In this oral history interview, Howard F. Jeter discusses his educational experiences at Poplar Grove and McBeth Elementary Schools in the mid-1950s and at Sims High School from 1960 to 1964.
Tom Crosby: Today is October 11, 2009.

Howard F. Jeter: Yes.

TC: And I am in the process of interviewing someone who has attended the Sims Middle School dedication, which is a new school in Union, South Carolina. And your name is, sir?

HJ: Howard F. Jeter.

TC: Okay, and I’m sure there are some women who don’t like to give their date of birth but I’m sure we men.

HJ: Yeah, I was born in 1947.

TC: Nineteen forty-seven.

HJ: March 6th.

TC: March 6th, where, or what county or whatever?

HJ: I was born in Santuck area, Maple Ridge actually, in Union County.

TC: Okay, alright, do you have siblings?

HJ: I have an older brother and an older sister.

TC: Older brother and older sister.

HJ: James Randolph Jeter, my brother, and Jacquelyn Jeter, my sister.

TC: James Randolph?

HJ: Yeah.

TC: Right, okay, and you sister her name is?

HJ: Jacquelyn.

TC: Jacquelyn?

HJ: Patricia Jeter Taylor.
TC: Okay, alright, and your mom’s name?
HJ: Emma Mattocks is her maiden name.

TC: Okay, and your dad?
HJ: James Walter Jeter, Jr.

TC: Okay, now where did you go to elementary school or schools?
HJ: I went to several actually.

TC: The first school?
HJ: Carlisle, Santuck. We talked about an earlier.

TC: The first elementary school?
HJ: The earliest school we talked about, the one we mentioned yesterday, I was not formally a student. I was too young to be in elementary school. But that was the school, a one room school, in Maple Ridge and, as I mentioned, there was no electricity. There was no heat. There was no indoor plumbing in that school. And several grades were taught there. My mother actually taught at that school.

TC: Okay, but there was heat but in was what form?
HJ: There was a woodstove, cast iron stove, what they called a potbellied stove, and that was the permanent form of heat.

TC: Okay and you were prior to six years old or something, five, something like that?
HJ: Five, four or five.

TC: Okay, then after there you went to what school?
HJ: Carlisle, Santuck.

TC: Carlisle, Santuck?
HJ: Uh-huh.

TC: You didn’t go to—
HJ: Popular Grove, yeah, I was there for a year or so, year or two.

TC: Oh, you were?
HJ: Yes.

TC: Okay, would you like to describe that school a little?
HJ: As my memories—

TC: It’s been a few months I know.
HJ: Yeah, it’s been a few, little time. But it was a wood structure. As I recall there must have been four or five rooms that were classrooms.

TC: There were five.
HJ: That were classrooms, five rooms.
TC: Right.
HJ: And I remember it was sort of on brick stilts.
TC: Right.
HJ: And you could, of course, walk under the school. There was a gulley just to the left of the school.
TC: Now wait, the stilts weren’t quite that high that you could walk but one area you could.
HJ: In the back area.
TC: Miss Grace Davis’ room you could walk.
HJ: Okay, well, I don’t remember her.
TC: You don’t remember her name.
HJ: But in the back of the school you could literally walk under that structure.
TC: Right.
HJ: Yeah, and there was a—
TC: How about the windows?
HJ: And there was a playing field. I don’t recall windows.
TC: How many, about how many?
HJ: I don’t recall.
TC: There were about four or five.
HJ: Yeah, in the entire school?
TC: No, in each room.
HJ: Oh, yeah, big windows, yeah.
TC: Yeah, okay. Now what you have just done you have described certain kinds of buildings that were built back in the ‘20’s, actually started in 1912, the Rosenwald schools. And those where schools that got money from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. You’ve probably heard the expression the Rosenwald schools and they had some of those features. All the schools had some of those features that you’ve just mentioned.
HJ: Okay.
TC: The foundation on pillars or stilts and I mentioned about four or five windows. Okay, that first school you mentioned you said had no electricity, right?
HJ: That’s correct.
TC: Yeah. Now those four or five windows of the Rosenwald schools they were to let light in. I think that happened initially.
HJ: There was electricity in—
TC: But in this one there was electricity and I think one of the reasons why, that was one of the last of the Rosenwald schools being built in Union County because the Rosenwald fund ended in 1932, okay. And through my oral history work that I’m doing I’ve learned that actually Poplar Grove is or was a Rosenwald school because two persons, I think I told you last night, Mr. Eugene Gist who’s about ninety-six now, and Barry Peat, who’s around ninety-four, ninety-five, they remember when the school was built. And they remember, one of the requirements of the Rosenwald Foundation to get funds was that the black people had to provide some money and whites were supposed to provide some too and they remember those kinds of things.

