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Tom Crosby Oral History Collection
Berry Peake Oral History Interview

Interviewee
Peake, Berry, 1925-

Interviewer
Crosby, Tom, 1940-

Date
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Santuck, South Carolina

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Scope and Background Note
In this oral history interview, Berry Peake discusses his educational experience growing up in Union, South Carolina, including his attendance at Tinker Creek Elementary, Poplar Grove Elementary and Greenbrier Elementary Schools. Berry Peake was born on October 10, 1925 to Johnnie and Johnny Peake. Tom Crosby interviewed Berry Peake at his residence in Santuck, South Carolina, on June 19, 2007. Interview covers Peake's education at Tinker Creek Elementary School (of the town of Whitmire, S.C.) in the early 1930s.
Tom Crosby: Today is June 19, 2007 and I’m at the home of Mr. Berry Peake. Is that correct?

Berry Peake: Yes, that’s correct.

TC: And we are in the southern part of Union County. The community is known as, Santuck, that’s S-A-N-T-U-C-K, as I said, in the southern part of Union County. When were you born, sir?

BP: October 10, 1925.

TC: October 10, 1925, okay, and when did you start to school? How old were you when you started to school?

BP: Six years old.

TC: Six years old and the first school you attended, you remember the name of that school?

BP: Yes, I don’t know whether that was right but it was just one room and it was called Puppy Town.

TC: It was called Puppy Town?

BP: Puppy Town.

TC: Now sometimes I think that school is also referred to as being Tinker Creek.

BP: Well, it was on the Tinker Creek Road.

TC: On Tinker Creek Road, yes, and its official name I think is Tinker Creek but persons may commonly refer to it as being Puppy Town, which is an interesting name.

BP: Yes, that’s right.

TC: And we have no idea how that name came about.

BP: That’s right.

TC: Okay, so you were born in 1925 and you started to school when you were six years old but you went that school known as Puppy Town or Tinker Creek for one year and then after that a school that had been built, another school, which was maybe four or five miles from the first school that you attended, and the name of that school was Poplar Grove.

BP: Poplar Grove.
TC: Yes, so now who was the principal of that school when you went to Poplar Grove?
BP: Reverend Thompson.
TC: Reverend Thompson, okay. Now do you remember your first grade I guess or it may have been your second grade teacher when you came to Poplar Grove?
BP: That’s right; my teacher was named Louise Johnson.
TC: Louise Johnson?
BP: Louise Johnson.
TC: I see. So at that time you were in the second grade, I guess.
BP: I was in the second grade. I went first over here.
TC: Yes, at Tinker Creek.
BP: Tinker Creek.
TC: And then after the first grade you went to second grade, do you remember that teacher?
BP: Yes, second grade I went to Poplar Grove my second year. My teacher was Louise Johnson.
TC: Louise Johnson. And then third grade?
BP: Third grade, third and fourth, I went to Miss Bouler.
TC: Lucy Bouler.
BP: Lucy Bouler, yes.
TC: And she also was my second grade teacher. There were a few years apart between me and you but she was still around. I believe you told me some time ago that she gave you a little discipline action.
BP: Yes, I come in the cloak room from recess and all the boys were in there, three or four of us were in there, and I don’t know what made me holler but I hollered too loud for her.
TC: You were being mischievous.
BP: Yes, and so she tried to find out which one was hollering. The boys they hold me up for a while then one told on me.
TC: Squealed on you?
BP: Yes. *(Laughter)*
TC: And what did she do?
BP: She had a paddle there like a baseball paddle.
TC: Made of wood.
BP: Yes, made of wood with a hole in it.
TC: How many holes?
BP: One, just one: one big hole.
TC: That was enough?
BP: That was enough. And with her hand—she had a hand hold on me, and she was a large woman—and she just pinned me down.

TC: She pinned you down?

BP: Yes, she took me and bent me over there and I couldn’t move. (Laughter) She learned me something.

TC: She hit you on your behind?

