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Tom Crosby Oral History Collection
Ted Trantham Oral History Interview

Interviewee
Trantham, Ted, 1935-

Interviewer
Crosby, Tom, 1940-

Date
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Location
Union, South Carolina

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Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, Ted Trantham discusses his educational experiences at Central and Monarch Elementary schools and Union High School (all located in Union County, South Carolina), commenting specifically on attending football and basketball games, as a white man, at segregated Sims High School. Ted Trantham was born October 12, 1935, in Union, South Carolina. At the time of this oral history interview, Mr. Trantham owned and operated an antique store in Union. Tom Crosby interviewed Ted Trantham at his business in Union, South Carolina, on July 2, 2009. Interview covers Trantham's education at Central Elementary (of the town of Gaffney, S.C.), Monarch Elementary, and Union High Schools from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s.
Tom Crosby: Today is July 2, 2009 and I’m in Union, South Carolina. I’m in the business of a person who sells antiques and so forth. What is your name, sir?

Ted Trantham: Ted Trantham.

TC: Ted?
TT: Trantham.

TC: How do you spell that?

TC: Okay, Ted is your first name?
TT: Correct.

TC: And would you spell the last name once more?

TC: Okay, thanks. What is your date of birth?
TT: I was born October 12, 1935.

TC: October 12, 1935. Okay, in Union or Union County?
TT: In Union, yes, sir.

TC: Okay. What were your parent’s names?
TT: My father was Clayton Trantham. My mother was Ethel Trantham.

TC: Okay. Do you have any siblings, any brothers and sisters?
TT: I have two sisters.

TC: Two sisters, okay. Now where did you attend elementary school or did you attend more than one elementary school?
TT: I attended more. I attended Central School on Main Street.

TC: Central School on Main Street?
TT: And then I attended Monarch School.
TC: And then you attended Monarch School, okay. I don’t think you’re old enough to possibly have attended what they call mill schools.

TT: No.

TC: You’ve heard of them, mills schools?

TT: I’ve heard of it, yeah.

TC: Okay. Is it self explanatory as to what they were or would you like a little information?

TT: I’d like information.

TC: Well actually years ago I guess back in the early 1900’s and ‘20s, there were many mills here in Union and other parts of the state and actually the mills provided schools for the children of the workers in the mills. They actually, the schools were not supported by the county or by the state; they were supported by the mills. And, of course, they referred to them as being mill schools. Then eventually those schools were given to or you might say were taken over, supported by the state. I’m not sure when that was. I’m not sure when it started, when they started being run by the state. What grades were you at Central? Do you remember when you left there to go to Monarch?

TT: One through three I was at Central and from fourth grade on I was at Monarch.

TC: Okay. You remember any particular teacher who maybe had a great impact on you, maybe let’s say between first and third grade?

TT: The only one I remember was a Mrs. Hawkins.

TC: Mrs. Hawkins?

TT: Yeah.

TC: You don’t recall her first name?

TT: I cannot recall her first name.

TC: You remember any textbook you may have used in class in either one of those grades, the name of one of those books?

TT: No, I don’t.

TC: You don’t? Okay. How about any games that you played, names of any games that you played first through third grade? It’s been a few months.

TT: I don’t remember to tell you.

TC: It’s been a few months.

TT: Right, yeah.

TC: Now it so happens that Mr. Trantham is a white person. I knew his father to some extent and his mother and he went to school as I did during the segregated time in Union and all of South Carolina. So we played certain games in elementary school. I attended elementary down in Santuck and it was called Santuck, S-A-N-T-U-C-K. Some spell it that way. Some spell it S-A-N-T-U-C. So anyway, we played hide and, what is it, hide and seek?

TT: Hide and seek, yeah.
TC: You may have done that. I’m not sure.
TT: I’m sure I played that.
TC: Then there was something called hopscotch, hopscotch.
TT: Yeah.
TC: You remember that?
TT: I remember that.

TC: Okay. Okay, beginning in the fourth grade you went to school at Monarch, M-O-N-A-R-C-H. Okay, any comments you’d like to make about attending Monarch Elementary, maybe a teacher that had an influence on you?
TT: Well, the principal.
TC: Or principal.
TT: The principal Mr. Butts when I first went there and then Mr. Sealy.
TC: Sealy was one of the principals?
TT: Yeah, he was principal when I left there. One day I left, me and another guy left the school grounds, were not supposed to. Mr. Sealy come and got us and he did real diplomatically and explained to us what we’d done wrong.

