School

I started school when I was six. You got to school when you could because you had things to do around the house before you left in the morning. In the springtime you didn't go as often because you had to help take care of the crops. Education didn't mean too much to my father; the way they looked at it in those days was, you were colored, so all you needed to learn was how to read your name, write your name, stuff like that, but why sit in school? You'll never get a job in the bank, or you'll never get a job down in the drugstore, so it was a waste of time to him. My mother had a little different opinion about it. She wanted us to read. My brother James and I taught my mother how to read and write. My father, we finally did teach him how to write his name, how to sign things, but he wasn't interested in education. He did love to hear us read; we'd read the Bible or something to him.

As I was getting older, I got a little education and I could better myself, you know, because I could read and write. And later, when I worked in different places, once they knew I could read and write, they would give me a little more responsibility. So instead of being the one unloading the trucks, they would give me a notebook where I'd write down what was being unloaded and the numbers and all. It meant I could get a little better job.

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The first school I went to was Providence School. It was in a big house. They had knocked down all the walls and made three rooms out of it. There weren't any grades. You just went to school and basically all they taught you was your ABC's and your times tables. You would read; we had some books that we had gotten from the white school which were just reading books. That was the type of education we were getting at that early age.

My first teacher was my cousin, and she graduated high school in New York, but she came back South, and they gave her a job teaching us at Providence. Now the point is she had never been to college. But she was teaching us the basics: how to spell your name, your times tables, and just how to read in general. But later, when we went to high school in Fuquay, then the teachers came from Raleigh, from Shaw University.

We lived about four miles from the school in Providence, and we had to walk every day. Some of the kids lived even farther out than we did, and they walked, too. The white kids had a school bus they rode in. And when we got to school in the mornings we had to go out in the woods in the freezing cold and chop wood. We used to bring the wood in and start the fire in the big old potbelly heater. We had to go out and draw water up out of the well. We had to put cardboard in some of the windows because most of the time they were broken. My mother and the rest of the mothers would give us a can of beans or white potatoes or something to take because that was the way we ate our lunch. The teacher had a huge cooking pot that she would put on the potbelly heater and she would mix all this stuff up. It was amazing how sometimes some of the kids couldn't bring anything, but the teachers would still make enough so they would get something to eat, too. We used to—just to show you the cruelty in children at that time—tease the kids that didn't have anything to bring, and many a time I've regretted it. Basically, it was the same kids and most of them came from large families; some people had ten, eleven, twelve, fourteen kids, and it was hard.

We brought our own tin cups and spoons and left them there. We used to buy peaches in those cups, they were nice-size cups, and that's mostly what everybody used. After we ate everything up, we'd put water in the pot, put it back on the heater, and when the water got hot, we'd wash our own cups out. Each kid washed their own stuff, and the teacher would inspect it.

That was the way we ate because we didn't have no kitchen or nothing like that at the school. The white kids had all that stuff. They had a big beautiful building. They had steam heat. They had a kitchen, a school bus, and everything.

When we left school for the day and

started walking home, we'd keep looking back until we saw the white kids' school bus. If we saw that bus coming, we would automatically take off and start running, looking for someplace to hide. If the bus driver stopped the bus when he got to where we were, we knew we were really in trouble. That meant the bigger boys and girls would get out of the bus and start calling us names. They would pick up stones and start throwing them at us. The larger black kids would act like decoys. They would get hit to keep the little children from getting hit. You would protect your little sister or brother or any little kid. It didn't make any difference if they were related or not, you didn't want them to get hurt. And the white kids didn't care who they hit, just as long as they hit someone. So what you would do was when they were throwing stones at you, you would start screaming and hollering and begging. They liked that, and most of the time they would let up on you. So long as they hit somebody, they were happy and you could hear them bragging, saying, "Hey, did you see me hit that one? Boy, I really hit him or her." Then they would go run and jump back in the bus and they would take off.

But I also remember a white man named Mr. Clark. He had a big white horse, and sometimes he would come down to the school when we'd get out and he would walk with us, him and his horse. When he would see the bus coming, he would tell us, "Don't run, don't run, they're not going to bother you." He was a good man, he was a religious man. And he was right—they wouldn't bother us if he was there.

Sometimes when we got hit, we would run to his house and have a knot on our head or be bleeding or something, and his wife would come out and help us. Her name was Miss Janie. She would come out and say, "It's a shame how they do this and they shouldn't do you young-uns like that." She'd make us feel better. Sometimes she'd have cookies and stuff like that she would give to us.

I think mostly all the blacks in that vicinity loved the Clarks. They treated us like people. And when you did some work on their farm, she would fix food and you would eat at their table, which was very amazing in those times. You know, we were used to eating out under the tree, but she would call you in the house. And I remember Mr. Clark used to sit at the end of the table and say a prayer. And we'd sit there and eat. And when you got through eating, you'd get up and go back to work.

Now, the white kids didn't bother us every day. Sometimes they would come past and just call us names and keep going. And sometimes the bus driver would just tease us. He'd stop the bus, we'd see the red light come on, and we'd all start running, and it was real funny to them, real comical. But they didn't do that every day.

The white people would teach their kids that black people had no feelings. They didn't have no soul, it didn't matter what you did to them, you couldn't hurt their feelings because they didn't have feelings. You could hit them or whatever, and you couldn't hurt them. And this is why they treated us like they did—they actually thought this.

Later we took a bus to Fuquay High School, and that was a step up. We were very happy because they built a new school, and the teachers came from Raleigh and we had good books and steam heat, we didn't have to go out in the woods and get wood. We had a cafeteria, and I remember they would give you your food for fifteen cents, but that fifteen cents could seem like fifteen dollars. Sometimes Mr. Johnson would give us lunch money when we'd walk past his house in the morning to get the bus. He would come out and say to us, have you got money for lunch? We'd tell him whether we did or didn't, and me being the oldest, he would like give me a dollar, and I would pay for the rest of my brothers' and sisters' lunches. We were very proud of our school. It even had a janitor who fired the furnace and did odds-and-ends work around there for us.