Interviewee
Cannon, William, 1928-

Interviewer
Crosby, Tom, 1940-

Date
July 23, 2008

Location
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Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, William Cannon discusses his educational experiences at Saxon Elementary School, Booker T. Washington High School, Allen University and South Carolina State College (modern-day South Carolina State University; located in Orangeburg, South Carolina), his time in the United States Army, his 30-year teaching career at Voorhees College, Booker T. Washington High School, A.C. Flora High School, and his tenure as an assistant principal at Columbia High School. William Cannon was born on January 12, 1928. Tom Crosby interviewed William Cannon on the Allen University campus in Columbia, South Carolina, on July 23, 2008. Interview covers Cannon's education at Celia Dial Saxon Elementary School (grades 1-7 in Columbia, S.C.) from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s, at Booker T. Washington High School (of Columbia, S.C.) until 1946, and Allen University from 1946 to 1950.
Tom Crosby Oral History Collection

William Cannon Oral History Interview

Interviewee: William Cannon
Interviewer: Tom Crosby

CROS# 024
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Tom Crosby: Today is July 23, 2008 and I’m on the campus of Allen University and in my presence is Mr. William Cannon. I think you told me that you grew up in Columbia?

William Cannon: Columbia is my home.

TC: Okay and your date of birth?

WC: January 12, 1928.

TC: Okay and the name of your elementary school?

WC: Saxon Elementary School. [Celia Dial Saxon Elementary School]

TC: How would you describe the teachers in general at that school?

WC: The teachers at Saxon School were very competent and they were in authority and the students knew that. And that’s why we had very few disciplinary problems out of them because the teachers had the authority to do whatever they needed to do so that we would learn.

TC: Was there any punishment?

WC: Well, they had, the teachers had the authority to do that and I think that was one of the things too that kept us in line.

TC: What’s it called?

WC: Corporal punishment?

TC: Corporal punishment.
WC: Yes. They did that.

TC: They did occasionally?

WC: Sure they did. Of course, they didn’t have to do it too often with me but, you know, as the old cliché, boys will be boys but really the truth of the matter is that boys will be men.

TC: Right. So as a whole you were a good boy?

WC: I would classify.

TC: As a whole?

WC: Yes, generally speaking.

TC: Any attributes you’d like to mention with reference to their teaching strategies?

WC: Well, no, the only thing as I say, they were on the job every day and of course their major concern then and should be now is that the students would learn, and of course, the atmosphere for learning was there. It was very much apparent and that’s one of the reasons, of course, that you didn’t have too many other problems, disciplinary problems, because teachers were given the authority to teach and they did that.

TC: Right. Do you remember any, maybe any textbook that you may have used at the elementary level?

WC: I don’t recall the textbooks. We had textbooks but I don’t recall the name.

TC: Any names?

WC: No, I do know we had one, “The History of South Carolina.” That’s about all I remember.

TC: You remember that?

WC: Yeah.

TC: Okay, did the teachers, now there were some, of course, individual differences and levels of achievement of the students. Do you recall how the teachers met the different levels?
WC: Well, as I recall, all of, you know.

TC: As a whole?

WC: As a whole the kids were all grouped together and, of course, teachers did the best they could to try to meet the needs of all of those levels and that, of course, was a very tremendous task for them to do. But now they kind of have groupings on ability but then they were all in the same class and, of course, they were expected to keep up with each other and they did that.

TC: So you don’t think they were homogenously grouped?

WC: I don’t think so. I really don’t at that time because that’s something that came into vogue later on, you know, and that’s a positive thing because all students don’t learn together and they don’t learn the same thing, so you have to meet them wherever they are and move to where you would have them to be.

TC: Okay, and then after finishing Saxon Elementary at the seventh grade, you then went to Booker Washington High School?

WC: Booker Washington, yeah.

TC: And it went from, at one point it went from the seventh through the eleventh grade?

WC: That’s right, yeah.

TC: Okay, now how would you describe your teachers at Booker Washington as a whole?

WC: Now that too was a very-

TC: Demanding?

