

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

Theodore Newkirk

Interviewed by Bob Lewis and the English 12 class of Jill McKean
November 10, 2003, 8:45 AM
Great Mills High School, Great Mills, Maryland
Logged by Tania Jordon on January 5, 2008
A verbatim transcript is available
Original format is one cassette tape
38 minutes, 30 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 1

Track 01

- 0:00 Where did you live and where were you born and raised? What brought you to St. Mary's County? He was born in Wilmington, North Carolina. He moved from Wilmington to Baltimore then to St. Mary's County. He moved to St. Mary's for employment. He worked at Patuxent Naval Base from 1954 to 1986.
- 1:30 How did you become involved with Great Mills High School? He and Fred Talbert were involved with the Carver PTA. At the time he was President of the PTA. They did a survey with the black community to determine why so many black kids "refused" to complete high school. They also recruited blacks to enroll in Great Mills during that time. They had a segregated system even though the Supreme Court had ruled that all schools should be integrated. Integration in St. Mary's County schools did not happen until 12 years after the Supreme Court ruling.
- 3:20 What was your specific involvement with Great Mills? At the time he was the Vice President of St. Mary's County Integration of Schools. Lester Colsen was the Chairman of the committee. Lawrence Henderson was the head of the NAACP. They and their two attorneys from Baltimore met with the Board of Education to determine why nothing was being done about the integration of schools in St. Mary's County.

Track 02

- 4:15 They were disappointed about what they had heard from the Board of Education. The Chairman of the Board could not understand why blacks were trying to integrate the schools when they were paying so little taxes. In addition to being a chairman, she was also president at St. Mary's College. Her statement was "she

couldn't understand why we would want to integrate the schools because at Carver, we had the cutest little toilets of anybody in the county for black students". They were surprised that professionals would suggest that was a reason for not wanting to integrate schools". They had other responses that were far more disappointing. This process went on for eight years before the schools were integrated.

- 6:30 What made these toilets the best? What they were referring to was at the time there was an all black enlisted mans club that was turned over to St. Mary's County Public Schools. When the facility was constructed, the toilets were smaller to meet the needs of the children.

Track 03

- 8:00 When did the first African American students enter Great Mills High School? The first to entered Great Mills were the two Grover's children (brother and sister) in the early 1960's. They only had two students at the time to integrate the public school system. Later on the board of education decided they would integrate on a volunteer basis. At that time he entered his three youngest children at Lexington Park Elementary School. At that time the board of education did not integrate the transportation system. His children had private transportation, which he thought was ridiculous, but that was the system at that time. He withdrew his children from Carver to let them experience integrated education. He did not feel that Carver's education was inferior.
- 10:20 What was it like for those first students at Great Mills High School? For Joan and her brother, it was like being on a foreign soil. If they communicated, it wasn't a friendly atmosphere. It was a resentful attitude as if they had taken something from them (i.e. students, teachers, facility). "It was disgusting how they were treated".
- 11:30 Going to white school was an elective. The board of education supplied segregated transportation. "I considered this to be ridiculous".

Track 04

- 12:52 Most blacks were not "climbing the walls to integrate". They did not integrate until it became a forcible situation from the Board of Education. "No one was climbing the fence to go either way". That was the status quo of St. Mary's County well into the 60's.
- 14:00 What did it take to for the Board of Education to end segregated schools? To integrate the schools in St. Mary's County after the Grover's children forced the integration; we wanted to get the whole system integrated. Their attorneys were in the process of taking the board to court. They did not have to go to court. Dr.

Robert King was able to maneuver the black community and the board to integrate.

“When I was President, I was not an easy guy to get along with. I was dissatisfied with what we were confronted with in St. Mary’s County. St. Mary’s County was a civilized county with civilized people. When it came time for integration, we acted some kind of terrible”.

17:20 “I can remember when the last white only sign was taken down at the base gate. That was the way we conducted ourselves and it was well accepted.

Track 05

17:48 There was one McDonalds in St. Mary’s County. At the time the principal and one of his black assistants would go to McDonald’s and pick up the black kids that were skipping school and suspend them. Mr. Newkirk was informed by Ms. Fleming of this situation. He and Bob King met with the principal. After the meeting Great Mills started to send the students to continue classes “stay in school suspension” in a trailer at Leonardtown High School. There was initially only one teacher. It was too much for one teacher. It was more like a baby sitting service. Eventually there were two teachers.

21:29 “I don’t see any improvement as far as instruction is concerned. I don’t see were we’ve achieved anything at all, except these kids now know each other. As far as curriculum is concerned, I wouldn’t know”

Track 06

22:15 Where the attitudes the same for the white students as they were for the African-American students? From the early 1960 to 1968, his Educational Chairman was Mr. Melvin Holland. They wanted to find out the results of the of 1969 racial confrontation. They wanted to interview the parents and the students. They wanted to know how the teachers treated them during this confrontation.

24:04 More than 90% felt that they were not wanted “aboard station at all”. Had they really improved on anything (i.e. integration) or why were these kids were so frustrated? Most of the problem was the teachers not know how to conduct themselves as educators. The conclusion was still that that the schools were still segregated. They were still just as prejudice as they were before integration. He believes that someone has learned something down the line.

Track 07

26:33 Were there concerns that the African-American teachers would be out of work? Yes, there was concerned that the African-American teachers would be out of work. The white establishment had the good sense to keep the black teachers and

put them in the white schools. He did think that any black teacher's loss their jobs. However, they did not have the freedom they desired when teaching the black students.

28:00 Where there any other incidence like the one in 1969? The 1969 incidents was the height of the confrontation.

Track 08

29:26 Questions from students: My name is Yu Fan Hsu - If you had to do it all over again would you choose a black school or mixture of schools? "I would do that all over again and I would be more aggressive now then I was then". For example, it took this County almost six years after the Supreme Court decision to even consider if they were going to do anything about integration. In my position at that time, I would have been more aggressive in voicing my opinion.

Yu Fan Hsu Q2 - Do you think it has anything to do with it being the southern part of Maryland or do you think it's like that generally? I had worked through out Maryland during that time. One thing he was told at the NAACP Conventions was that at least he was able to talk with the County. Some of the other Counties did not even talk with the NAACP. St. Mary's County never once closed the door. The door was always open, they didn't agree but they did talk.

Track 09

32:38 My name is Shantea - How did your kids feel about going to an integrated school? "I don't think they cared one way or the other. We've always tried to instill in our children to never accept an individual based on their color. Try and understand what it is to be a decent human being. I've always told my children that you can get a rotten in any color". For instance, his youngest daughter Lauren wanted to go to Frostburg for college. She and her friend Patti Myers borrowed his car to take a look at the school. On the return trip, they left the school late and got lost in a rural section of Howard County. While they were riding, they saw a cross burning on a farm. They went through the farm gate and asked the people how to get back to Route 40 because they were lost. When she got back home, she told Mr. Newkirk about the incident and how nice the people were. She had been given direction from people burning a cross with white sheets on. Her father couldn't believe that his child has come across a Klan meeting and didn't have any problems.

He wanted his children to accept decent people he didn't want his child to be confined to one group.