TC: So what was the punishment for leaving?
TT: I don’t remember exactly. We might have got a couple of licks with the paddle. I’m not sure.

TC: So you did get some licks in elementary school?
TT: I think we got some paddling, yeah.

TC: So some paddling was a form of discipline?
TT: Oh, yeah.

TC: I see. With a strap?
TT: I don’t remember.

TC: Don’t remember but you did get some?
TT: Right.

TC: I see. So you went to Monarch up to the seventh grade I guess?
TT: Up to the sixth.

TC: Up to the sixth grade?
TT: And then went to Union High, which was seventh and eighth, junior high.

TC: Okay, that was at Union High School?
TT: Union High School at East Main.
TC: Union High School at East Main, okay. So do you have any recall or would you like to make any comments about let’s say some of the teachers, let’s say seventh through the eighth? You can call names if you wish or just general statements about that grade level, seventh through the eighth.

TT: Gosh, I don’t remember a whole lot about the seventh and eighth. I only remember one fellah because he was football coach. I can’t remember his name but he was one of my teachers and I thought a lot of him.

TC: Oh, you did?

TT: Seems like his last name was Taylor.

TC: Taylor?

TT: Yeah.

TC: Possibly his last name was Taylor?

TT: That’s right

TC: You liked him you say?

TT: I liked him, yes.

TC: What were the things that you liked about him?

TT: He was, he talked on our level.

TC: He could relate?

TT: Could relate to us and explain things much better than some teachers.

TC: Yeah, sometimes they say he knew how to break it down?

TT: That’s right.

TC: I see. Okay and then you had the ninth through the twelfth grade at Union High School?

TT: Yeah.

TC: You were beginning to grow up then, any comments about that level, ninth through the twelfth?

TT: The most outstanding teacher was Mrs. Lamb.

TC: Mrs. Lamb?

TT: Yeah.

TC: L-A-M-B?

TT: Right, she taught English and French. I didn’t take the French but she was probably one of the best teachers I ever had in school.

TC: Really?

TT: Correct.

TC: Okay, what was so good about her that you say that she was probably one of the best teachers you had in high school?
TT: She took a lot of time with you to make sure you knew what she was explaining to you.

TC: I see. How did she deal with let’s say those students who sometimes people would use the term that they were kind of slow, they didn’t get it as fast as others. Do you remember how she dealt with those?

TT: She took time with them. Sometimes she’d call them after class and talk to them and she worked with them a lot.

TC: I see. Now sometimes, not sometimes but in most instances there have been persons who say that there were kids who came from certain kinds of backgrounds that teachers may have shown favoritism towards those who were a higher level you might say economically, parents who were doctors and maybe teachers and lawyers and things like that. Do you recall any?

TT: I’m sure that we associated some with that. I didn’t pay it that much attention because it didn’t bother me because I knew where I was coming from.

TC: You knew where you were coming from?

TT: Right, I knew, let me explain something to you. In high school I never took a book home a day, one day during the whole high school.

TC: You did not take a book home?

TT: I made one failing grade.

TC: Throughout high school you did not take any books home?

TT: That’s exactly right.

TC: And you made one failing grade?

TT: Right.

TC: What was that course?

TT: English.

TC: English?

TT: Under Mrs. Lamb. (Laughter) I did not try.

TC: Why?

TT: I don’t know. I had, it was writing and storytelling and stuff.

TC: You didn’t like that?

TT: I didn’t like that. I found out in my life as I’ve come along I’m a realist. I believe in real facts. I don’t believe in fantasies. That’s something, I’ve never said this to many people but when people start talking out here in fantasy land I just walk away from them.

TC: I see. So you’re more comfortable with down-to-earth and people who are genuine?

TT: Exactly.

TC: And the highfalutin ones you wash them away?

TT: Yeah, when they get to talking.

TC: I see. But Mrs. Lamb wasn’t that way?
TT: No, no. She failed me because I didn’t try. In later life she became one of my best customers for my business and a real good personal friend. We discussed this and I told her and she said, “I thought so.”

TC: I see. Okay, now you didn’t take any books home though?

TT: No.

TC: What was the problem?

TT: I did all my work at school.

TC: Oh, you did? You had a study period time?

TT: I had a study period and I just took advantage of it and did what I was supposed to.

TC: So if I may ask, what kind of courses you may have taken in math and science, for example?