WC: Demanding and strict type of environment. We had a principal there the name of which was J. Andrew Simmons. He was tall and he was somewhat threatening, you know, in his appearance, but he was not a mean person, he was good and he made an indelible impact on, not only at Booker Washington but throughout the city of Columbia. Booker Washington had most of whatever the other schools had, you know, with the extracurricular activities.

TC: Now what was his name again?
WC: J. Andrew Simmons. He was the one that had posted all over the school; thank God a man can grow. Anybody who would go into Booker Washington would remember those lines. It was much more to it than that but the whole purpose of that was to let kids know that they don’t have to stay right where they are but they can grow and this is what we do, and that’s what school is all about, trying to get you from point A to point C in an orderly manner.

TC: Now, thank God a man can grow.

WC: Can grow.

TC: That was just part of the statement?

WC: That was just a quotation. No, it was a long poem but that’s the one that was.

TC: Oh, it was a poem?

WC: Yeah, that was the part that was most profound.

TC: I see.

WC: And it was not a very long part. He just took maybe a paragraph out of that poem and it went on to talk about a man may be, you know, his beginnings may be low but he doesn’t have to stay there; he can grow and this is what teaching is all about.

TC: That’s true. Did he emphasize, now did you have let’s say assemblies?

WC: We had assemblies practically every, once a week. If not, it wasn’t a daily thing, yes; we did have assemblies in which students would perform. We had a band that they would perform and it was a time of enjoyment. It would break the monotony of the academics for a period of time.

TC: Right, would he, would outside speakers sometimes come in?

WC: We had outside speakers and we also had the principal, J. Andrew Simmons. He could play the piano. He was a professional piano player and he would oft times play the piano and entertain us.

TC: I see.

WC: But he was one of the, he was one of the top administrators that I’ve ever known. He was the type of person that you would work your fingers to the bone and you
wouldn’t complain about it because he would do whatever he did and you realized it was for your benefit.

TC: So he was a great motivator?

WC: Oh, it’s no question about it.

TC: And demanding person?

WC: Yes, that was J. Andrew Simmons.

TC: Academically as well as discipline wise?

WC: Yes, he believed in the holistic development of a child. Not only was the academics stressed but the extracurricular activities also.

TC: Okay, such as what?

WC: We had, of course you know we had football. We had tennis. They had practically all of the other sports.

TC: Excuse me. I guess that the school went from the seventh through, at one point, as we said, seventh through the eleventh grade. So I guess in general that school atmosphere encompassed all of those grades and you didn’t have any separation let’s say from the seventh through the eighth?

WC: Oh, you had all the levels would meet together but you would have different group in their level. I was talking about the elementary school that I think they were all grouped together. But of course, you had all first graders in first grade.

TC: At high school level, seventh, eighth. When he had assembly?

WC: We would all be together.

TC: The seventh through the eleventh?

WC: The entire school would be there, and of course, they had assigned seats.

TC: Sections for the different groups?

WC: Right and the teachers were there to make sure that they were in the seats and that they were attentive to what was going on.
TC: I see. Now the extracurricular activities, what were some of them?

WC: Well, as I say, football was one, as they have now, of course, they have the intramurals. They had basketball.

TC: Would you say football was the major sport?

WC: Football has always been the major one in this area. Football carries all the other sports. But then too, tennis was, we had tennis there.

TC: Did you?

WC: Yeah, not only did they have the academics but they had the vocational program there at Booker Washington.

TC: Excuse me, did you play?

WC: I did not. I was not able to do it. I had to work. I shined shoes until I went to college and before that I carried the State newspaper. We had the largest paper route in Columbia. And so I had to work and I didn’t play any of the organized sports. But I mean, you know, we played in the street but not organized with a team.

TC: School activity.

WC: No.

TC: Now I’m from Sims High and that was up in Union and I’m thinking about your saying that Booker had tennis.

WC: Yeah.