HJ: But I remember that school well. There was a gulley actually—

TC: To the left.

HJ: To the left of the school, yeah, to the left of the school that went all the way around and we used to take cardboard and slide down the side.

TC: Of the gulley?

HJ: Of that gulley and that was big fun back in the day.

TC: Yeah.

HJ: It was in a wooded area. There were lots of muscadines and things like that around.

TC: And vines.

HJ: And vines.

TC: The other vine was kudzu.

HJ: Kudzu vines, yes. So we would venture out and explore the area a lot.

TC: Right, now how about the plumbing facilities at that school?

HJ: It was an outdoor facility. I frankly don’t remember.

TC: That’s my point, it didn’t have indoor and it had they called them privies. I think that’s the term they used to refer to them so there’s no indoor plumbing, that’s the point.

HJ: No, outdoor.

TC: It was outdoors. Okay, after elementary you went to where?

HJ: Carlisle, Santuck.

TC: Okay, but after finishing Carlisle, Santuck you went to?

HJ: I attended McBeth for it was less than a year.

TC: Was it?

HJ: Yeah.

TC: Okay.

HJ: And then on to Sims High School.

TC: I see, okay, and you graduated from Sims in?
HJ: Nineteen sixty-four.
TC: Nineteen sixty-four. Okay, were you valedictorian?
HJ: I was.
TC: I thought someone told me that. Congratulations.
HJ: Yeah.
TC: Who was salutatorian?
HJ: Raymond Worthy.
TC: I see.
HJ: One of my best friends, or was it Gladys (8:19)?
TC: I don’t know.
HJ: It was one or the other.
TC: Oh, yeah.
HJ: I think it was Raymond, if I’m not mistaken.
TC: Okay, at Sims what kinds of activities were you involved in, a few or many?
HJ: I was on the school band.
TC: What instrument?
HJ: I played clarinet.
TC: Or instruments.
HJ: And then I played drums. And Donald Roberts was the—
TC: Band director.
HJ: Band director.
TC: I see. How about student government?
HJ: I don’t recall being in student government at Sims High.
TC: Okay.
HJ: I was in drama club and very active in there.
TC: Okay. Classroom officer?
HJ: I don’t recall that either.
TC: Senior class officer?
HJ: I don’t recall. If you find out let me know. (Laughter)
TC: You’re not that young now.
HJ: No, I’m not.
TC: I mean the opposite, not that old to not remember.
HJ: Well, I don’t recall.
TC: I understand but I was just kidding.
HJ: Sometimes you’re older than you appear.
TC: That’s true. After Sims you attended college?
HJ: Yes.
TC: And where was that?
HJ: Morehouse College in Atlanta.
TC: Okay and you majored in?
HJ: I majored in political science, minored in economics and French.
TC: I see, okay. Now were you active in governmental student activities there?
HJ: At Morehouse?
TC: Yeah.
HJ: Yes.
TC: Such as?
HJ: I was the senior class representative to the board of trustees at Morehouse College.
TC: Okay, anything else along that line?
HJ: I wasn’t a member of the SGA. I was a Merrill Fellow, Merrill Study Travel Fellow.
TC: M-A-L?
TC: Okay, so what?
HJ: The benefactor who established these fellowships was the grandson of Merrill, who was the financial firm, and he’s also a member of the board of trustees at Morehouse. Charles Merrill was his name and he funded six or more scholarships, several scholarships every year for years and years at Morehouse, to give students an exposure to the rest of the world.
TC: Okay, so what was the nature of this exposure?
HJ: It was a study travel fellowship.
TC: During the academic year or?
HJ: During the academic year and it really was an additional year because although you studied, some people studied in universities, other people studied at institutes and I studied at the (11:26 La Institute of Studies Pierre), which was Institute of European Studies that was based in Chicago but they had programs in Europe. And you would be a part of the institute, also take university courses at the local university. I was based in Nantes, N-A-N-T-E-S in France.
TC: In France?
HJ: Yes.
I see.