BP: Yes, that’s right, she tore it up.

TC: She tore it up?

BP: Yes, she tore it up (Laughter) And I didn’t say nothing about it, you know, when I got home because at that time you would get another one.

TC: Another light one.

BP: No, you’d get a heavy one if you didn’t act right, you know.

TC: I see. And what was the name of your father?

BP: Johnny Peake.

TC: Johnny Peake, yes, and your mother?

BP: Johnnie Peake.

TC: I see. Now do you remember any kind of games that you played at school, that could be elementary, you know, first grade through sixth seventh or whatever?

BP: No, the only thing we did was shoot marbles at break time.

TC: At recess?

BP: Recess. We’d shoot marbles, had a pig-eye we put them in and we’d roll marbles, shoot marbles.

TC: A pig-eye?

BP: That little old pig-eye.

TC: A circle?

BP: Yes, just a circle like that and each one put a marble in there and had a dead-line down there and you shot your marble down there and the closest one to the dead-line got the first shot.

TC: I see. And the dead-line was just a line, a straight line?

BP: That’s right, about five or six feet from there.

TC: From where you were standing?

BP: From where you were standing. Your marbles were in the ring and you would throw them and the closest one would get the first shot. And every marble you would knock out was yours.

TC: I see. So you got to keep them?
BP: Yes, but now when I miss a shot, it’s your shot after I miss, but long as I don’t miss—. And then when all of them get out of the ring then each one put another marble in and then go back to the dead-line.

TC: Yes. So now were there two persons you might say shooting at a time?

BP: It was three or four or four or five shooting at one time. The ring was big enough to put a marble apiece in and all us would roll down there and the closest one would get the first shot.

TC: I see. Now I’m sure you played baseball, didn’t you?

BP: Well, they had a baseball team there but we weren’t on the team. I didn’t play ball till—I played ball but it was after I finished school, after I stopped going to school.

TC: When you were in elementary school they didn’t play much baseball?

BP: No, no more than they had a little.

TC: I mean at the school.

BP: Yes, they had a little—we had a little old rubber ball. We’d pick out so many for each team and have the bases and we’d throw a rubber ball like that.

TC: I see, okay. Now if we may go back some in terms of—at this point, let’s say, when Poplar Grove was built—I’ve never seen Poplar Grove listed in terms of when it was built. Now you were born in 1925 and you went to school when you were six years old and that school had just been built, I think you told me earlier.

BP: It was built—it was going on when I was going down here.

TC: To Tinker Creek?

BP: Tinker Creek.

TC: But then it had been built by—.

BP: Yes, it was finished the year when I left from down there. The next year is when it opened up and I started going up there.

TC: So that means Poplar Grove really opened in 1931?

BP: Thirty-one or ’32, somewhere in there.

TC: Yes. Now it’s important and interesting that we’re talking about this because, as I said a moment ago, I’ve never seen when Poplar Grove started—in writing—anywhere. So this indicates if you were born in ’25 and you started school when you were six years old that it was built around 1931 or ’32, somewhere like that. And if you are not familiar, there was a white Jewish man that gave money to help build black schools in southern states.

BP: Yes, I don’t remember that.

TC: Yes, you’re not aware of that. Okay, well, he started giving money throughout the southern states around 1917 and he was the owner of Sears Roebuck. You remember Sears Roebuck?

BP: Yes.
TC: You remember that mail ordering business. Okay, well he became wealthy with that Sears Roebuck company and he started giving money to help build new schools because schools were in very bad shape back in the early ’20s and so forth. And, in fact, that first school that you attended, it was a one-room school.

BP: One room, that’s right.

TC: And it probably wasn’t in too good a shape?

BP: No, not too good a shape because—see, we had to go down in the woods and get the wood out of the woods to heat in there.

TC: Right. Now, was any food served in that school?

BP: No.

TC: You had to bring your food from home?

BP: We brought our lunch with us.

TC: From home?