TC: Now when I was at Sims, left in ’61, we didn’t have tennis and I can’t remember anytime that I was at Sims or even before getting into Sims of having tennis, but I have seen a school newspaper, I think it may have been the first that was ever published. Sims was established in 1927, [the] first building and I’ve seen a campus newspaper that was published in 1928 and there was a tennis team. I’m trying to remember. I know I remember seeing female tennis and I guess they had male too most likely. But through the years I don’t know how long that may have lasted. But I know we didn’t have tennis when I was there, you know, in the ’50s and ’60s, they didn’t have it. Now we did have football and you may encounter, remember encountering Sims High School in football.

WC: Oh, yes.
TC: Now I know that Booker has always been pretty good in football and Sims, I don’t know. As you know, the various schools there were different conferences on the basis of the enrollment I think. And I don’t know whether Sims was actually in, I don’t think it was. I think it was up in the Piedmont and you were in, I don’t know what it was called here in Columbia. And when we would meet Booker it would be like in the playoff.

WC: Okay.

TC: And I know I’ve seen one or two scores where Booker did beat Sims. I don’t know about how often that occurred. So anyway, I know Booker has been good and it also had a very good band.

WC: Band, track, you name it, yes, we worked with them all.

TC: And it also had what was called the John Work.

WC: John W. Work Chorus. All the students in the school had to participate in that, in the John W. Work Chorus.

TC: Now do you know how that started?

WC: I think, I’m not sure, this is not truth, but I really think J. Andrew Simmons was the one who brought that at Booker and, as I say, all of the students had to participate in it and it was a big thing. And it’s still going on. They still have the John W. Work Chorus with the people who graduated from Booker Washington.

TC: Now when they, you say all the students had to participate.

WC: Everybody had to sing.

TC: What was the structure of that? Was it by grade level?

WC: They would practice not by grade level but by voices and at certain times all of the voices would come together. The teacher that I remember, Miss Fontaine was one of them, she would practice the tenors at one time and the sopranos and then they would bring them all together and everybody in the school, as I say, had to participate in the John W. Work Chorus and it was a worthwhile experience.

TC: Yes, so the students would be sitting in the auditorium seats, not up on the stage?

WC: They would be in the bleachers.

TC: In the gym?
**WC:** In the gym. We had a gym and, of course, the kids, the students would be in the bleachers. I don’t know if you are familiar with our gym, Booker Washington gym, but it’s a very large gym, very large area there for bleachers and they would sing and those voices were so beautiful.

**TC:** So all the students could get in there?

**WC:** Yeah, well, all of the students were involved in singing.

**TC:** I’m saying it would accommodate all the students in the school?

**WC:** Oh, yes, and then the audience would be on the floor looking up and it was just a wonderful experience to go through.

**TC:** The audience would be on?

**WC:** The floor. See the bleachers would be, the audience, like parents.

**TC:** Right, the parents.

**WC:** Yeah.

**TC:** Now this took place once a year?

**WC:** Once a year.

**TC:** In the spring?

**WC:** Usually at the end of the year, somewhere around the end of the year but all of the students would take part in that.

**TC:** I remember when I did my student teaching at Booker. I remember hearing reference to-

**WC:** John W. Work?

**TC:** John W. Work. So when would the students practice?

**WC:** They would, during some portion of the day time was made for them to do that. That’s how important it was.
TC: I see, okay. I think I remember hearing singing, even though I was in class, I think, when I was student teaching.

WC: I don’t know if that type of thing persists after we left. When I was there working I don’t know. It may have.

TC: Yeah, it was still going.

WC: Okay.

TC: When I was there in ’63.

WC: As you said, every year, there’s an organization called the Booker T. Washington Foundation. They meet each year, all of the alumni from the area, and they form a John W. Work Chorus.

TC: Has it been held this year yet?

WC: Each year it’s usually in the fall.

TC: In the fall?

WC: Yeah.

TC: So it’s coming up?

WC: Last year it was. It’s been already. It will be coming up in the fall.

TC: What month?

WC: Let me see. I don’t know.

TC: September or October I suspect.

WC: Yeah, somewhere around in there, yeah.

TC: I plan to come this year for a certain reason, to talk to some of the people.

