasn’t there during my time, my era. No, A. T. came after me. See I left, like I said, August 10, ’56 and I know A. T. so if he was there I would have known unless he was, he could have been.
TC: Mr. Swinton?
KP: Yeah, Tony was there and Mrs. Swinton was there, year. Miss Nelson, aka. Nelson, the lady, you know.
TC: Yeah, I know the lady.
KP: All those were there.
TC: Did you have Miss Nelson for a course?
KP: Let me see now, seems like I went, no, because Miss Nelson, I know she was in science I believe.

TC: Yeah, she was biology.

KP: No, I didn’t have her for anything.

TC: Now I guess you would say that the major factor that convinced you, that influenced your going into political science you might say, politics, really started back there in high school?

KP: That’s correct, yeah.

TC: Okay, any activities or things at Allen, maybe Claflin that you might contribute?

KP: At Allen the first time I ever came in real contact, close contact with white people was Dr. Hoffman and Dr. Rideout.

TC: Oh, they were there when we were there?

KP: It was alleged that they were Communists.

TC: Right.

KP: And we would go down to—

TC: Township?

KP: No, I’m talking about down in Beaufort off the island there to Penn Center.

TC: St. Helena?

KP: Yeah, Island to Penn Center and the Siceloff’s were there, white people, S-I-C-E-L-O-F-F, Siceloff’s, they were in charge of Penn Center.

TC: Penn Center?

KP: Yeah and they were white and I had these white professors and that’s my first real close contact, other than Marines, you know, hell, just a bunch of damn jar head shit, you know. Excuse me. (Laughter) They don’t count. I don’t count them as being white people. So that was my first opportunity and experience of being around white people and that helped me a great deal, an experience to help me.

TC: Well, what went on down there?

KP: Oh, they would have—

TC: Down at Penn Center.

KP: Penn Center, I’m saying now, seemed like this would be political workshops or some type of workshops where students would come in from throughout South Carolina and have conferences and conventions, that type of thing, and we were just there as a part of that experience.

TC: Do you remember something that they talked about?

KP: Seem like—
TC: Voter register?
KP: They would talk about voter registration but first class citizenship, being good citizens and the rights and privileges that we should have that we should be working towards to enjoy, which we did not have at that time, you know. That’s what I can recall from it.
TC: A few more minutes if I may, I’ve heard a lot about Rideout, Hoffman, Wiggins.
KP: Yeah, Wiggins, I liked him too.
TC: Can you tell us something about those people?
KP: It is alleged that they were Communists. That’s the allegation but now they were the best teachers there.
TC: That’s what I’ve heard.
KP: They were the best there. They taught you. They weren’t playing and jiving around.
TC: Now two of those persons were white?
KP: And Wiggins was black, tall, light skinned fellah. I forgot about Wiggins. You’re correct.
TC: I read about it in that.
KP: Do you know where they are now? Might be deceased.
TC: No, one person that works at the University of South Carolina has been in contact with Rideout I think. One of them is still living. At least one of them is still living. Now something else that happened, you had left Allen I think at that time, but there were some students from Allen, as a result of the Rideout group, the state of South Carolina would not issue teacher certifications. Are you familiar with that situation?
KP: No, seem like that was something dealing with A. T.
TC: That was later on. No, that was another one.
KP: You ain’t talking about that? *(Laughter)*
TC: Let’s leave that one right now, you can tell me about that one later.
KP: But something about Rideout, I don’t recall that.
TC: There were some students they would not certify Allen because their kids had Communist teachers and those students in ’57, ’58, maybe you were gone.
KP: Yeah, I left in ’56.
TC: They tried to come and register at the University of South Carolina. You’re not familiar with that?
KP: No.
TC: I have the article. I’ll show you one day.
KP: No, I’m not familiar, never heard of it.
TC: Anyway, I’ve heard a lot about Rideout and Wiggins and Hoffman.
KP: They were the best.

TC: And I saw some writings by them.

KP: Even if they were Communists because I remember the writings, Hoffman would make us write a lot and I wrote about the Sea Islands.

TC: This was in English?

