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KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NORTH GEORGIA ORAL HISTORY SERIES

NO. 3

INTERVIEW WITH DR. SUSIE W. WHEELER

CONDUCTED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project  
North Georgia Oral History Series, No. 3  
Interview with Dr. Susie W. Wheeler  
Conducted by Dr. Thomas A. Scott  
Friday, 3 March 2000  
Location: Home of Dr. Wheeler, Cartersville, GA

THOMAS SCOTT: Dr. Wheeler, let me begin by asking you where you were born and when you were born?

SUSIE WHEELER: I was born in Bartow County out in what was then known as the Pine Grove area, the lower level of the Pine Grove area. We called it something else that I don't think of at this minute. I was probably about two years old before my parents moved to the Cassville area.

TS: Where was Pine Grove exactly? Was it the northern part of the county?

SW: Yes, it is the northern section going up 411. There is an area that one goes to the People's Valley area and the other one is 411 and it's in that little corner there.

TS: Would this be 411 toward Rome or 411 toward Chatsworth?

SW: 411 toward Chatsworth is the place where I was born. The house is there no more.

TS: Would this be beyond Rydal and that way?

SW: It's going toward Rydal.

TS: Before you get there.

SW: Yes, but it's not that far out of Cartersville. Out where you've probably noted the mobile home areas out there on 411. It's just a little less than half a mile from that place in that corner where that road forks.

TS: And so you spent two years there. Were you living on a farm at that time?

SW: Yes, my father was a tenant farmer. It was a farm not around the house, but across from the house where the tenant lived.

TS: Why did he move into Cassville?

SW: I wonder sometimes why did we get there also. My mother's father had this area that was close by to where we moved. When we first moved there I think we went to

the home of an aunt, the aunt for which I am named. Her name is Susie, and I was named Susie for her. We spent about two years there with her before we moved to the house that was not too far from where she was. We lived there until that house was destroyed by fire.

TS: While you were living in it?

SW: Yes. I was away in school during that time but the family did live there.

TS: Wheeler is your married name; what is your maiden name?

SW: My maiden name is Weems.

TS: When you moved into Cassville what was your father doing then?

SW: He still was a tenant farmer. He farmed, but he had this land very near him, all around us. We chopped cotton and picked cotton . . .

TS: Oh, you had to work too?

SW: Yes. Indeed so. During that time. All work.

TS: So you know all about chopping cotton.

SW: Yes. And I disliked completely. I said I never hope to do any more once I left.

TS: I can understand that. Did your mother work outside the home?

SW: Yes, she worked outside the home as a laundress lady who worked, when we had the Atco laundry she worked in that laundry.

TS: For the Atco community?

SW: In the Atco community, but she had to commute from Cassville to that place.

TS: That was the mill village community?

SW: Mill village community. She also worked as a maid in the home of the Pittards, Mrs. Sam Pittard still remains alive, and that was in the home place where she worked.

TS: This is in Cartersville?

SW: Cassville.

TS: In Cassville.

SW: And after that she did her final work with . . . oh dear, I can't think of the little motel area that was very near our house and that is where she worked up until the final days of her . . .

TS: Was this a motel on U.S. 41?

SW: No. 41 Highway. Not far from our house. Because after our house burned, my grandfather gave to my mother a plat of land to build on. A home was built on this new property, and this new property was over to the new 41 that was going into the Cassville area.

TS: The new U.S. 41 was just being built about the 1940s, I guess, wasn't it?

SW: Yes.

TS: So the old 41 then, where did that run?

SW: The old 41 ran by that house where we lived; it's called the Mack Johnson Road.

TS: And that's in Cassville?

SW: In Cassville. My grandfather owned about eighty acres of land in that general area even though the house we first lived in was not a part of his property. The one we first lived in with the aunt became a part of his property after her death. In fact, my grandmother's niece [owned] the home we lived in.

TS: Do you know how your grandfather acquired that land?

SW: Yes, there's a good story about this. In fact, we have done this in a little history of the Smith family. We told about how . . .

TS: Your mother was a Smith.

SW: My grandfather was a Smith; my grandmother was a Douglas, Emma Douglas. So it's Thomas Smith who was married to Emma Douglas.

TS: And then your mother's name was. . . ?

SW: Cora Smith.

TS: Cora Smith Weems.

SW: Well, it became Cora Smith Weems Canty.

TS: C-A-N-T-Y?

SW: Yes, my father passed away when I was eight years old. Five years later my mother was married to Oscar Canty, and that's how she became a Canty.

TS: Well, I interrupted your story of how your grandfather acquired the land.

SW: Yes. He first was given a plot of land by the Edwards family, because my grandmother's mother was an Edwards before she married a Douglas. My great-great-grandfather was an Edwards, and he came from the Nashville area after slavery. I guess he came with some [former] owners, and he bought this plot of land. It became the first part of the Smith family's estate.

TS: Do you have any idea how he got the money to pay for it?

SW: No, I've never heard how he got that. I'm always going back to this reference, because sometimes time has helped me to forget.

TS: Is this something that you researched and wrote about? You're holding a book on the Smith family.

SW: The family did with my help. In the meantime we have it in the archives now. So we have it on the record. This was started by a son that was raised by my mother from seven months old. It was her brother's child, and his mother had passed away, so he was raised just like a brother to me. Even though I only had one blood brother, he became my second brother and was the one who started the family idea that we needed to put it into some form, so that we could refer to it at later times.

TS: The family history. What was his name?

SW: His name was Bennie Reuben Smith. He passed away early, like in his late forties, but he has two daughters that live in Atlanta, very successful daughters that live in the Atlanta area. One is an attorney.

TS: Great. I don't believe we said on the tape what year you were born.

SW: I think we didn't.

TS: Oh, you're trying to bypass that. [chuckle]

SW: No, I don't mind telling that. After sixty-five most people don't mind telling their age. I was born February 24, 1917. Just had a birthday.

TS: I saw those birthday cards on the table; I thought that might be the case.