WC: They usually hold that in the Russell House at the University of South Carolina because the gym, I mean the auditorium at USC, I don’t know if it’s air conditioned or not. But that’s where they usually hold it.

TC: I see. Now so how long, now you after finishing Booker you came to Allen?
WC: To Allen, yes, 1946. In 1950 I graduated and then immediately I was inducted into the Army, stayed in there for three years, and after that I came back. After I finished Allen I went back to Allen to get my director of teaching experience.

TC: Certification?

WC: Certification and after that I got my first job down at Voorhees School and Junior College down in Denmark.

TC: At one time it was called Voorhees School and Junior College?

WC: Yes, I worked in the high school.

TC: Okay, so I guess that’s why they had the name school and college, junior college.

WC: Right, that’s right.

TC: So your first job was at Voorhees High School?

WC: Voorhees High School, well, it was Voorhees School and Junior College then. It was the college and the high school combined. Of course, it’s only now it’s college, so they dropped the high school portion of it and Dr. Potts was the principal there. He too was a very strong person, a man that you would work for and would enjoy doing it.

TC: Are you aware that he was once director of student teaching at Allen?

WC: Yes, he worked here in the city at District 1 for a long time.

TC: Did he?

WC: Yeah, Potts, he’s been around. I think he was one of the big wheels in Omega Si Phi organization too for a while.

TC: Was he?

WC: Yeah.

TC: I see. Now another organization that pertained to teachers was the Palmetto Education Association.

WC: Yes.
TC: So were you involved in it at times?

WC: Yeah, Palmetto Teachers Association but, of course, you know, during integration they all merged and it's no longer.

TC: So how long did you teach down at Voorhees?

WC: I taught at Voorhees only one year and the second year, it was away from home but the atmosphere for working down there was beautiful. It was a campus type life and I’ve always wanted that and the experience, as I said, was a beautiful one for me, but I was away from home. I wanted to get back into Columbia because the salaries were much better. So I worked at Voorhees for one year and then I applied for District 1 and I got a job here and this is where I retired from, the rest of my thirty-some years.

TC: Now when you were working at Voorhees that was at high school level?

WC: High school, right.

TC: And then in Columbia, high school too?

WC: It was still high school, yes.

TC: Your first job in Columbia?

WC: First job in Columbia was at Booker Washington, back to my alma mater and that was a very rewarding experience to come back to the school where your roots were so deep. So I enjoyed working there until the unitary system came in and then I was transferred to A. C. Flora High School and worked over there for seven years.

TC: So you were at Booker for about fifteen or twenty years?

WC: Yeah, that’s right, and then I went over to A. C. Flora for a few years there.

TC: Is that integration?

WC: Yes, the reason for it because the schools had to integrate there so I was transferred there, stayed there for a few years.

TC: How long were you there?

WC: Oh, five or six years over there and then I applied for the job as the assistant principal at Columbia High School and that’s where I retired.
TC: I see. When you were at A. C. Flora that first year of integration, can you describe what it was like?

WC: Well, it was, the transition was not difficult for me. I mean I didn’t have any problems with that because most of the people who were there, of course, were white and, of course, that has changed in composition and most of your inner city schools, the city schools that changed. They’re predominately black. They’re back again to the way they used to be.

TC: Now what was the ratio of black/white faculty at A. C. your first year would you say?

WC: At A. C. Flora it was close to I guess, it was not quite half, more whites than blacks.

TC: More whites?

WC: Yeah. This was the whole purpose for it. They had to integrate faculty and, of course, as well as student body, so it was close to half but not quite.

TC: How about the student body ratio?

WC: Student body you had more whites than black and as time moved on that composition changed too.

TC: Right, what was it like to interact with the white kids, you might say, or their interaction with you that first year?

WC: As I said, I did not have any drastic problems. I didn’t have any. Transition was smooth because it was a sight better than the Army. In the Army I had gone through that same process just before I was discharged.

TC: So that helped?

WC: Well, yeah, all experiences that you have will help you to make a transition. My whole concept of anything, if you have a job to do, you do it and you do your very best. If you feel comfortable in what you are doing then you don’t have to worry about it.

