In this oral history interview, George Harkness discusses his educational experiences at Due West Elementary, Carver High School, Allen University, career influences in educational administration, and his time serving on the Allen University Board of Trustees which, in 2013, totaled twenty-four years. George Harkness was born on January 28, 1930 to Sallie and Curtis Harkness in Due West, Abbeville County, South Carolina. Tom Crosby interviewed George Harkness at his residence in Columbia, South Carolina, on September 8, 2008. Interview covers Harkness' education at Due West Elementary School (of the town Due West, S.C.) and Carver High School (of the town of Lake City, S.C.) from the late 1930s to 1949.
Tom Crosby Oral History Collection

George Harkness Oral History Interview

Interviewee: George Harkness
Interviewer: Tom Crosby

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Tom Crosby: Today is September 8, 2008 and I’m in Columbia, South Carolina at the home of Mr. George Harkness, H-A-R-K-N-E-S-S. Mr. Harkness, what is your date of birth:

George Harkness: January 28, 1930.

TC: January 28, 1930. Where were you born?

GH: In Abbeville County in Due West, South Carolina.

TC: Okay, who were your parents?

GH: Curtis and Sallie Harkness.

TC: Curtis and Sallie Harkness. Now what was the name of your elementary school?

GH: Due West Elementary School.

TC: Due West Elementary School?

GH: Yeah.

TC: What grades were at that school?

GH: As far as I can remember it was grades one through three.

TC: One through three?

GH: Uh-huh, and then we went to a junior school and picked up grades four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and eleven, twelve, four through twelve.

TC: Okay and what was the name of that school?

GH: Carver.

TC: Carver School?

GH: Carver High School.
TC: Carver High School and it had grades four through the twelfth?
GH: Four through twelve, yeah.
TC: Now did it have, it had twelfth when you were a student?
GH: Yeah.
TC: Okay, because you know at one point.
GH: It turned to the twelfth grade when I was a senior. It used to be four through eleven but when I got to the eleventh grade the state passed the law where all the high schools had to go through twelfth grade.
TC: They added an additional year.
GH: I had to go for an additional year.
TC: Uh-huh and I think that grade was added in 1948.
GH: Forty-eight.
TC: I see. So you graduated in?
GH: Forty-nine.
TC: Forty-nine, I see. May we go back to your elementary school, elementary grades? How would you describe the teachers and principal or principals?
GH: Far as I know I don’t remember having a principal in the elementary school. All I know is I had Miss Janie Ellis as my first grade teacher and Miss I. Kay Davis was the fourth grade teacher. And my third grade teacher I can’t think of her name.
TC: Okay, how would you describe those teachers in general, what were they like?
GH: Very, very sincere about our learning and work and were very interested in our learning the basics in education so we would be able to further our education. They, you know, made us do it, punishing if necessary.
TC: They would punish, in what forms?
GH: Spanking in your hand or your hip.
TC: Really? I see. Would they do it, sometimes I’ve heard them say that they’d make the students stand in the corner on one foot.
GH: They would do some of that, yeah, stand in the corner, but the ones I had they were more interested in the strap than standing in the corner. And, of course, they would call your parents if necessary and that was something that we didn’t want them to do.
TC: So you behaved?
GH: Uh-huh.
TC: Because when you got home there was another one?
GH: Yeah, that was another spanking.
TC: Another spanking. Do you remember any games that you played during elementary school?

GH: No, nothing but out there running and playing.

TC: Baseball maybe.

GH: Not really baseball, we just played.

TC: Just played around with each other?

GH: We had tennis balls and we would use a tennis ball and play a baseball game because we didn’t have gloves and mitts so we’d use that.

TC: I see. Do you ever remember a man or a lady sometimes visiting the school and he or she would come and sit and observe, just observe what’s going on in the classroom? Do you remember any instances like that?

GH: Uh-uh.

TC: Okay, well the reason I asked that question, back in the ’20s and ’30s and all the way up I think until 1964, they had what were called Jeanes teachers.

GH: Yeah, I remember the Jeanes teachers but I’ve never had any, you know, they never did, if they came to our room I didn’t know who they were and therefore I don’t remember any. You know, our teachers that taught us they didn’t appear to worry about superiors. They were doing their work and you know.

TC: So the reason I asked that question though, back in the ’20s and ’30s some of those teachers and even people from high school could go out and teach and it was thought, observed that some of them maybe their instruction needed a little improvement. So this lady up in Pennsylvania, her name was Anna T. Jeanes, J-E-A-N-E-S, she gave money for certain teachers to supervise instruction. You are aware; you’ve heard that some students could finish high school way back and maybe go teach.

GH: Yeah.

TC: And then many of them would come to college for two years.