So I studied there for a year. All of our work was done in French. So the first six months—

So that means, excuse me, that means you had, did you have French?

Oh, yes, I had some French, yeah.

Compton?

Yes, here at Sims High and I also took French at Morehouse but classroom French, conversational French, apples and oranges.

Yeah, right.

So in any case, one of the aspects of the Merrill Study Travel Program, for the first six weeks with the Institute of European Studies you did nothing but language. And the way they did that it was a six week immersion course and you traveled around for six weeks as a group and you were only allowed to speak French.

Really? And you also speak Portuguese?

I speak Portuguese and a little bit of Swahili.

Okay, where did you learn the Portuguese?

Portuguese I learned in the Foreign Service and also I lived in Mozambique, which is Portuguese, a Portuguese speaking country.

Swahili you learned?

Swahili I learned a bit in Washington and I lived in Tanzania where Swahili is the national language. And I spent a lot of time in Zanzibar, which I highly recommend if you ever get an opportunity to go there, very exotic. That’s where they speak pure Swahili.

I see. Okay, so I assume all this exposure was at Merrill scholarship?

No, no, no. The Merrill scholarship was the tour in France, the nine month study experience in France with the Institute of European Studies and there was three months of travel. That was not funded travel. That’s travel you did on your own and I remained in Europe for three months along with there were two or three of my other classmates and we traveled throughout Europe, western and eastern Europe. We got as far as Czechoslovakia, East Berlin, but all of Western Europe, parts of Scandinavia, southern Europe, Greece and other places.

I see. So would you say that this Merrill scholarship got you started with international conquests?

No question about it.

Okay, now, what’s your position, title now at this time?

I’m an ambassador retired. (Laughter)

Ambassador retired?

Yes.

Okay. So when did you become, in what year?
HJ: My first ambassadorship, I have two ambassadorships. The first was 1983 to ’86 in the Republic of Botswana in Southern Africa. The second ambassadorial position was to Nigeria 2000-2003. But also I was President Clinton’s special envoy to Liberia and that position carried an ambassadorial title. So effectively I guess three times.

TC: Briefly what was the nature of that ambassadorship to Liberia? Can you just describe it a little?

HJ: Well, there was a civil war that had started in Liberia in 19, actually it was started in ’89, very destructive, practically for all intents and purposes it destroyed, at that time it was destroying the country, a lot of violence, a lot of human rights abuses. There were warlords from various ethnic and regional areas of Liberia that literally took over the country.

TC: Excuse me. So what did you do to improve this situation?

HJ: Well, I think the State Department and the White House decided, you know, there’s a long relationship between Liberia and the United States that goes back to the 1840’s. As a matter of fact, some people say if the U.S. ever had a colony in Africa, Liberia would be it. And it was used in various periods, but particularly during World War II as sort of a platform for the U.S. for intelligence gathering, listening, logistical operations, etc., etc. So this relationship between Liberia and the U.S. and, of course, Liberia was founded by former slaves who were sent from the U.S. to Liberia known as Americo Liberians and they constituted about maybe four percent or five percent of the population but they dominated the place.

TC: When you say they were sent there.

HJ: The American Colonization Society back in the 1840’s.

TC: Maybe I should know but why did that happen?

HJ: Because it’s part of the anti slavery movement. There was a move to send some existing slaves back to Africa.

TC: So they did not choose freely themselves or did they?

HJ: No, I think they did, yeah. There was an organization called the American Colonization Society that actually started this movement.

TC: Back to Africa?

HJ: Back to Africa and these were some of the people who went back.

TC: I see, okay.

HJ: There may have been a few freed slaves as well as existing slaves but they went back and they constituted this special group in Liberia, which over time was their downfall, but that’s a different story.

TC: Now how many years you did work in Africa, in, well, in Africa?

HJ: In Africa in total?