TC: And you’re organized.

WC: And you have your program organized, you’ve got to be knowledgeable about what you’re doing and if you have this kind of confidence it doesn’t matter what kids you’re teaching.
TC: So you didn’t get any rejections?

WC: Oh, you do get, sure you’ll get that, but you know.

TC: Have to deal with it?

WC: Right, you have to learn how to deal with situations.

TC: So you didn’t have any major problems?

WC: No major problems with me but there were some people who could not make that transition and, of course, you know, they had difficulty. One thing that I always say, you do the very best that you can do all the time and if you do that then you won’t have any problems with anybody. People have respect for intelligence.

TC: How you present yourself.

WC: That’s right and performance.

TC: And talk to people.

WC: Yes, that’s respected by everybody, your performance. If a man has a job to do, he wants you to do it and he don’t want to hear excuses because excuses only satisfy the people who are making them.

TC: So who was your principal at A. C. Flora?

WC: A fellah by the name of Harvey, now he had some problems later on, you know, like most people. They had to make some transitions and have some changes in perception and whatnot. And, of course, we had some problems with that in the school itself.

TC: Were you there when Dr. Waddell?

WC: Waddell, no, I was over at Columbia High I think when Waddell.

TC: When he was principal?

WC: Yes.

TC: I see.
WC: No, he was not there during the time that I was there.

TC: So after you left A. C. Flora you went to Columbia High?

WC: Columbia High as assistant principal and that’s the school I retired from and I enjoyed working over there too because Columbia High School was one of the schools, and Flora, none of them, you know, we could go to as African Americans.

TC: At one point?

WC: At one point we could not attend. Used to walk by the schools but we couldn’t and many times some of the equipment that they had that they had used, they’d pass it down to us. And then when I went there it was quite a feeling because here one time that I couldn’t go to the school and now I’m sitting in a board meeting with the principals, the other principals and assistant principals, and here we’re making policies for the school that I could not attend at one time.

TC: Yeah, right, just walk by.

WC: Yeah, just walk by, yeah. So it was a very strange feeling there for a while because I recalled all the past history of my experiences.

TC: I get that feeling sometimes, or think about it rather, when I’m on USC campus and how that was, you remember?

WC: Yes, yes.

TC: And you eventually got a master’s most likely?

WC: Yes, I did. I went down to South Carolina State during the summer.

TC: And you know at one point back in the, prior to, back in the ‘40s, ‘50s, we could not get a master’s other than at South Carolina State.

WC: That’s right, yeah.

TC: And you remember many of them had to go out of state?

WC: Out of state, they paid you to go out of state to get your education.

TC: Yeah, they paid teachers to go out.

WC: Sure.
**TC:** Now did they pay, do you know what was paid? Did they pay the tuition at that institution when the people went out of state?

**WC:** Oh, I’m not sure the mechanics of that because I never did even think about doing that. But I’m sure they paid much of their expenses for going elsewhere.

**TC:** Right.

**WC:** Now that is if what they were looking for they couldn’t get it.

**TC:** Here in South Carolina at South Carolina State?

**WC:** Yeah, that’s right. The state paid the price and that shows you the mentality that we still have out there.

**TC:** What was it like as your being assistant principal at Columbia High?

**WC:** I enjoyed it. To show you how much I enjoyed it, very seldom was there a time when I was not at school. I had perfect attendance for most of the eleven or twelve years that I worked there. All of the schools, I decided that I would be there and I enjoyed going because I knew what I had to do and I did it well.

**TC:** Yeah and I’m sure your training from elementary school, Booker T. Washington, and then you came to Allen with this teacher education program and who was director of teacher ed when you were here, do you remember or you don’t recall?

**WC:** I don’t remember now but I do remember some of the teachers and, of course, there was Mr. Swinton, you know, he was the social studies, the department head.