TT: Well, I took regular math and algebra and I’m sure I took other things.

TC: And you got good grades?

TT: Huh?

TC: You got good grades in math?

TT: Oh, yeah.

TC: Science, biology?

TT: Biology.

TC: Did you have chemistry?

TT: Yeah, I had chemistry.

TC: You did well?

TT: Did well in it.

TC: I see. Okay, did you play any sports?

TT: I played football and baseball.

TC: You played football and baseball?

TT: Right.

TC: Okay. That’s really interesting to me that you took no books home in high school, did all the work at home. So you really grasped the material easily?

TT: That’s correct.

TC: I see. If I may ask, did you graduate with honors let’s say from high school?

TT: I graduated. I don’t know whether it was with honors.

TC: Don’t know if you were an honors student or not? They had the honor roll?

TT: Yeah.

TC: You made that sometimes or all the time?
TT: I don’t remember. All I remember I passed the grade.

TC: You don’t remember now whether you did or not?

TT: That’s right.

TC: Okay. Okay now as you know there was a black high school in Union because it was a segregated time and you finished high school in 19?

TT: Fifty-five.

TC: Fifty-five?

TT: Yeah.

TC: Okay so we had the black high school, which was known as Sims High School. And the white school in Union was known as Union High. Now you told me sometime ago that you attended some of the Sims High football games at one point in your life. About what age were you?

TT: I was either fourteen or fifteen.

TC: Around fourteen or fifteen you attended some of the Sims High games. Now Sims High played on Thursday nights, if you recall, okay, and on Union High Football Stadium because Sims High at that time did not have a football stadium. So on Thursday night Sims High would play and then on Friday night Union High School would play on what we will say was their field, the next night. Okay now there were many, a large number of white persons attended Sims High games. They would be sitting as I recall on one side of the stadium and the Sims High people on the other side. Or maybe they may have been sitting on the end zone. I can’t remember but it would be a large number. But how many white persons would you say would?

TT: I would say at least a hundred.

TC: At least a hundred, yeah. Now why were they there?

TT: Well, they were like me, they enjoyed sports and Sims High School had a winning team. They had probably one of the best coaches in the whole state of South Carolina at that time.

TC: Say that once more now.

TT: I say had probably one of the best coaches in the whole state of South Carolina.

TC: And what was his name?

TT: Coach Moorer.

TC: Okay, the name of the coach was James F. Moorer, M-O-O-R-E-R.

TT: When he took over the team I understand they were down and the players were even challenging him. And he challenged them back and he worked them into a winning team for several years.

TC: Right, I have an article on that first team that he had. He came to Union in 1946 and I have, I think Blackwell across the street gave me a copy of a photo of that first team. I forgot to bring it today. I’ll bring it when I come back later. And so they lost the first game or the first two games. I think they lost the first two games and one of those games was our arch rival Sterling High School. And I think Sterling beat, the score of one of those games was 12-6, one of those
first two was 12-6 in favor of Sterling. But after that they did not lose another game for nine years, actually was eight years. They lost to, do you remember the team that Sims High lost to?

TT: No.

TC: That long streak beginning in 1946-54, in Spartanburg, do you remember the name of that black school up there?

TT: No, I don’t know who they are.

TC: Carver.

TT: Carver?

TC: Carver, you remember now.

TT: Now I remember Carver, yeah.

TC: Carver High School.

TT: Yeah.

TC: So Sims won ninety-three games without a loss between 1946 and 1954. I have many of the scores of each game and write-ups from the Union Daily Times newspaper. Any particular game you recall of major interest when you were attending those games or you don’t remember any particular game right now or do you?

TT: Well, they played some team from North Carolina.

TC: Probably that was Stephens-Lee.

TT: Right.

TC: From Asheville.

TT: Right and that was played late. I think that was the time I told you it was so cold they had barrels set on fire so people could get warm it was so cold.

TC: So barrels, they were using barrels. It was very cold. I think they played that game usually near the end of the season.

TT: Yeah, right, towards the end, yeah.

TC: Yeah because that was a great school too, football.

TT: Right.

TC: So they had barrels around where the people were sitting?

TT: End zone.

TC: To help keep them warm, yeah. Now that was in the white area or the black area or both?

TT: It was all over.