BP: Yes, we took in at nine and turn out at two thirty.

TC: Now when you got to Poplar Grove during your time being at Poplar Grove, was any food served?

BP: Yes, they had a soup kitchen then.

TC: They had a soup kitchen?

BP: Had a soup kitchen and everybody got in line. The soup kitchen was part of the school there.

TC: Right, okay. So I went to the same school, at Poplar Grove, if you would like to know. Now I think we called it the lunchroom and they may have called it the soup room. You called it the soup kitchen, right?

BP: We called it the soup kitchen.

TC: Just called it different things, different people.

BP: Little bowl of soup and soda crackers and at times—.

TC: Is that all you had, just soup?

BP: No, that was all they had. Sometimes during the weekend or something or other they might have four or five bushels of apples. They’d give out an apple apiece or something like that.

TC: I see. Now, of course, somebody cooked in that soup kitchen.

BP: Yes, they had somebody in there to fix it.

TC: Do you remember the name of the person?

BP: No, I sure don’t.

TC: Now you went there until around the sixth or seventh grade?

BP: I went there until I was in the sixth grade.

TC: I see and then you didn’t go anymore after that?
BP: Didn’t go anymore after that, no. See, we were walking. We had—I don’t know, I guess it was over six miles one way from where we were. There were so many of us living in that area they opened up Greenbrier School down there. It was just a one-room and Reverend—.

TC: Okay, at this point you’re talking about the first school that you went to was Tinker Creek, when you were six years old, and then I guess the next year you went to another school called Greenbrier?

BP: No, that’s after I left Poplar Grove.

TC: Oh, I’m sorry. After leaving Poplar Grove at some point you went to Greenbrier?

BP: Went to Greenbrier.

TC: I see.

BP: See, what happened, it was a lot of families went down there and they was walking, some of them was walking to Greer Town next to (unintelligible) River over there.

TC: Another school?

BP: Yes, so then so many in there they opened up this house—well, it was two rooms, but they weren’t using but one room of it, and Reverend William Jeter was the teacher there. He taught all grades in that one room. That stopped us from walking so far.

TC: When you were at Poplar Grove there were how many teachers?

BP: Four.

TC: Four?

BP: Yes, they added another room.

TC: Okay, yes, I read somewhere—in fact, I found an article, and I could tell you when that room was added. You may not remember.

BP: I don’t remember the year but I remember when it was put there.

TC: In 1941. I’ll bring the article and show it to you one day, in 1941 that’s when they added the other room and then they had five rooms. And since we’re talking about it, I’ve seen the blueprint, I guess, or the design of when Poplar Grove started and had only four rooms and then if you remember there was a room that kind of looked like it stood off by itself. That’s the one that they added.

BP: Yes, it was on the back, but see, where it was, when you come in the front, it was a hall go all the way to the auditorium. They had a stage in there.

TC: In one of the rooms?

BP: Yes. And down the hall it was one room on this side and one on that side. And then when they got into the auditorium they had a folding door cut in two.

TC: Now were those folding doors there when you went there in the second grade?

BP: Yes, it was there when they put the school there.

TC: They were there?
BP: Yes.

TC: Okay, I see. Well, what’s interesting now about Poplar Grove—and you might remember that they tore those five rooms down, and they built Buddy Gilliam a house. Do you remember that?

BP: No, Buddy Gilliam put the house where the soup kitchen was and the last room they built, Buddy’s brother stays in it now.

TC: Pap.

BP: Pay, yes. That was added on to the school.

TC: He lives in that room that was added in 1941?

BP: That’s right.

TC: Okay. So what happened to the other four rooms? They were torn down but what happened to the wood, do you remember?

BP: No, I sure don’t. They tore it down.

TC: Well, it’s my understanding that they tore it down and they built rooms around what you call the soup kitchen to make the soup kitchen be part of Buddy’s house, and it got burned. Buddy’s house got burned at some point and that’s what burned the soup kitchen up.