SW: That's the birthday cards that came. And the Valentine flowers that are about gone now came from my son and his family.

TS: Well, great. It sounds as though your family was middle-class or reasonably well-to-do with that land. Or maybe terms like middle class don't mean much in a farm community.

SW: No, we were poor like others, but then we were blessed in another way that we did have family that was landowners. I always remember my granddaddy saying that he was so proud that he was one of the first black men in the community that could vote. Because at that time unless you were a property owner you could not vote. So I guess we were classified as just a poor family, but maybe by some other standards we could have been something else.

TS: But he registered to vote.

SW: He registered to vote and was so proud of it.

TS: As he should have been. There were a number of things that were part of the law that really tried to discourage, particularly African-Americans, from voting in those years and that was one. If you owned forty acres of land you would be eligible to vote, assuming you were paying your poll tax.

SW: And you asked how he got his land. The first land I believe that he had was given to him by my mother's great-grandfather, Edwards, Charles Edwards was the great-grandfather.

TS: This is the one that came from Tennessee?

SW: Yes.

TS: And he bought the eighty acres and then he gives . . .

SW: No, he did not buy the eighty acres. He only bought a number of acres that he could have to build himself a home.

TS: I see.

SW: Susie Edwards was his daughter who lived in the home with him. He became a preacher and a teacher in the family.

TS: Now, which one is this that becomes the preacher?

SW: Charles Edwards, who was the father of my grandmother's mother.

TS: Father of your grandmother's mother.

SW: Right. Her name was Rebecca Douglas, Rebecca Edwards Douglas.

TS: Which denomination was he?

SW: Baptist. And the whole family became Baptist people. Granddaddy became a deacon in the church that still exists and I yet belong to.

TS: And what's the name of it?

SW: The name of the church is New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. It's in the Cassville area, and I've maintained my membership there.

TS: What was the school where he taught?

SW: The school was a building that was just below Noble Hill in that same general area there. It was between what is now the church and Noble Hill. Cassville School I think it was, Cassville Colored School.

TS: He must have had a little education if he was a teacher.

SW: Evidently so. He came out of the Tennessee area, and we never had a whole lot of information concerning the backgrounds there.

TS: What about your parents? How well educated were they?

SW: My parents had just elementary education. I'm not certain exactly what grades even, you know, grades kind of varied during those years; so I'm not sure; but they were not highly educated people. They were just elementary.

TS: Who encouraged you to go ahead with your schooling?

SW: Well, I think my mother. She encouraged me to do anything that I could and to do it well. That was always her emphasis, you know, whatever you do, do your very best with it. And I give the credit to going on with my

education to my step-father who was Oscar Canty. He had done some studying in the junior high school area, I believe, and loved poetry. He used to read it to us often after we came to the point that we would accept him in the home. At first we didn't want him, because we did not want our mother to marry. It didn't matter with me, it mattered to my sister and my brother--I had one sister and one blood brother.

TS: Were you the oldest one?

SW: Youngest.

TS: You were the youngest. And the older ones were upset by it.

SW: Oh, the older ones were upset by the marriage. They didn't want to accept him, but we did, and he lived a good long time with us.

TS: What kind of poetry did he like?

SW: Well, he quoted a lot of poetry that was done by African-Americans.

TS: Oh, like Langston Hughes?

SW: Langston Hughes and that group of people.

TS: Fantastic.

SW: A lot of that sort. He did not limit it to that, you know. He would read a lot, but he would read some of it to us.

TS: Well, this is the time of the Harlem Renaissance; is he reading the things that are just coming out at that time?

SW: That's true. He was reading those and those that had already been out. It impressed me very much, because I liked poetry. Going on to school after elementary school meant coming to Cartersville here at Summer Hill, and Summer Hill at that time was only through the ninth grade. That's all it was in 1930. Of course, I stayed here for the eighth grade and the ninth grade, and then I had to go away to boarding school. This boarding school that was recommended to my mother from the principal of our school here in Cartersville was in Griffin, Georgia. The name of that school was Cabin Creek High School. It's no longer there. It was sponsored by the Baptists of that area around Griffin.

- TS: Let's talk about that for a minute, but let's talk first about Noble Hill. Noble Hill must have been built just about the time that you were ready to go to school, wasn't it?
- SW: Yes, 1923. We began my schooling in New Hope Baptist Church that was just below that until the school could open about mid of that term. Then that's when we transferred from there to that school.
- TS: So you had a brand new school to go to.
- SW: Brand new school. We were so proud. In fact, Noble Hill was the first school built to any architectural design for schools for African-Americans in Bartow County.
- TS: Why don't you tell the story about it being a Rosenwald school and what that meant.
- SW: Well, a Rosenwald school at that time was considered a school center that had some funding from the Rosenwald fund. I had a cousin, I believe it was, who lived in Thomasville, Georgia and she was the one who knew about the Rosenwald fund and was responsible to bringing that information to the Cassville community. That's how an application was made and funding was received. The funding at that time was like \$1,500.
- TS: Which was a lot.
- SW: A lot of money. The community and the county had to match the funding. I'm not sure. We'll have to look back on our . . .
- TS: The exact amount?
- SW: Yes, for the exact amount, because what the county and the community did were to match the funds.
- TS: Fifty-fifty?
- SW: Fifty-fifty. It was interesting what happened, how that came about. Individuals gave, county gave. Funds were raised by fish fries and other kinds of activities in the community, and many of the things during the building time were contributions of community people. I know my grandfather contributed some of the materials.
- TS: Like some of the lumber?
- SW: Lumber that was needed for that. Some others did some other things as well.

TS: I guess there are a lot of in-kind contributions. Were local artisans working on building the building? Carpenters and so on?

SW: Yes. That was true.

TS: I did a little research before I came today and found out that the Rosenwald fund started in 1912 in Alabama. I guess it's in the '20s when it really started becoming very widespread. But by the end of the '20s, if I remember correctly, about one-fifth of all of the black schools in the South were built with Rosenwald funds, at least in part.