**TC:** That was your major, right?

**WC:** Yeah, that was my major and, of course.

**TC:** So you had Mr. Swinton, Mrs. Swinton?

**WC:** Yeah.

**TC:** I did too.

**WC:** Did you?
TC: Yeah.

WC: I remember Mrs. Gladden’s psychology, quite a few of them.

TC: Witherspoon?

WC: I don’t remember him. I remember the guy from the islands, he taught English.

TC: Dedmon.

WC: No, and he was in dramatics. He used to put on dramatizations, Henry, Dr. Henry. He put on a play at Allen, the name of it, oh, I can’t even think of it but he was very good. All of my teachers were good over here. I enjoyed coming to Allen.

TC: Did you have Miss Nelson?

WC: I had Miss Nelson in biology for a short period of time. (Laughter)

TC: For a short period of time?

WC: And I got out of Dodge. (Laughter)

TC: You dropped the course?

WC: I got out of Miss Nelson’s class.

TC: Okay, you’ll leave it just like that?

WC: Yes. That was too much.

TC: Now the teacher education program, who were some of the, Gladden you say?

WC: Miss Gladden, she was the psychology teacher. I don’t remember all the people who were in charge but I did my practice work down at Booker Washington?

TC: Did you?

WC: Yeah.

TC: I see, yeah. That’s interesting and then you eventually got a job.
WC: Absolutely and I was so thrilled with that, yeah.

TC: Yeah, when I was here Dr. Swinton, she was here I think like my freshman and sophomore years.

WC: This was not she, the he, the husband.

TC: Yeah, I was referring to Sylvia.
WC: Yeah.

TC: I would see her walking with an arm full of papers all the time. And as you know, she had a very strong elementary ed program.

WC: Yes, indeed.

TC: I was biology major under Miss Nelson. Okay, do you have any additional comments you’d like to make with reference to anything pertaining to your schooling at various levels and your career?

WC: Well, as I said, I owe much of whatever success I have to Allen University. Had it not been for the opportunity to come here I sometimes wonder what would have happened to me in life. So I got a good foundation here I think and it has helped me tremendously through dealing with all of life’s problems. But having a foundation also in the Christian concept is the thing that just, you know, caused me to move forward because if you have that foundation and your Christian beliefs, then things seem to go better when you believe and I do. I’m involved with church and I’m involved with my family and all of those things are values that we were taught early on, so life has been beautiful.

TC: If I may interrupt you one moment, can you maybe make some comments about the Palmetto Education Association?

WC: Well, as I said, I was not involved too much in that because the whole thing was integrated and it was not just the Palmetto thing then.

TC: In the earlier years though you went to those state meetings, Palmetto?

WC: Seldom because I mean we had, we had meetings with all black teachers at one time.

TC: Yeah, I’m referring to that.
WC: But that was not, I was not here for most of that time. I mean I was not in the profession during most of those times.

TC: You were in the service?

WC: No, well, I was not even in the teaching profession because the thing was integrated after that and the Palmetto Teachers Association was not the organization then. It became the.

TC: So you were not teaching too many years when the Palmetto Education Association was existing?
WC: No, that’s right.

TC: I see.

WC: Yeah, that’s what happened so I was not too involved in that because I was not on the scene at that time.

TC: I see. Well, if you don’t have any additional comments.

WC: Well, it’s just been a pleasure to talk to you about my history and my career and this type of thing and I’m glad you asked me.

TC: Well, I’ve enjoyed it because I did my student teaching at Booker T. Washington High School and you are, I would say, my representative of one of the persons that formerly taught at that school, so you know what it was like, what it endured, and so forth, and then after that you went to other places.

WC: Yes.

TC: And then for you to have gotten your first teaching job at Voorhees High School is interesting. And then your going eventually after finishing college going back to your high school to teach, and then the years you have spent teaching in various schools and part of that integration era, all of those things have been part of your life.

WC: Indeed they have and they’ve made an impact, no question.

TC: Right, and so you know what it was like.

WC: I know what it’s like and I know what it should be, yes.
**TC:** Okay, well I certainly thank you for your time.

**WC:** It’s been my pleasure.

**TC:** Thank you again.

End of interview