BP: Well, Buddy built a house and that burned down, and after it burned down Buddy put a trailer there.

TC: Yes. Excuse me, but you don’t know precisely what happened to the four rooms that they tore down, what they did with the wood? You’re not sure?

BP: No, I guess they destroyed it; as far as I know.

TC: Most likely they didn’t just throw that wood away.

BP: I don’t know what they done to it. I don’t exactly know.

TC: And I’m not positive also. But anyway, the important thing is that Pap or Robert Gilliam lives in that room that was added in 1941. That was a large room and they cut it up, I think, and it has three small rooms that he lives in.

BP: Well, they made some rooms—the Henderson boys lived in it before Pap did and they made rooms out of it. Yes, they cut it up.

TC: Maybe go back to something that you were talking about a moment ago; I forgot to mention something. I was telling you about this white Jewish man, known as Julius Rosenwald, gave money to help build these schools in the South for black persons. So any school that got money to help build the school is referred to as being a Rosenwald school, so that’s how you hear some persons talk about Rosenwald schools. For example, Sims High School, which was located the original building was located in Union—you remember where it was?

BP: Yes, I know exactly where it was.

TC: Okay, well, in 1925 they got twenty-one hundred dollars from the Rosenwald Fund to help build Sims High. They got thirty-seven thousand nine hundred from the county and from the
state. Since it got twenty-one hundred from the Rosenwald Fund that makes Sims High be known as a Rosenwald school. Okay, now what kinds of activities or events were held at Poplar Grove through the years that you remember, you know, like they had quartets?

**BP:** Yes, they had quartets singing and that’s about all. Well, they did have some—I think—brought a little moving picture there and showed it on a sheet. That’s about all. I remember one time, I don’t know who was all there, somebody come there who had never seen an Indian and they brought an Indian there for all of us to see. He was in the auditorium. And when they got ready to—.

**TC:** Have activities.

**BP:** Yes, they’d fold the doors back. That’s what Kathleen in her room and—.

**TC:** The seventh grade room, the stage was.

**BP:** Yes, that’s right.

**TC:** And that gave you a big auditorium.

**BP:** That’s right.

**TC:** And I guess you could get about, oh, maybe seventy-five or a hundred people in that auditorium or even more than that.

**BP:** I believe you could get more than that.

**TC:** Yes. And you remember they used to have school programs.

**BP:** Yes, we used to have all that. (*Laughter*)

**TC:** Do you remember any?

**BP:** It’s hard to remember them kinds of things. We used to have plays and stuff, you know.

**TC:** Do you remember participating in a play?

**BP:** Yes, a lot of them but I can’t remember what we played in there. We had several plays we played in.

**TC:** I see and then they would have Christmas programs, remember?

**BP:** Yes.

**TC:** Thanksgiving.

**BP:** They had all that, but the teacher—I remember Miss Louise Johnson, you know, we were trying to give her something because everybody would give her a Christmas program.

**TC:** Christmas present?

**BP:** Christmas present, yes, and she give all of us a pencil because she wasn’t but one and all of us was a crowd. (*Laughter*) So she couldn’t give us expensive presents so she gave everybody a pencil.

**TC:** I see. Now also they would have other kinds of activities, certain functions, at the school, and one of those that I remember was, I think we called it apple bobbing, apple bobbing. You put
an apple in a tub of water and you try to get the apple out of there with your mouth. Do you remember anything like that?

**BP:** I don’t remember that but I remember the cake walks.

**TC:** The cake walks?

**BP:** Yes.

**TC:** How did that go?

**BP:** The cake walk, well, you get your partner and all these about.

**TC:** The partner was a boy or a girl?

**BP:** Girl, with a girl. And they had one standing in the middle with a broom handle and every time they go around—it’d be about five or six of them, be about ten by the time they couple, going around, and when you get around there to it you catch that broom handle and when you get past he’d turn the broom handle loose and when the other one would come he’d catch the broom handle and somebody in the other room sometimes they’d hit the wall and the one that had a hold of the broom handle would win the cake. (*Laughter*)

**TC:** You know, I saw an article about having a cake walk. There used to be, I don’t know whether you remember this black newspaper called the *Palmetto Leader*, and somebody would write an article about their community. Like for example, Santuck—this must have been like around 1935—Miss Sallie Jeter, Berry Jeter—.