SW: Yes.

TS: But you said that the county school board also put some funds into it?

SW: Yes, they did. I don't remember exactly how much, but a part of it was done by the county. In fact, it seems to me that the county made certain that the matching amount was available. Exactly how much that was at this point I wouldn't like to say.

TS: But at any rate, everybody put in a little bit.

SW: That's right.

TS: Who paid the salaries of the school teachers? Maybe you wouldn't have known that at the time.

SW: I think Bartow County was paying them. During that time, you know, there was one rate of pay for whites and another one for blacks.

TS: How much did they make, do you think?

SW: I'm not really sure. I can only tell you that when I started I made \$25.00 a month.

TS: And that must have been the '30s by then.

SW: Yes, it was late '30s.

TS: Was it a big difference between what the white teachers made and what the black teachers made back in the '20s at Noble Hill?

SW: That I'm not certain about, but I do know this; whatever was made was based on your certification. We could begin teaching on a county license by taking a test for that.

That's how I started.

TS: Before you went to college? Or after?

SW: Before.

TS: The county license was for people who hadn't been to college primarily, wasn't it?

SW: I believe so, because you could get a one year certification or two year certification and so on up the line.

TS: But you wouldn't get paid very much without the education.

SW: That's right.

TS: What about your teachers at Noble Hill; did they have any college at all?

SW: Yes, they were college grads, My first grade teacher--Myra Williams was her name--was the one who inspired me to become a teacher. I loved her for what she did and how she treated her students and what she did for all of us. That's how I got into education as a result of what she did.

TS: You just saw her and wanted to do the same.

SW: That's true.

TS: That's great. You went six years at Noble Hill?

SW: Seven years at Noble Hill. At that time seven grades in the county schools. Later on it became eight.

TS: Seven grades and two teachers?

SW: Seven grades and two teachers.

TS: How did they do that? Did they have grades one, two and three in the same room--you only had two rooms there. Or how did they do that? Was it like grades one through four in the same room?

SW: One through three, and the preschool was also in the one, two, three room. Then the four through seven in the next grade room.

TS: So I guess each grade had its assignments, and they'd go up and recite to the teacher. Is that the way it worked?

Or how did a teacher manage four grades in the same room?

- SW: I think they taught one grade at a time; they divided the time so that all of them would have equal opportunity.
- TS: If you're in the fourth grade, and they're doing the fifth grade lesson, are you reading your assignments?
- SW: Doing our assignments or carrying through with some studying for the next day. Something of that sort.
- TS: I see. But by the time you get to the seventh grade you're probably hearing it for the fourth time. Or did you just tune it out?
- SW: I think we tuned it out pretty well, and yet I think also we learned from each other, because if you listened to what was being taught to the next grade you probably learned something that you could utilize when you got to that point.
- TS: Did the older kids help the younger kids with their lessons?
- SW: Yes, they did, particularly in the primary grades. I remember that third graders helped second graders or first graders, that sort of thing. I'm not sure that we did too much of this in the upper grades. But I do know this, that our recitations were always made as a class group standing in line. Especially did we remember the spelling area, because it was there that she turned them down, we called it. If somebody missed the word below you, and you could spell the word, then that person went below you. [laughter] It was always interesting about who was going to be at the head of the line.
- TS: Very competitive.
- SW: Very competitive.
- TS: You went to Summer Hill in the eighth and ninth grades?
- SW: Eighth.
- TS: Just one grade.
- SW: Eighth grade and ninth grade, two grades.
- TS: Summer Hill was in Cartersville, right?
- SW: Yes.

TS: And was that city school system or county?

SW: City school system. There was some arrangement between the two systems. Since we had no high school for blacks in the county, the Cartersville School System would take care of that.

TS: So you didn't have to pay tuition.

SW: No.

TS: So it must have been the county if there was tuition.

SW: Yes.

TS: How was it at Summer Hill? Did you have one teacher per grade when you got there?

SW: One teacher per grade and we had some very strong teachers too that were there. I always remember a teacher that I had who taught science and mathematics. I thought she was the meanest teacher I had ever had, and yet that teacher taught me more. I respected her more after I got out of this school than I did any of the other teachers, because of the fact that she really saw to it that we did what was required of us.

TS: She didn't put up with any nonsense.

SW: She did not. She was a good musician, and she practiced her music but no half doings.

TS: Well, she knew what you needed to succeed in the world and was determined that you learned it.

SW: She did. She was a gifted person. In fact, she was invited--I learned this much later--that she was invited to Washington to perform because of her skills in that area. She was from the Griffin area, and I think that was one of the reasons that we were referred to that area because of her concern.

TS: Do you remember what her name was?

SW: Beatrice Morgan.

TS: What was the principal's name?

SW: J.S. Morgan. I think that's John Stanley.

TS: Was this husband and wife?

SW: Husband and wife.

TS: I was thinking that Morgan was the name of the principal.

SW: Yes, J.S. Morgan.

TS: I think you gave the name of your first grade teacher but let's make sure we've got it, that inspired you so much.

SW: Myra Williams.

TS: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that you mentioned that. Were those your favorite teachers, Mrs. Morgan and Mrs. Williams?

SW: Well, Mrs. Morgan wasn't favorite . . .

TS: Well, I mean, later on.

SW: At that time, but definitely Mrs. Williams was my favorite teacher. Out of all I could remember she was my favorite teacher. I had a very likable science teacher in high school, so I do remember that person too.

TS: Did you carry your lunch to school with you in those days?

SW: Yes, we carried our lunch at Noble Hill. It seems like we had a lunchroom at Summer Hill. I believe we did. We didn't have to carry our lunch. We had lunches, but that's the pay we had to make was to pay for our lunches.

TS: I see. How many kids went on to junior high back then?

SW: I would think about a third of a class. Sometimes maybe as low as a fourth of a class, but it wasn't too much. You didn't have too many of them going on to school.

TS: Most were going out to work.