TC: Yeah.
HJ: I lived in Africa continuously, meaning I was a resident in Africa for eighteen years, but I traveled back and forth all the time.

TC: So what country you served the longest period of time?

HJ: All the countries where I served basically were for three years, so six different countries over a period of eighteen years.

TC: I see, okay. Do you have any comments in particular about any one or two of the countries?

HJ: Well, you know, they were all very interesting for different reasons. I first went to Mozambique in 1979 as more or less a junior officer. And during that period it was very, it was just after Mozambique’s independence and there had been a twenty year liberation struggle. And there was a political party, actually a liberation group called FRELIMO that took, freed the Portuguese and took control of the country. But the Portuguese when they left literally destroyed the country, the infrastructure. So this poor Mozambican government was struggling but the person who headed that government, Samora Machel, was one of the most charismatic people you could ever imagine in terms of his persona and in terms of his speaking abilities, his oratorical skills.

So Mozambique was on the front line of the fight against apartheid. It was a socialist government with very close ties to the Soviet Union, East Germany, and Cuba at the time. But the American embassy was the target of I guess for lack of better terms Cuban and East German machinations. They expelled for alleged espionage all but three members of the embassy. And what’s interesting to me was when we woke up that morning we heard about it, they read the names off, and lo and behold my name was on the list. I said, okay, if you gotta go, you gotta go. I’m not a spy. I don’t work for the CIA. But by the time the formal and official announcement was made at about two thirty that afternoon my name was gone. So it was a very tense period. We were still watched a lot by the government of Mozambique, followed, people watched our movements and our homes, etc., etc.

TC: So how did you get things done, the nature of what you did? How did you, did you meet with a group of people and they would go out and?

HJ: Well, as an officer of the embassy you meet with your counterparts in government. You meet with people from nongovernmental organizations. You meet with people in so called “civil” society. You meet with business people in the country. You meet with different segments of the country. For example, I had ties to the Pakistani community there. I had ties to the South African community there. So your routine is that you reach out and you meet people. You have official business. If I as an official of an embassy call up the ministry of Mayans and say I’d like to talk to you about this subject because my government has the following questions. Or I’d just like to get a sense of what’s happening in your area of responsibility. The door’s open. Now the difficulty is that in a place like Mozambique, of course, you had to do this in Portuguese.

TC: Now would you like to make any comments about how your educational background preparation contributed to your life?

HJ: Well, as I said, you know, I think Sims High School gave me my foundation. My aspirations were developed here. My perception of sort of general expectations about what I would and could do were formed here. So I think that for me Sims High was the foundational springboard for everything I did. And as I mentioned last night, Morehouse just reaffirmed a lot
of that. The nice thing about Sims High School was that you had these wonderful teachers, all of whom really cared about you. It wasn’t, you know, there was no anonymity.

TC: It wasn’t just a job to do.

HJ: It wasn’t just a job. There was no anonymity. They knew who you were. They knew who your parents were. They knew who your relatives were, etc. And my experience at Sims High School, of course, was that Professor Sims was my uncle. Mr. Murrow was my cousin, both by marriage. And my aunt taught at Sims High School, Mrs. Sims. Clara Hopkins, my other aunt, taught at Sims High School. So I had all of these, in addition to people to whom I was not related. I had these relatives who were there and who had an interest in what I was doing. And I actually studied under some of them. But as I said, the people I mentioned in my remarks last night.

TC: Such as, people you mentioned?

HJ: Candace Nicholas is one who stands out and who is just an outstanding, very dedicated, very accomplished teacher.

TC: And she taught?

HJ: She taught English and literature.

TC: Right, okay. In closing do you have any additional comments?

HJ: Well, Tom, the only thing I can say is that when you talk about career, I told you about one of my posts. That is not representative of what, you said what is my favorite country, probably Botswana because they were able to do so much in such a short time.

When they got their independence in ’65 it was the poorest country in the world. And after that they discovered diamonds. It’s one of the primary diamond areas in the world. But it wasn’t the fact that they got diamonds and got a lot of money from that, but the way they managed it. Poorest country in the world, I think they had if any, twenty university graduate, no paved roads in the country, very few schools, no hospitals, etc. If you look at Botswana today it’s one of the most developed and one of the most impressive countries on the continent because it’s a democracy. They’ve managed and husbanded their resources very well.