**BP:** Yes, they run the store.

**TC:** They ran the store?

**BP:** Yes.

**TC:** Now there was another man named Berry Jeter, too, and so how did they tell the difference between the two? Well, one Berry Jeter was a white man and then you had Miss Sallie Jeter’s husband. She was a black lady and so was her husband. So you remember how they referred to the white man who was named Berry Jeter and the black man who was named Berry Jeter?

**BP:** Well, they called the black man Colored Berry. (*Laughter*)

**TC:** Had to refer to him as Colored Berry.

**BP:** Yes. And the post office, Berry Jeter run the post office. He had a boy named Berry, Jr.

**TC:** That’s right, he had the insurance company up in Union. He used to sell insurance.

**BP:** No, he used to—.

**TC:** Sell houses and things like that.

**BP:** No, his boy was Richard with Richard Federal Savings and Loan. He loaned me some money.

**TC:** Oh, his son named Berry, referred to him as little Berry.
BP: Yes, now Berry, I believe it must have been Berry III, I guess. His wife just passed here the other day. You might have seen it.

TC: I heard someone mention that.

BP: Yes, she just passed here the other day but now he been passed.

TC: I see.

BP: My daddy used to farm with them.

TC: Now back to Poplar Grove: I remember those certain kinds of activities they would have. How would you describe the teachers that taught you at Poplar Grove in general?

BP: Well, they were just as gentle as they could be but they were often upset if you didn’t get your lessons because they could tell who was trying to get it and who wasn’t, you know. And they were rough on you.

TC: What do you mean they were rough?

BP: Some of them had switches setting in the corner. (Laughter) Yes, they did. If you come there and didn’t know your lesson about two days, next time you come you know it.

TC: They’d put the switch on you?

BP: They’d put the strap on you.

TC: Really?

BP: Yes, sir, they sure would. That’s the only way. If they didn’t, I mean you couldn’t hardly—some people didn’t try.

TC: Right, but they didn’t do that to be mean.

BP: No, uh-uh. Really, they were doing you a favor. They were trying to learn you.

TC: Right. And they really were, as a whole, they were like your mother and your father.

BP: Uh-huh, yes.

TC: Because they really cared.

BP: Yes, that’s right. My daddy whipped me. I didn’t think he ought to do it, but he cared. I know that. I understood that. After I got on up, I understood it. I remember one time he whipped me. He told me not to do something; I don’t know what it was. Anyway, said, “Next time you do that I’m going to get you.” And I didn’t pay him more attention than nothing. And, boy, he went out there, had little old plow line like that, and he come in there and he wrapped that thing around his hand and boy he got my overalls back there.

TC: He set you afire?

BP: Boy, he was whipping me so hard I called Mama. Well, at that time if Mama whipped me he didn’t say nothing and if he was whipping me she didn’t say nothing. And I said “Mama!” And she didn’t come. You know, Mama supposed to come. She didn’t come. Way after while, I said, “Oh, Lord.” He was tearing me up. He said, “This ain’t nothing the Lord, said this is Johnny Peake.” (Laughter) I said, “Pa, I ain’t going to do that no more.” He said, “You telling the truth now.”
TC: He knew he was putting it on you.

BP: And boy, when he turned me loose, I said, “The next time you whip me it’s going to be for nothing,” because whatever he tell me from now on, if it’s right or wrong, I’m going do it.

TC: Well now, when you got to school about in the fifth or sixth grade, do you remember any things that went on?