TC: All over, yeah, and I have scores about those game too, Stephen Leigh, L-E-I-G-H [note: the correct spelling is: Stephens-Lee] High School, which was in Asheville. And I have heard persons make reference to bowl games and it was the Lions Club here in Union that would sponsor that game with that team from Asheville, the Lions Club. You remember anything about that, along that line?
TT: I don’t remember anything about that.

TC: Okay and then I think you told me that you also attended some Sims High basketball games.

TT: Yeah, I attended maybe two or three I guess.

TC: Uh-huh and there were very few white persons?

TT: There were very few white people at those.

TC: At those games?

TT: The reason I went, a local grocery store owner he was invited by Coach Moorer and he invited me and a friend of mine to go with him. And we would go to the center and they would have us a seat somewhere, you know.

TC: So you were telling me once to get into the game, what happened?

TT: Well, we went to the door and we told them why we were there and all and they questioned it and somebody went to Coach Moorer and in a little bit they came back and somebody then escorted us to our seats, front row seat too.

TC: Front row?

(Laughter)

TC: So to get into the game you went to the door, this is a basketball game.

TT: Yeah.

TC: And the person taking up the tickets or whatever wanted to know why you were there.

TT: Yeah, right.

TC: And you told them that Mr. Moorer, the football coach or whatever, that you were there and he came outside or somebody came outside and took you to a seat.

TT: Exactly.

TC: How many persons were with you?

TT: There were three of us.

TC: Three?

TT: Yeah.

TC: Three guys?

TT: Yeah, right.

TC: From Union High School?

TT: Well, the merchant and me and a friend of mine went to high school, yeah.

TC: Oh, I see. So how did it feel sitting in there?

TT: It was kind of an unusual feeling sitting in the crowd because people would look at you, you know, because you stood out naturally in a crowd like that but after a while. I was interested in sports and then I got engulfed in the game, you know.
TC: So you didn’t have any, you lost the apprehension or whatever?
TT: Right, exactly.
TC: So was Sims High doing pretty good in basketball?
TT: Seemed like they had a pretty good team.
TC: Do you remember who won that game or you don’t remember?
TT: I don’t remember.
TC: Did you go only to just one Sims High basketball games?
TT: No, I went to two or three.
TC: Oh, you did?
TT: Oh, yeah.
TC: Your nerve was still up?
TT: Oh, yeah, right.
TC: Did they, did some of the students try to make any negative reactions towards your being there?
TT: Not that I recall, no.
TC: I see. That brings me to something else now along a racial line. When the principal, the founder of the school, his name was Reverend Alexander, Andrew Alexander, excuse me, his name was Reverend Andrew Alexander Sims and he came to Union in 1905 I have found out through the Union newspaper. Somewhere around 1920 you might say or ’21 or ’22 he invited, you’ve heard of Fisk University. F-I-S-K?
TT: Yeah.
TC: Up in Tennessee and they had a great choir called the Fisk Jubilee Singers that toured the country and the world, but they sang spirituals and gospels and so forth and I think anything almost. And they were very noted so Prof Sims, he became known as, he invited them to come to Union around 1920, ’22, somewhere like that, and they sang in the courthouse. And the article states that he stated in the newspaper that half of the seats in the auditorium in the courthouse would be reserved for white people and the article stated that a sizable number came. And then when Sims High, the first building of Sims High opened in 1927, at the dedication which was 1926, April 1926 dedication of the building, the article states that the auditorium would seat around five hundred or six hundred people and the article also states that he said half of the seats would be reserved for white people and the article states that a sizable number came. So my point for telling you that is to say that it seems Prof Sims and Mr. Moorer, they knew how to politic you might say and relate to people to get what they wanted. And there seemed to have been more of a cordial relationship between white people, at least some white people in Union than persons might think that existed in the past, and maybe until today. Do you have any thoughts or comments with reference to the relationship between blacks and whites that maybe existed in Union over the years?
TT: Well, when I was growing up I could see a certain amount of bias in certain people but then there were some people that were open minded and, like you say, they were diplomats. Basically
what you said Professor Sims and Coach Moorer were because they understood we’re all human beings you know. And I saw some of that, you know, people made an effort to get along, you know. And you know so many people are closed minded, they don’t; all they can see is their own way in life. But I didn’t pay it much attention.

TC: Because your parents I guess.

TT: Right, my parents always told me to respect everybody, regardless of who they were as long as they respected you. And we run a store and I dealt with all types of people, blacks, whites, whatever came in our door we treated them all the same.