But the pinnacle of my career was Nigeria, and Nigeria because Nigeria’s so important to the U.S. In terms of size it’s the largest country on the African continent, very robust country, energetic, very energetic people, entrepreneurial people. Of course, Nigeria has oil, sixth largest oil producer in the world, fifth largest exporter of oil to the U.S. We depend upon Nigeria for about fifteen percent of our oil and natural gas and they have very high quality oil. Over the years they have earned hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of billions of dollars from the sale of oil but they haven’t used their resources well. So I contrast, and Nigeria you can’t contrast Nigeria and Botswana; a hundred and fifty million people, three million people, but in terms of how they’ve used their resources there’s a clear contrast there. And you know I’m still very much involved in Nigeria because I think the future of Africa hinges on what happens in Nigeria. If Nigeria goes down the tubes, so does Africa.
TC: So what’s the nature of your involvement?

HJ: Now?

TC: Yes.

HJ: Oh, I do all sorts of stuff. I do some business consulting with private firms in Nigeria. I sit on some Nigerian boards, both nonprofit and profit boards. I used to when I was with Good Works International, Andy Young’s international consulting firm, I used to represent or at least participate in representation of the Nigerian government in Washington. So my involvement is pretty extensive.

TC: May I ask do you have any interaction with anyone that lives in Colombia who is interested in natural products and things like that?

HJ: No.

TC: No, I see.

HJ: I don’t get involved in oil trading.

TC: Okay, do you have any additional comments?

HJ: No, that’s it. I think it’s a good interview. I don’t think it covers all the bases but you can’t do it in twenty minutes.

TC: Right. Well, if you have one or two more bases that we haven’t covered, you know, it’s your pleasure. I don’t know your field, you know, so if you have anything else.

HJ: Well, I guess the only thing if I could just mention to you about my graduate education.

TC: That’s fine, yes.

HJ: Morehouse was just, I couldn’t have asked for more. Morehouse is just such a wonderful school and when I went there it was much smaller. It’s now about five thousand students. When I went there it was a thousand students. And you got the same kind of care at Morehouse as you had gotten at Sims High School. People knew you. Your professors knew you and they cared about you. There were all kinds of opportunities created and we had some living legends who were associated with the school, people like Dr. Benjamin Mays whom I’ve mentioned. But when I left Morehouse I went to Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies. I remember my advisor at Morehouse was the chairman of the political science department and I wanted to go to law school. That was my goal. He said no, you can’t go to law school; you have to go to graduate school, get your Ph.D., then come back here so you can replace me in this department. So I said, well, that’s tough because that’s not what I was planning to do. But anyway, after some consideration I decided that given my international background because, as you know, I first went to Africa in 1970 with a program called Operations Crossroads Africa.

TC: I see.

HJ: And Crossroads Africa was sort of a mini Peace Corps so you’d go, you’d work on these development projects but for a much shorter time. And we went to Nimba County in Liberia to build this motor road that I mentioned and we lived in a village of about two hundred people. And the idea was to mobilize the village to get going and build this road because the village
produced huge surpluses of rice and they weren’t commercializing that rice because they didn’t have the means to get the rice to market.

TC: And you also went to Columbia for graduate?

HJ: For graduate school, yes. So I spent a year at the School of Advance International Studies at Johns Hopkins, SAIS, and I transferred to Columbia to the graduate school of arts and sciences and concentrated on international relations comparative politics, did all my work for a Ph.D. except a dissertation. There’s a story behind that as well.

TC: Do you want to leave that for another day?

HJ: We’ll leave that for another day but it explains why I didn’t get a Ph.D.

TC: So but the impetus was the Merrill for your getting into the international thing, is that correct?

HJ: And my first overseas trip.

TC: Yeah, okay.

HJ: And then I never stopped.

TC: Okay, any additional comments?

HJ: No, I think that’s it, Tom.

TC: You think that’s it?

HJ: Yeah.

TC: Well, I certainly appreciate your time.

HJ: It’s been wonderful being with you.

TC: Any information that you’ve given, so thanks again.

End of interview