KP: History.

TC: History?

KP: History.

TC: Okay.

KP: And I wrote about the Sea Islands, how it was an experiment to see could blacks live on their own by growing crops and that type of thing. And then it was proven that they could and as soon as it was proven that they could they came in and took the land from them. There was land I guess leased or given to them right after the Civil War and the owners came back and took the land back. I remember writing about that.

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TC: Okay.

KP: And I wrote about the Sea Islands, how it was an experiment to see could blacks live on their own by growing crops and that type of thing. And then it was proven that they could and as soon as it was proven that they could they came in and took the land from them. There was land I guess leased or given to them right after the Civil War and the owners came back and took the land back. I remember writing about that.

TC: I see. Okay, in concluding here do you have any comments you’d like to make in general about your life, kinds of things that contributed to your development in general? Maybe it might relate to school or experiences with government.

KP: The only thing I can think of is that both of my grandmothers were strict disciplinarians and they instilled discipline in me. And then when I got in the Marines that just reinforced the discipline, you know, and I believe in discipline. They inspired me to just go on and do something and be somebody, you know. Now that came from my grandmammamas and Mrs. C. A. Lawson, Miss Mary Lawson. They just inspired me to go on and be the best you can and be somebody in life.

TC: So as a result of having these excellent dedicated teachers, elementary thru college, they have contributed greatly to your life?

KP: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. And down at Claflin, I took Bible down at Claflin freshman and sophomore year and then I took Bible again I believe at Allen, so I was very familiar with the scriptures and had to read a lot and had to learn a lot of Bible verses and Psalms and that type of thing. That really helped me and it taught me that it’s good, reading is fine and I love to read but there are some things you ought to be able to get up and recite, you know, and not read it.

TC: Right.

KP: It helps you and it develops you and especially if you call yourself an orator or speaker like me. You can get up there, get a folder and open up the folder and put your head down in it and start reading it. You got to get up and burn it.

TC: Right, that’s true.

KP: And I learned that thru these institutions.

TC: Right, now, the last thing, would you like to describe some of your what you might consider major accomplishments, achievements while you were in the state legislature?
KP: Well, I’ve always said that the biggest thing that I was able to do was, with help of the NAACP and business people, was to take the flag down off that building over there and out of the chambers and out of the lobby and put it out on the grounds. The grounds ain’t where I wanted it but that was a compromise in the political arena, which most people outside the political arena don’t understand is you don’t get everything you want. You have to get some of what you want and the other side got to get some of what it wants and that’s the compromise.

TC: If I may interrupt, was it known where the flag would be placed when it was taken from the top of the building?

KP: Yeah, we discussed that in the compromise. It would be placed behind the Confederate soldier out front. That was the compromise and people may not realize it but that was a helluva jump in progress for us to get it from where we got it from down on the ground. Now people of the NAACP complain about it being on the ground but now in their resolution, NAACP resolution, say remove it and place it in a historical context. It can’t get anymore historical context than out there behind that Confederate soldier.

TC: Be it not accepted by many persons, what was done.

KP: Yeah, hell, we know that it would not be accepted by many but my position is, where it is is better than where it was, wuz if you’re taking notes.

TC: Now was there any objection when it was indicated that it would be placed where it is?

KP: Oh, yeah, the House members, plenty of them objected to it. But see, Medgar Evers in his autobiography Evers, he said his daddy taught him and Charles many things and he said never criticize nothing, don’t criticize and tear up nothing unless you got something better to offer. But see these folks can criticize and tear up but they ain’t had nothing better to offer that the other side would accept. Are you following me?

TC: Yeah.

KP: People ain’t going to take a flag down and put it where you want to put it. I want to put it in the Confederate relic room. That’s a place of historical context, but that ain’t where they want it and they had the power and we ain’t.

TC: Yeah, I understand what happened. Okay, well I certainly thank you for your time and your interest. I have approached you about this several times but I know I had to do it on your time when you were available. So again, I’m sure this will become part of history and has contributed to what we know about black education that occurred in the past and presently. So thanks again.

KP: Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.

End of interview