BP: No, tell the truth, I was getting out pretty good then in the sixth grade. I didn’t go no further than the sixth. Other than that I done started working on the farm and when I got up about seventeen or eighteen years old I said, “I ain’t going to farm.” My daddy always told me, “You just quit.”

TC: Do you remember any of the kinds of ways that the teachers tried to teach in the classroom, any of the kinds of things that they did to get the students to learn?

BP: Yes, well, some things. If you didn’t get it, like I said, they’d make you go to the board and write it twenty-five or thirty times or whatever. The only way they would punish you is like that, you know. But now if you look at it right, they just cared. If you weren’t learning anything, they didn’t like that.

TC: They would really get angry?

BP: They’d really get angry. They didn’t too much show it, but they really learned the kids.

TC: So they would do things like making you write something?

BP: Yes. And then we’d have homework: sometimes writing, arithmetic, things like that, sometimes just writing. She’d make us write twenty-five or thirty times, the same thing. We learned how to write that way.

TC: I see. I think they call that repetition. I think that’s what they call it when you do something over and over again. Now did you have devotion every day?

BP: Yes, every day. Every day we had to go in that auditorium and then when they had devotion we’d come out and go to our room.

TC: Right, we did the same thing.

BP: Now they want to cut it out or something or other. Looks like they don’t want to have it. We had prayer every day.

TC: Yes, I know you’re not supposed to. It’s against the law to have religious things in school.

BP: Well, that’s the law. I don’t (unintelligible).

TC: Yes. Well, do you have anything you’d like to say that we haven’t touched on today in terms of schooling, as you went to school, anything that you’d like to say?

BP: No. You know, I believe I could have went further. As far as we went in the country was seventh grade. That’s far as we went. Reason I didn’t go there, we had to work and part of the time we didn’t go and sometimes—.

TC: Yes, you’re saying you had to walk a long distance.
BP: Yes, but see sometimes the reason, I’d done missed half the time, you know, if it was raining. But at that time they didn’t keep that against you because we had to walk. But now, if we hadn’t had to walk, I probably could have finished because I’d had more time. Some years I stayed in the same grade twice on account of I missed half the time.

TC: Because you had to stay out of school?

BP: You had to, see you were walking and if it was snowing or raining you couldn’t walk. You couldn’t leave home.

TC: So you missed things that went on one week that were needed for the next week?

BP: That’s right, that’s right.

TC: And you got behind.

BP: Now, just like if we had spelling days—tests—where if it was raining or something you missed that test because you weren’t there. So we missed. That’s why I had to stop early because I was getting older and not making no grades. Sometimes, you know, it’s hard; before the school even closed we’re in the field, ought to be at school. We were in the field getting ready for the next month.

TC: Right, and then in the fall the cotton gets up right?

BP: Yes, well, when we picked ours then the other people wanted—we were picking cotton for fifty cents a hundred.

TC: But you’d have to stay out of school sometimes.

BP: Well, school didn’t have many months, as they got now. By March they were about to wind up, anyway.

TC: But even, yes, sometimes you only had maybe three months or four months of school.

BP: That’s right.

TC: For a particular year.

BP: That’s right.

TC: But in the fall even though school was going on, you’d have to stay out sometimes?

BP: Yes, if we had something to do at home or something on the farm. We ought to be at school if school wasn’t out. We’re down on the farm and ought to be at school.

TC: And that caused you not to stay up with the other children?

BP: That’s right.

TC: Yes, you were going through something, especially people in the ’30s and ’40s and ’50s too, especially back there in the ’20s and ’30s and ’40s.

BP: Yes, it was rough, sure was. Take my mother and daddy, I don’t guess (unintelligible).

TC: Okay, if you don’t have any additional questions or comments we’ll end this.

BP: No, that’s about all I can think of.
TC: I think you did tell me something about earlier something about, I don’t remember right now but I’d like to thank you for this time.

BP: Yes, any time.

TC: I learned a lot.

BP: Any time.

TC: It’s been very informative. Well, thanks again.

BP: Yes, okay, all right.

End of interview