SW: Out to work. On the farm and things of that kind.

TS: Tell the story now about how you got down to Griffin. How did you hear about the school down there?

SW: I think I said the principal and his wife told my mother about the school, the Cabin Creek High School in Griffin, Georgia that they would recommend that she would send me to that school. In fact, they highly recommended to her that I be sent on to school somewhere. Some of the students from Cartersville would go to Marietta, but there was no boarding area there. That was one of the

reasons that they suggested that I would be sent there. In fact, during those two years in Cartersville I had to spend the week with an aunt and then go home on the weekends. I walked home on the weekends from Cartersville to Cassville.

TS: What was it, five miles?

SW: Five or six, one. Sometimes I finally had to do the latter half of it alone, because the two students who started first with me had found other means of moving back home, getting to and from home than I had. So I always remember that.

TS: That's a long way to walk.

SW: It was then, but we had fun. It was a social hour usually for us, particularly this group. It was about six or eight in the group that went as far as about half way, to go out to the other area, to the western area there, and we would have fun doing this.

TS: Well, did you ever think about going to school in Atlanta like at Spelman I think had a high school connected with it or Booker T. Washington would have been in existence by then.

SW: Some of my classmates went to these schools, but my mother always had in mind I would go to a boarding school, to this Griffin school, and that's why I went there.

TS: Was the school in downtown Griffin or was it out, kind of out in the suburbs or out in the rural areas?

SW: Well, it was not a rural school, it was closer downtown. Not definitely downtown but close to the downtown area.

TS: So you graduated from high school in Griffin?

SW: In Griffin in 1935.

TS: Just say a few words about that high school. What kind of advantages did it have that you may not have had in Cassville or Cartersville?

SW: Well, one advantage was learning to live with other people, that was number one; and I think another advantage, it wasn't so large that you were not recognized as an individual student. It was that kind of school. I think that we had some very dedicated teachers that gave us a broad background in education.

TS: I gather you had a college preparatory curriculum that you took.

SW: I think we did. My science teacher was a Simon. He wanted me so badly to go to Clark College. But going to high school, paying room and board, was too much for my parents to try to send me on. For that reason I got out ready to go to teaching from high school.

TS: Let me ask another one or two more questions about your high school and the kinds of classes and courses that you would take; when you were in your English classes in high school, did you read the same kind of poets that your stepfather was reading to you?

SW: Yes, many of them. It was an advantage, because I had heard of some of them, because I also did a little of that here in Cartersville before that. And we took a year of Spanish and had a teacher who had come out of the Texas area, very fluent. Of course, we enjoyed this, because we learned how to say some things that otherwise we wouldn't. We got the little accent that he could put to it, and it was just great.

TS: So you could speak Spanish with a Mexican type accent.

SW: That's true. We could very definitely do that, and we felt so proud of that. We thought that was over other people who might have taken Spanish.

TS: I had heard before that one of the advantages of a segregated school in those days was that you probably got more black history in a history class than you would had you been in an integrated school.

SW: That was true. Even though we might not have had too much in print, but we did get the oral history that was shared by our teachers. So we did do more of that in that sense.

TS: When you got through high school you didn't have the money to go directly to college. So is that when you got a county certificate to start teaching?

SW: Yes. That was when I first taught I didn't even have a certificate; I was asked to come to Calhoun, Georgia to complete the term of a sixth grade teacher who became terminally ill. It was like completing a four-month period that I did there. When I came back home then, that's when I decided to take the county license test for a job in Bartow County. Of course, that's exactly what happened; I did get the job in Bartow County. And I

always remember this: the first time my mother carried me to see if I could get a job, it was in Cobb County, and it was down at Acworth, I believe at that time. Of course, I had just finished high school, and the trustee boards that we all had during those years interviewed me. They finally told my mom, "She's just too young to try to handle these boys and girls, with one teacher with grades one through seven. Just too young." Disappointing, but I guess I was glad in the end that this did not happen.

TS: I just interviewed a lady last week who went to that school in Acworth. She's a little bit older than you are but she had attended that school. She was born in 1907, and she went to that school in Acworth. Her name is Mrs. Gragg. She was telling me all about that school last week.

SW: Yes, right.

TS: You had mentioned earlier that you started out making \$25.00 a month; was that in Calhoun?

SW: Yes, I think I got \$25.00 there also. It's been so long I don't even remember, but it was the \$25.00 that . . .

TS: So this was in Bartow County then when you were . . .

SW: Yes, it was Bartow County that I remember the \$25.00.

TS: And which school was that in?

SW: I went to the Adairsville School, and taught there for eight years.

TS: Is this before you went to college?

SW: I started before I went to college. Then when I started teaching and I found out that every year in college the salary was increased--that gave me the need I guess I had for saying you better move on to try to see if you can get as much salary as you can. So I began taking classes in the summer--those who came on the field--and just kept on doing this, moving up all the way as time moved on. I really didn't complete my college education until 1945.

TS: So you started teaching in '37. So the eight years that you're a teacher in Adairsville you're gradually taking classes each summer . . .

SW: Yes. On the field and whatever.

TS: What do you mean "on the field?"

SW: During that time, and I think it's true now, the classes were brought to certain areas. A college class was taught . . .

TS: So you could do that in a regular school year.

SW: A regular school year as well as going over the summer.

TS: Was it a nine month term in Adairsville?

SW: When I started it was not. Let's see, was it? I'm not really certain about that one, but I know it wasn't long that if not that it became nine months. Because Adairsville didn't get out of school to do the farming at that time.

TS: What about at Noble Hill. I guess that was pretty much a rural community. Was that a nine month term or was it more of a . . .

SW: No, seven, two.

TS: Seven, two. So you did get nine months, it just wasn't consecutive.

SW: That's right.

TS: Well, that's good. That was a lot more than what a lot of rural schools did.

SW: Well, we did seven and two.

TS: Where did you go to college?

SW: I finally ended up going to Ft. Valley State College. But I had gone to the summer schools in Atlanta, and then there was a college in Forsyth, Georgia.