GH: I had a teacher, of course, this was after I became a man and started service as principal, but I had a teacher who did that. She started teaching when she graduated from high school. I was her principal. This was about ten or twelve or thirteen years ago.

TC: Twelve or ten or thirteen years ago, she had graduated from high school and started teaching?

GH: Yeah. No, she graduated I guess about twenty or twenty-five years ago.

TC: Right or even more?

GH: Yeah. But she did teach until she went back to school and got her degree from Allen University.

TC: Right. Now some of them, you’ve heard of the L.I. degree?

GH: No.
TC: That was a degree that was given by Allen and other black colleges in South Carolina. L.I. stood for licentiate of instruction, and those persons had two years of teacher training beyond high school and they got what was called an L.I. degree.

GH: I’m not familiar with that.

TC: Okay and then eventually many of those teachers had to go back to school and get their four-year degree. And you might remember Allen, for example, Allen University used to have a very strong elementary ed department or teacher education program.

GH: Yeah, by Dr. Swinton?

TC: Yeah, Dr. Sylvia Swinton, and many of those teachers would be there during the summer and some of them were working on their four-year degree because they had not finished the four-year degree.

GH: Right.

TC: Okay, so now how about in high school, how would you describe those teachers?

GH: All of our high school teachers were basically, some of them were sincere and some of them were not so sincere and they were about like teachers are now. You know, you had some good ones and some were not so good. The ones that I had that, you know, I thought were good and then I had one in particular, a young man, he wasn’t so good. That was my evaluation of him then. But basically, you know, they were good.

TC: They were good and required you to do the work?

GH: They required us to do the work and, like I say, this one man that I’m talking about I always remember him. He would give us assignments and we would go home and work and it was difficult doing it because we didn’t have electricity. We were using kerosene lamps so we would go home and do our homework; it was a very difficult task.

TC: Now about what grade was that?

GH: That was in grades six through twelve.

TC: That guy was there?

GH: Oh, no, he was there, yeah, but I only had him about, what, one or two years in the eighth and ninth grade and then I went to other teachers, you know.

TC: Now you mentioned that there were no electric lights.

GH: No, we didn’t have any. We didn’t have electricity back there.

TC: And I guess this was when you were in elementary school mostly.

GH: Elementary and high school. What I’m saying, there were electric lights in the school but it was not all over the community.

TC: Oh, I see.

GH: And therefore we didn’t have any at home so doing assignments were a great task for a lot of students. Especially we had brothers and sisters who had to use the lamp and we didn’t have that much space in the house in the first place. And therefore we all had
to use that same lamp, which was a dim light. So to get our assignments it was, you know, difficult. But what I used to hate about this particular teacher, he would give us an assignment, we’d go home and work hard on it, and then he wouldn’t call for it the next day. And so I felt like I’d wasted my time and he was sitting up there wasting my time.

**TC:** Do you have any idea why he was that way?

**GH:** Lazy is all I could tell you. He wasn’t dumb, he was just lazy.

**TC:** Really? About how old was he, would you say?

**GH:** I don’t know. He was somewhere in his middle forties, a young man, wasn’t an old man.

**TC:** Do you think he may have been using alcohol? You don’t have to call his name.

**GH:** No, he just.

**TC:** Just lazy?

**GH:** I don’t remember, you know, seeing him intoxicated or nothing like that.

**TC:** I see. That’s unusual you might say because not much of that went on.

**GH:** He was just one of those guys that passed through that I always considered a lazy, sorry teacher and one that influenced me to be an administrator because when I went to college I said well, I want to go to college, I want a good teacher, I want to really develop to be a principal. I want to make sure that those kinds of teachers don’t come through the school where I’m working. So that particular teacher influenced me to work hard to become a principal and, you know, I eventually became principal.

**TC:** And what school, what’s the name of that school where you were principal?

**GH:** Webber in Eastover.

**TC:** Webber?

**GH:** Webber Elementary School.

**TC:** In Eastover, South Carolina?

**GH:** Yeah.

**TC:** Were you principal at the high school level too?

**GH:** No, just elementary.

**TC:** Would you like to make some comments about your administrative career with reference to what you required of your teachers and things like that?

**GH:** You know, I treated my administrative experience like I did, you know, the years that I taught seven years before I became a principal and I was sincere about that because of the experience I had in my background, my early childhood experience. And therefore I required teachers to do their work, plan their work, have their lessons planned, teach according to what we had available as far as aids and things were concerned and books, because my first couple of years as a principal it was hard for us to get books. So I really
as a principal I insisted that teachers take a love for children and be creative and work hard and make sure that the children understood what they were doing and that the children understood their objectives. And that’s basically what I did.

TC: And be patient with them.

GH: Yeah.

TC: And caring.