TC: And I think as a result of that Prof Sims and Mr. Moorer they were able to get things done that some persons may think that didn’t exist.

TT: Right.

TC: For example, what we called the new Sims High, there were only two buildings and the first one, as I said, opened in 1927 and the second and last opened in 1956. And it’s existing now, 2009, at least until this year. Integration came in 1970 so Sims High no longer existed as a senior high school. It became a junior high school when integration came. And so they were able to get things done that other, not necessarily other, maybe so in other communities weren’t able to get done, those communities because of not being able to communicate and politic with the powers to be at that time. For example, Mr. Moorer always prided himself on saying that Sims High, the second and last building when it was built it didn’t have an auditorium and cafeteria combined and they call that a café-torium. It had a separate auditorium, a separate gym, not a gym and a stage, what they called a gym-na-torium. So it had a separate cafeteria, separate auditorium, and a separate gym. I can’t remember the name of this white lady on the board of trustees. I don’t remember the name and I heard him say it several times. He credited her for getting that achieved, having those three separate sections of the building. So that’s an example I would say that Moorer was able to do by being tactful I’m sure and knowing how to communicate with people to get what he wanted. So do you have any additional comments you’d like to make with reference to anything that we have talked about or something we haven’t talked about at this point, maybe the kinds of things that you saw exist in Union among the races?

TT: Yes, I think that like in the late ’40s, early ’50s there was a lot of separation but as time went along people started realizing that, and I think this came from integrating the military, because a lot of fellahs in my community went in the military and they served right along side a black fellah and they become friends. And when they came back home they couldn’t understand why people, you know.

TC: Living as they were.

TT: Right. A lot of it is psychological you know.

TC: Yeah. Now you know who integrated the military, you remember?

TT: Harry Truman.

TC: Truman, yeah.

TT: Right.
TC: So I would agree with you because you know when you don’t travel very much or you
don’t mingle with other people, not necessarily other races but the environment, other
environments, it makes a world of difference.

TT: Well, let me make a comment right now. I just talked to our representative now, Mike
Anthony. Me and him talked some time ago. People that have never left Union County, always
lived here.

TC: Okay, you mention Mike Anthony. He’s in the state legislature now in Columbia.

TT: Right. People that have always lived in Union, they have a little different feeling than
people that have left the town and went out and seen what the world and come back. They’ve
seen what the world is you know and, you know, they’ve expanded their knowledge is what it
amounts to. I was fixing to tell you before, between my junior year in high school and senior,
my dad told me I had to go to work for somebody besides him. He had me a job at Monarch
Mill or either I could go to New Jersey. I had a cousin up there that I could go spend the summer
so I went up there for the summer. I got a job and I worked all summer up there and I was like,
north Jersey, I was like thirty minutes from

New York City. I worked at night and I went into the city a lot of times during the day to
Yankee baseball games because I like sports. But I saw a lot of things, you know, that
broadened my vision of what people were, you know. The plant I went to work in we had all
kinds of people, people from Germany, people from Italy, people from Russia were in there and
they were human beings just like me. All they wanted to do was make a good living and take
care of their families. And you got to realize this, you know.

TC: Yeah, it’s good to travel.

TT: Travel, right.

TC: And to get out of your immediate environment, that’s true. So yeah, I hadn’t considered
your talking about integration in the Army and coming back to the southern states and seeing that
people are human and it makes a difference.

TT: Oh, yeah.

TC: I guess a lot of other persons probably feel the same way that that Army, integration of the
Army really was actually the beginning of breaking down a lot of barriers and perceptions that
existed in the past.

TT: Right, right.

TC: Okay.

TT: Because as you go through life if you look at people, all races or creeds of people they got
good and bad. I mean you know you can’t judge that whole group of people by a few bad
apples.

TC: The actions of some.

TT: Right, you got to look at those people as a whole, you know. I treat a person as an
individual, you know. If he’s a respectable person and respects me, I’m going to respect him.
I’m going to respect him until he shows otherwise, you know.

TC: That’s true. I agree. Okay, unless you have any additional comments or questions
I’d like to thank you for your time and your interest. I have learned some things that I haven’t considered myself that have contributed to let’s say the interaction and perception among the races like the Army. So again, if you don’t have any additional comments or questions, I’d like to thank you for your time and your interest. I’ve enjoyed it.

TT: Well, it’s my pleasure.

TC: Thank you. I appreciate it.

TT: Yes, sir.

End of interview