TS: That's what became Ft. Valley, wasn't it?

SW: Well, it was a part of it, I think, and probably did become. I never did know if it did. But anyway, that was where I would do my summer studies, some of my summer studies.

TS: Some of them. Some in Atlanta and some in Forsyth.

SW: Some in Atlanta and some at Forsyth and then on to Ft. Valley.

TS: That was my understanding that the school moved from Forsyth to Ft. Valley.

SW: That's probably true, it probably did. Ft. Valley. And the final year I was offered a scholarship to go to Ft. Valley State for the year '44-'45. In the meantime I had gotten married; we didn't talked about that

TS: No, when did you get married?

SW: I got married in 1941.

TS: What was your husband's name?

SW: My husband was named Dan W. Wheeler, Sr. It was actually Daniel Webster Wheeler, was Sr. when our son was born. After we were married in '41, in June, in '42 he was called into the service, and he went away in service. That was another reason I decided I could go and spend a year at Ft. Valley State; because he was in service. At that time, his final area of service was in Hawaii and didn't get back until I had completed that year. When I completed that year, that's when I did my final--the nine years I said that the final was here in Cartersville at Summer Hill where I had completed my junior high school.

TS: Was your husband in the Army or the Navy?

SW: He was in the Army, Air Force. Never to fly but in the Air Force, staff.

TS: Were you all aware of the Tuskegee Airmen back then? Was that. . . ?

SW: Yes, we were aware, because one of the sons of Beatrice and J. S. Morgan was killed as a flyer from here. So we were quite aware of that area.

TS: What did your husband do in the Air Force? Was he like a mechanic. You say he didn't actually fly in the planes.

SW: No, he was a record keeper, something of that nature. He was a corporal.

TS: So that allowed you to finish your bachelor's degree.

SW: Yes.

TS: Did you have any children by that time?

SW: No.

TS: So that was an advantage then, I guess in terms of getting through school.

SW: That was an advantage.

TS: Let me ask you one or two other questions about Adairsville before we move on beyond that. I know in 1937 the state appropriated funds for free textbooks for the first time, and also I've heard stories in lots of communities where it was really unfair on the textbooks that the new books would always go to the white schools and then after they were worn out they'd go to the black schools. Was that your experience in Bartow County?

SW: Yes, that was my early experience in Bartow County. I don't remember exactly the year when that changed, but I do remember that it did change.

TS: Oh, it did?

SW: It did change. Students were given new books, not the passed on ones.

TS: Well, apparently in Atlanta it lasted all the way up until the 1950s, at least that the books were handed down.

SW: Yes.

TS: Well, you graduated from Ft. Valley right about the time that World War II was ending. Then what did you do then?

SW: Well, I was interviewed for a job as a Jeanes supervisor, but that required that I take training for that. My training was offered to begin that summer after I finished Ft. Valley State. If I took the courses I could begin the work as a Jeanes supervisor. But that work would carry me to south Georgia, and I had been accustomed to the hills and mountains of north Georgia. I didn't want to go there. Also my husband was going to get out of service, so I certainly didn't want to be that far away where I couldn't work. So Dr. Robert Cousins, who was in charge of Negro education at that time, was one of the persons who did the interview with me. He said to me, "If you will go and take the course, the first course at least, for supervision, at Atlanta University, this summer--that was the summer of '45--I'll see if I can't help you to get a job at Cartersville. I'll talk to Bartow County in Cartersville about a Jeanes supervisor." And that he did. That was the year that I taught at Cartersville, at Summer Hill, in sixth grade for one year and went back the next summer to Atlanta University, took the second course and, by that time, Dr. Cousins had arranged with Cartersville and Bartow County to employ a Jeanes supervisor.

TS: You were the first Jeanes supervisor for Bartow County?

SW: For this area. First I didn't know if I wanted to do that or not; but there was a little incident at school that caused me to make that decision.

TS: What was that?

SW: The incident was that during the time athletics was going on, teachers would sell and do their little part for the school at the games. Two or three teachers were always together to do this. When my time came about the rain came and the game was canceled. We thought we should have the next game that came up. But the next game coming up was Marietta's game, and it was always well attended. The question was, would it be fair for us to have that day or for the group who it had been given to already. We had to vote on it, and the principal voted with that other group. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, because it made me decide, yes, I'm going to take this course and take this Jeanes supervisor. That's how I got into Jeanes supervision. I went that summer. By that time my husband had returned, and he decided that he would take the grant to go to barber school that was in Atlanta also. So that just worked out real well for us.

TS: Why don't you talk a little bit about what a Jeanes supervisor did.

SW: Well, a Jeanes supervisor was responsible for working with the rural black schools to improve them in any way that she could--I think most of us were ladies at that time--and that was really our responsibility. In fact, sometimes we said we kind of served as the black superintendent.

TS: You know, I had read that, that they were almost like superintendents.

SW: That's right, we were given that kind of responsibility.

TS: What all were some of the things that you would do when you would go to the different schools?

SW: Well, we were responsible for seeing that they got the textbooks they needed; we were responsible to help them with any lunch programs that were coming about at that time; we didn't have so many lunchroom but we did have lunch foods that were distributed to schools.

TS: Federal programs?

SW: Federal programs. We were responsible for that; we were responsible for helping them to improve the classroom teaching; we were responsible to work with the parents to help them to cooperate and make their schools better-- just total improvement of education for the children and for the community.

TS: What were some of the special problems of that era? We're talking now about the late '40s and into the '50s. Were there still a lot of the public health problems that once existed like hookworm and pellagra and those kinds of things?

SW: I never heard too much about that in our community, but we were responsible to see that the health of the children and the school environment were such that it would not interfere with their education. So we had to work with the health department and have the nurses to come in and give the injections and whatever was necessary. That was our responsibility to see that it was done.

TS: Did you have any authority over who the teachers were, over hiring the teachers?