GH: Patient and caring and, of course, sometimes had to be rough with them too, had to be firm and they had to understand that you meant what you said and that they were to study their lesson and learn and pass their exams and tests.

TC: That’s true. May we go back to just a few more minutes here if you will, back to high school when you were in high school, you told me earlier about the number of students in your senior class.

GH: Well, when we were in high school our enrollment had dropped because we were in a rural area and people did farming and black people had to go and do farm work. When I graduated it was only seven of us seniors that graduated and, of course, when we were in the tenth and eleventh grades we had something like maybe ten or twelve people in there.

TC: I see. Now how many of those went on to college of those seven?

GH: Of those seven, let’s see it was me, John Wesley, I can’t think of the girls’ names, two other girls. Out of those seven four of us went to college.

TC: That’s good, that’s over half, so all of that work paid off for the students as well as the faculty, teachers.

GH: Well, we were driven to go and further our education by a lot of things. First place, we were working for the white people for nothing and in our case we had our own place but it wasn’t a whole lot of extra money available so we decided we would go to school where we could get jobs and make more money than we were making on the farm. We were not interested in being farmers.

TC: And I’m sure you want to make a comment about your parents, their desires.

GH: Well, our parents were very, very faithful and very sincere about our education because if they hadn’t been we would have dropped out of school. My daddy and my mama insisted that we get our lessons and we went to school every day and, of course, the only time we were not going to school, in the late fall we had to pick cotton. School didn’t really open up until the first of October and we didn’t go to school until we finished picking cotton, which would be about the first of November. We stayed in school from November until early spring, which was March, then we had to start preparing the ground to plant cotton, plant corn, all that stuff on the farm. We didn’t get to school in the spring until around the first of March and April, except on days when it would rain we’d go to school.
TC: How did the teachers, you know, kids had to stay out. Some would come, others wouldn’t. Do you have any idea or do you recall what the teachers did to try to meet the needs of kids who some were here one day and not the next day and things like that? You may not remember.

GH: I don’t remember.

TC: Did she give lesson assignments?

GH: We had books and the teachers had us to, when we stayed out of school for farming duties we had to read those books and go back to school, they would give us tests and we had to determine how, you know, on the test what we had learned while we were there reading those books. We did have to study, you know. Those who went on to college, they studied. So we didn’t waste our time because contrary to what it is now and a few years ago, we had a reason to learn. We didn’t want to farm because there was no money being made on the farm and we were tired of that kind of work and therefore we had a reason to learn. Of course, no one had to make us study and the reason was we were trying to, you know, most of us were going to go to college and be something, whether it was preachers. At one time I wanted to be a bricklayer and I wanted to go to Tuskegee. I believe that’s where, in Alabama?

TC: Tuskegee, Alabama.

GH: Where they taught you how to lay brick and do carpentry work and all that, that’s where I wanted to go to school and I hadn’t planned to teach until I found out I wasn’t going to be able to go to Tuskegee so then I started making plans to come to Allen University.

TC: Would you like to make some comments about your experiences at Allen University as a student?

GH: Allen was a good school and we had almost the same kind of instructional interest there as we had in high school, all black people. We knew we had to know more than basically a white person who was doing the same kind of job.

TC: You were often told that.

GH: Making less money but we still had to pass the teacher’s examination, the teacher’s test, and so therefore we had teachers at Allen who prepared us real well for the world that we were going out into. Very good teachers were there at that time.

TC: Yeah and also were dedicated and caring.

GH: They were dedicated, they were caring, and they would take extra time and talk to you about what you had to do and what you ought to do and the reason why you ought to do those things.

TC: They were great motivators.

GH: Oh, yeah.

TC: Yeah, great motivator. The last, any additional comments you might like to make about your life, your career?
GH: Not really, I just basically I spend a lot of time in the church, working with the church and young people in Sunday School and that kind of thing, or working with the lay organization in the Methodist Church.

TC: You enjoyed your teaching and administrating?

GH: I enjoyed my work as a principal. I enjoyed my work as a teacher, so that’s basically it.

TC: There’s one more thing. As you know, you served on the Allen University Board of Trustees for a number of years.

GH: About twenty-four years.

TC: Twenty-four years, I see. I’m sure it wasn’t easy at times but you have seen much result of your efforts.

GH: Yeah.

TC: I’m sure you’re happy to see what’s going on at the institution at this time.

GH: I don’t really know. I can’t answer that question because I don’t really know what’s going on there now.

TC: I’m referring to the renovations and the building of dormitories.

GH: Oh, the renovations, I’m glad to see that they are improving and making available facilities for students to live in and to be comfortable.

TC: Right. Okay, well I certainly thank you for your time. It’s been most informative and I appreciate your interest. Thanks.

GH: Okay, like I say, I have to get out.

End of interview