SW: Yes, we did. That was one of the things. We recommended the teachers to the superintendent, and we really were the ones who went out and found the teachers that we wanted in particular in the schools.

TS: Where did you do your recruiting? Was it like at the colleges in the area?

SW: Yes, we recruited. I got information from colleges very often, and we recruited with anybody, any group that dealt with teaching. We went to them to ask them for recommendations and that sort of thing, explaining the kind of person we needed in the schools.

TS: I guess we should have spelled Jeanes; J-e-a-n-e-s?

SW: That's correct.

TS: I believe it was a lady from Philadelphia or somewhere that started I guess . . .

SW: Jeanes supervision.

TS: That gave the money originally or something to start this program?

SW: Anna T. Jeanes was the person.

TS: I believe she was Quaker, wasn't she?

SW: A Quaker.

TS: How many schools were under your supervision?

SW: When I started I had thirteen in the county and one in Cartersville. So there were fourteen schools that I worked with.

TS: Wow. That's a lot of travel.

SW: Yes, a lot of travel.

TS: Did you have your own automobile to go around?

SW: Yes, my husband had taught me how to drive much, much earlier; so I could drive.

TS: How were the roads at that time?

SW: Where my schools were, the roads weren't bad. They were in good shape. So I never had a real problem of that.

TS: Were they mainly dirt roads or paved roads by that time?

SW: Most of them were paved for the most part where the schools were. I can't think of any real problems I had with transportation.

TS: Did you get an allowance for travel?

SW: Yes, we did. We got an allowance for travel. I don't even remember how much the mileage but so much per mileage.

TS: Well, I guess as a Jeanes supervisor, you were making a lot more money than as a regular teacher, weren't you?

SW: Yes, yes.

TS: When was it that salaries became equitable without regard to race in Georgia? Was it always that way when you were teaching?

SW: No. I don't remember exactly when the change came, but I certainly remember that as long as I was teaching in the county schools that was the case. So evidently it changed somewhere in the early '40s or mid '40s or something of that kind.

TS: Was the teacher retirement system in place by this time?

SW: I hadn't heard very much about it if it was.

TS: You hadn't? So you didn't have a retirement plan until when?

SW: Until the state began to promote retirement funds.

TS: Do you remember about when that was?

SW: I sure don't. I guess I could recall somehow.

TS: Well, we can find out somewhere else, I guess, on that. I was just wondering if you had any real stories about that. When did you decide to work on a doctorate? Or did you decide to get a master's first and then a doctorate?

SW: Yes. Well, my master's idea started when I started the course on Jeanes supervision. I just kept going on, because I felt that I needed to know more about what education was all about and to voice its concern and to keep improving and advancing. That's when I decided to continue my work at Atlanta University working towards the master's degree.

TS: And you were going to get a master's in some kind of education . . .

SW: Yes, elementary education, I believe it was.

TS: By the way, looking back on it, did you feel like you had a really good education at Ft. Valley or were there deficiencies in it? How would you rate the education you received?

SW: Well, I thought the education at Ft. Valley State was certainly beyond medium; it may not have been superlative but it was beyond medium. I was very pleased with it. One of the things I think that I was so pleased with that I had an opportunity to work with people throughout the state and outside of the state as well in the educational process.

TS: Our county manager in Cobb County, David Hankerson graduated from Ft. Valley. I did an interview with him, and he was very pleased with the education that he got there. What about at Atlanta University, how was that?

SW: Well, now, I thought that Atlanta University's training was superior. I always did think it was superior, and I never had any regrets of anything that I was exposed to at Atlanta University.

- TS: Any teachers who stand out from your graduate training that had an influence on you? Or maybe by that time you're so mature that you don't need that kind of a mentoring influence anymore.
- SW: Well, I always remember the person who encouraged me to go on towards the doctorate and her name was Dr. Barbara Jackson. When I went back to work on my education doctorate, I had already done the degree before that. The reason I did that with that six-year certification was because I was one of those persons who always felt I'd like to have the highest possible salary that was offered to me. It was because of that that I went to the University of Kentucky. I had a scholarship offered through the Southern Education Foundation, and I spent that full year with my son who was four years old then. We spent that full year at the University of Kentucky in Lexington.
- TS: Oh. Your husband stayed down here, and you went to Lexington.
- SW: My husband stayed here. At that time he had developed a business that he was responsible for. So he stayed here and would come often. We would come back and forth during that year.
- TS: What was his business?
- SW: His business was he had a barber shop and a beauty parlor. He had taken on some other responsibilities. He was a pretty good carpenter. His daddy was that, and he had taken the training for that that the Army offered. So he did both of those things. Then he even worked awhile with the railway; so he could travel on the railroad without paying any . . .
- TS: Was it the GI Bill that paid when he went to barber school?
- SW: GI Bill did all of it.
- TS: So you had one son at that time.
- SW: Yes, born in 1950.
- TS: So this will be 1954 that you're up at Lexington. You said he was four years old, didn't you?
- SW: No, he was fourth grade.

TS: Fourth grade, oh. This is 1960?

SW: '59-'60. I guess he was fourth, fourth grade I thought.

TS: Sounds about right. So 1959 and '60 you were at the University of Kentucky, and this is where you got your six-year certificate?

SW: Yes, my six-year certification came from there. At that time the University of Georgia didn't accept us, you know. Of course, we didn't go there. But then later on when the state began to offer not just a certificate but a degree, accept a degree in--what do we call it, that six year--Education specialist.

TS: Specialist, right.

SW: So when it came up that the state offered the specialist degree, then I decided I wanted that degree too. But when I checked with the University of Kentucky at Lexington I found out that it would take me longer to change my certificate to a degree there than it would if I would go to the University of Georgia. And the University of Georgia at that time was accepting all of us, as such, and I could do this by weekend classes or summer classes. The only thing I had to do was establish residency. So I decided to do that.

TS: Okay, so now we're beyond '61, I guess.

SW: Yes, this is about '76.

TS: Oh, '76.

SW: Yes, we'd been out, it was a good length of time before that decision was made. That's when I went there and completed my work for that specialist degree.

TS: Okay, from '61 to '76 or '59-60 you're at University of Kentucky. Now what did you complete there?

SW: The certification for the six-year.

TS: And then what is it you get at Georgia? What's different about what you get at Georgia?

SW: Well, at that time, in '59-'60, the state of Georgia was not accepting the specialist degree as such, it just said certification. So that's when I went on to Georgia, I went there to get the degree, not just the certificate. But I got the pay for it, the state of Georgia paid for the six-year certification at that time.

TS: And then after you finished that, is that when you started working on your doctorate?

SW: Yes. I came the summer, I think, that I finished. By the way, I'll always remember this; I didn't go back to be a part of the graduation. The reason I didn't do this, I thought, I'm not going to do this because when I was working for the six-year certification, Georgia didn't want me then, I won't bother now. [laughter] That was just a little idea; I'm not going back to do that.

TS: Right.

SW: But that's when I came on and started the same summer, I believe. The reason I went back to get my doctorate was I wanted to write the story of the integration of Bartow County schools, because I thought we had done a superior job and that I'd like to record it. So that's why I went back there. When I talked about Dr. Barbara Jackson--it was she who said to me when I was working on this and taking some of the courses that were necessary, "I think you ought to move this towards your doctorate." It was for that reason that I went on and began working with this all during the total period to write the history.

TS: You'd written a paper for Dr. Jackson, and she's saying let's expand that?

SW: That's right.

TS: What year did you get your doctorate?

SW: '78.

TS: And the integration of the Bartow County system was about ten years before that?

SW: Right. '68. Let's see, '67-'68, I believe.

TS: Marietta was also '67. Why don't you tell the story that you wrote about in your dissertation. What made it such a successful experience, do you think?

SW: Well, I think it was the way in which it was conducted. We had a superintendent at that time, Carl Merrill, and he was listed as one of the most influential people in Bartow County of the twenty people. Of course, I was listed there too as one of those persons along with him. And I think it was a fact that he moved integration in a very smooth fashion without community disturbances and

very peacefully. What I thought was it was fairly done. All the schools became integrated, all the trustee boards at that time became integrated at every school. He had taken me to his office and integrated the Bartow County school superintendent's office with a secretary. So he led the way in that sense before he tried to work on the other part of integration. And I just think it was done professionally. Well.

TS: His name was Merrill?

SW: Carl A. Merrill.

TS: What was your title? Were you a Jeanes supervisor until this time?

SW: No, we had changed our names to curriculum director. So I was working as the curriculum director for Bartow County Schools. In the meantime, I worked also with two other systems as a part of my Jeanes supervision.

TS: What were the other two systems?

SW: One was Gordon County which it's only school was at Calhoun. The other was Paulding County and it had one school, Matthews High School. Bartow County had then integrated all of its black schools into one school, so I had these four schools to work with and not the little rural schools.

TS: Was Matthews in Dallas?

SW: Dallas.

TS: And you say all the black schools were merged together before integration.

SW: Yes, prior to integration. Three I think it was.

TS: Into a consolidated school.

SW: Yes. '55 they were consolidated in Bartow.

TS: When integration took place, did the black school continue in existence as an integrated school?

SW: Yes. I believe it had been an elementary school, grades one through eight. I believe it became a middle school after integration. The principal that was there remained as the black principal of that school, but it was integrated.

TS: That's unusual.

SW: We thought it was unusual, but it was done so well.

TS: What happened to Summer Hill High School? Did it close down at that time or did it become a middle school?

SW: Summer Hill, as I remember, became a middle school, I believe it was, and partly was integrated, but it was not attended that much; enrollment was not that great, I don't think, as I can remember.

TS: Was integration something that was universally wanted by African-Americans or was there any resistance from African-Americans to the change?

SW: I don't think there was resistance from African-Americans; some people were a little fearful of what would happen, but other than that I don't think there was that much resistance.

TS: I had heard before that some of the students felt that the segregated schools at least gave them a kind of a nurturing environment where they were protected where sometimes in integrated schools they felt like they had kind of been thrown to the wolves, maybe.

SW: Perhaps that was true. In the meantime, the only thing that I say that we might have suffered was the fact that the black teachers in all black schools were like parents for children. The families sort of turned over parent responsibility to these teachers. That was lost when integration came. And that probably was some feelings that were expressed at times, you know; that no longer did they feel that someone was there who really cared for them deeply. That's possibly the only thing I know.

TS: Do you think there was a difference in teaching style of white teachers compared to black teachers?

SW: Well, I think so in many ways, but I believe that black teachers worked harder to become a part of the school program, because of the fact that they had been separated prior to this and had been taught, I guess, that white teachers were better than they. They wanted to make sure that that was not true.

TS: What about from the white community? Was there any resistance to desegregation in Bartow County or did they accept it readily? How would you describe it?

SW: Well, I'm sure that there was some resistance, but it

didn't surface to hinder what was going on. I thought that was the success of the whole thing that even though there may have been resentment that it didn't surface.

TS: You think this was because of strong leadership from the top?

SW: I think it's strong leadership caused this to happen; I think we had a strong board of education too that had been convinced that this was the way we should go. And you know, there was another thing that came up: the school systems that failed to follow the federal regulations lost funds, and the school systems who moved ahead gained funds as a result. I think that was another kind of thing that made some school systems move ahead. And I'm sure we were like that here, because it was made known that we have gained this amount of funds as a result of what we have done, and we'll get some more if we continue. And that's the way it was.

TS: Was Bartow County under a court order to desegregate or did they do it voluntarily?

SW: I don't think we were under court order. No more than what was expected through the federal government.

TS: Everybody knew it was coming.

SW: Right.

TS: But they did it before they had to. How long did you remain as a curriculum supervisor?

SW: I started as a curriculum supervisor for the system of Bartow County in '61 or '62, and I remained there until I retired in '79, I believe.

TS: So you finished your doctorate, and then one year later you retired?

SW: That's right, that's true. One year later.

TS: Let's talk for a few minutes about what you've done with the Noble Hill Wheeler Memorial since you retired, because that was I guess in the '80s that the effort started, wasn't it, to save the old school?

SW: Yes. Well, my first effort was to see if I could get my grandfather's home place on the National Register. When I inquired through the state of Georgia and the Department of Natural Resources what I should do, the first thing they said I should do was to get someone from

that department to come and look at the home place that I was trying to get on the register. When this person came from that department and looked at this house and, by the way, she is the person who is in charge of the Herndon House now, Carole Merritt.

TS: Yes.

SW: Carole was with the Department of Natural Resources at that time. When she came and looked at this house, she said we've done too much to it for it to be considered a part of the National Register, because there were things like siding. So when she finished telling me that I told her I would like to take her to see this school that at that time looked like pictures showing that it . . .

TS: It's in bad shape.

SW: The pictures showed that it's in bad shape. When she looked at that she said, "Now, this can be brought up to be placed on the register perhaps." That's how we got started. In the meantime, Chief Justice [Robert] Benham had carried his son up there to see what a rural school looked like years ago. He was concerned about the whole area and talked to me concerning this. We decided to get together and bring a group together to talk about preserving that old building. That's how we got started.

TS: Now Justice Benham, what was he at that time? He was not on the State Supreme Court yet, was he?

SW: Not yet.

TS: Was he a Superior Court Judge?

SW: Superior Court Judge, I believe, at that time.

TS: Okay, so he's the mover and shaker along with you in getting this started?

SW: Yes, he was. He was right there along with it. Later on, you know, he couldn't participate too much because of his new positions. So he worked with us at a distance sort of as an advisory sort.

TS: So you all set out to save the old school then.

SW: That's what we did.

TS: What did you have to do? Who owned the property at that time?

SW: My sister-in-law [Bertha W. Wheeler] owned that property and lived next door to this school. We began talking to people who had some concerns or who had been former students of the center, and we decided to bring us all together and sit down and talk about this. Out of this setting came the discussion about what we needed to do, how we'd get about it, how we'd try to divide up the property if we could, and how we would move beyond this. We met at my sister-in-law's house that was next door. We approached her then by saying, "Are you willing to sell us the building?" And she said, "Let me think about it." We decided then we would meet again soon and talk about it. She came up at the second meeting with her decision. She said, "I'm going to give the building in memory of my husband and my father-in-law who was the builder that built it." Of course, we then jumped for that. We made decisions about what we were going to have to do, how we would get started, and all the things that would be necessary, and how we'd get some funding for it. Our funding first was everybody was going to give a donation for postage to contact people and that sort of thing. I thought at the first one we gave one dollar each. Anyway, we didn't have too much money, but we had enough postage to get in touch with people, and it just grew from that. Who would do some volunteer work, and who could we get in touch with to ask about other funding, and all of that. It grew from that start.

TS: Who all helped fund it? Was it Georgia Humanities Council?

SW: Department of Natural Resources, I believe, and then we wrote grants; we asked for donations; we had fund raisers ourselves; and we contacted as many of our former students as we could for assistance.

TS: It reminds me so much of your stories of how your school was built in the first place.

SW Yes, very much, very much.

TS: How long did it take before you managed to renovate the building?

SW: I think we started in '82. Then we really didn't get too much done until '84 and '85. In fact, we didn't open it until '87; so along that line--five years before we really got going; so we had a lot of things, fund raising and everything else and volunteer service to do a lot of the work. Bartow County joined in with us to help us with this whole idea.

TS: Good. I'm trying to remember, I've been taking my classes up there for a long time. What year did it actually open to the public?

SW: '87.

TS: In '87? Yes, I've probably been taking classes just about that long out there.

SW: Yes, not too long after that.

TS: Well, tell me a little bit about the services you provide through the Noble Hill Wheeler Memorial?

SW: Well, the services we try to provide is open to all the communities around us for tours, for meetings, and particularly for students, young class students--we decided to ask the third grade classes and the seventh or eighth grade classes, wherever they taught Georgia history in the systems and then some of the class from the social science division to come annually on a tour of the center. We didn't say others couldn't come, but we just targeted those groups.

TS: Right.

SW: That's what we've done for our students, and we've had good response. We've asked organizations to hold their meetings there, and we've had traveling exhibits that we could advertise and let people know about. Just a number of other little things we've gone through to make sure that the center does attract people in the area and get more knowledge about what our heritage was like.

TS: Well, it's certainly a wonderful thing that you've done with the school to have it open to the community. You're also active in the Etowah Valley Historical Society I know and have been for a long time. Are there other organizations that you're involved in now?

SW: Well, American Association of University Women, I've been a member of that for a good, long time; Delta Kappa Gamma is another group that I work with.

TS: Is that an educational sorority?

SW: It's an education association, more like an association. The Retired Teachers, of course, that I still work with; the Bartow County Library Board which really was one of the things that I worked with very, very early starting our little center on Jones Street here in the Summer Hill area.

TS: Is this the Summer Hill area around here?

SW: No, this is not the Summer Hill area. The Summer Hill area is more of a hill area along there, that way.

TS: About how far from here?

SW: It's about three blocks to begin with, about three blocks and then it covers a good area that is identified as Summer Hill.

TS: The other side of Cherokee Street, is that the way you're pointing?

SW: Cherokee Avenue. No, I'm pointing more to North Bartow Street that goes around that way.

TS: Oh, okay, yes, I know where Jones is.

SW: You know where Jones is, Jones intersects Church Street.

TS: Yes, I know exactly where you're talking about.

SW: This area was known as the West End area; so that makes the difference and Summer Hill.

TS: Well, how many children do you have?

SW: One.

TS: Just the one.

SW: Two grandchildren. And they're all in Birmingham.

TS: Well, that's not too far away.

SW: Not too far, two and a half hours if you're driving.

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