

**Lemon Street Schools Oral History Collection
Marietta City Schools System, 2019-2021
Brenda Russaw McCrae Interview
Conducted by James Newberry
May 20, 2021**

Full Transcript

Interviewer: All right. So, this is James Newberry. I'm here with Ms. McCrae on Thursday, May 20th, 2021 at her home in Marietta, Georgia. Thank you for meeting with me. Do you agree to this interview?

McCrae: I do.

Interviewer: Could you tell me your full name?

McCrae: Brenda Francine McCrae.

Interviewer: What's your birthday?

McCrae: 7/3/56.

Interviewer: Where were you born?

McCrae: Fort McPherson in Atlanta.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

McCrae: Frances James and Ralph Russaw.

Interviewer: Where did they grow up?

McCrae: My father grew up in Butler, Georgia, and my mother was in Marietta.

Interviewer: Your mother was here in Marietta. So, where did she attend school?

McCrae: She attended the Lemon Street School System, Perkinson, whatever the other name for it.

Interviewer: What did your parents do for a living?

McCrae: My father was in the service. He was a military. He was in Air Force. My mother didn't work till the move back here, and I was in high school.

Interviewer: Do you know what age he was when he joined the military?

McCrae: I would guess 20, 21.

Interviewer: And so, is that why you were at Fort McPhearson?

McCrae: Correct.

Interviewer: So, I know that you were born here in Georgia, but at a very young age, you moved.

McCrae: Yeah, we travel. We moved from spot to spot, and then ended up back here when I was in the ninth grade, eighth grade, ninth grade.

Interviewer: What were some of those other places that you lived?

McCrae: We lived in Italy. We lived in Florida, Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., and then back here.

Interviewer: And so, were the schools you were attending at that time mostly military-based schools?

McCrae: They were all military, except for the one in Virginia. It was a state school.

Interviewer: I assume because they were on military basis, they were integrated schools.

McCrae: They were. Yeah. Everything was integrated. We ate and came home for lunch and went back to school and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: In that nine year or so period when you were living away, how often did you visit Marietta?

McCrae: We visited every year, except for when we went overseas, of course. When we were in Italy, we didn't, but we visited once, twice a year.

Interviewer: Who were you visiting?

McCrae: My grandmother, Analie Porter, my other grandmother, Rosa James, and then all the extended families from there. Yeah.

Interviewer: What did it mean to you to come home? How did you feel about visiting?

McCrae: I thought it was cool. Coming to Georgia to visit was... Back then, there wasn't any internet. So, coming to Georgia, all the kids would say, "What's the latest songs?" because they were behind as far as catching up with the latest songs and the latest dances. So, we shared that. Whatever the latest latest was, we bought it South.

Interviewer: Did you drive in?

McCrae: We drove in.

Interviewer: When you came down, were there things about town or being in the South that you noticed different than where you were living in other places?

McCrae: No, I think my father just—We traveled in a manner that was accustomed to Black people in how they traveled back then. We packed lunches. We didn't eat in the restaurants, stopped to get gas. We stopped in rest places or whatever and ate. We had towels that we had already washed and then Ziploc bags, we washed our hands with. It was pretty much zoom. My father traveled... Most of the time, when we traveled, we traveled at night. We didn't travel in the daytime for the most time.

Interviewer: Why is that?

McCrae: I think safety.

Interviewer: Did you all have conversations about it? Did he talk to you all about that or was it just something you observed?

McCrae: It was just something I observed and then picked up on at the end of my childhood. It was one of those things I wasn't told. But at the end, as I grew older, it came to me, "Okay. That's why he did what he did."

Interviewer: Was there a place at which this began or was it just everywhere for the most part?

McCrae: It was pretty much everywhere. I mean, during our travels, I remember we were going to Alabama and he stopped because he had to the bathroom. It wasn't pretty when he stopped and got out. It wasn't a very nice situation. A couple of white guys got out and there were pickup trucks. Back then, everyone had their little rifle shotgun in the back of the window. They came over and ask them where he was from. "Are you from New York, boy?" and that kind of stuff. Yeah, it wasn't pretty. I remember that like it was yesterday.

Interviewer: When he got back in the car-

McCrae: Oh, he didn't get out the car. They got him before he got out the car. He kept the gun underneath the seat. He reached down to get it and look back at me and my brother and he didn't grab it. I guess he felt like that might not be the best thing to do.

Interviewer: Did y'all talk about it at all or anything?

McCrae: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

McCrae: It's just one of those things you just observe and keep going.

Interviewer: Which of your parents was more talkative?

McCrae: Well, my father didn't talk much at all as far as that kind of stuff goes. My mother, just depending on the subject and the time, would talk about things, but not to that depth. We didn't talk about it. Yeah. They just told us what to do and what not to do, and we followed their lead.

Interviewer: Back here in Marietta, where did your grandparents lived? You mentioned your two grandmothers. Where did they live?

McCrae: My father's mother lived across the street and my mother's mother lived two houses down.

Interviewer: Did you get far beyond this area when you would visit?

McCrae: Yeah. I had an aunt that lives on Washington Avenue.

Interviewer: What was her name?

McCrae: Anna Kate Sanders. I had an aunt that lived down in the projects, where they tore that down. That's Lucy James. I had another aunt that lived in Baptist Town. I had an uncle that lived in Smyrna. I have another uncle that lives in Marietta on the other side of the railroad tracks. I had another uncle that lived in Marietta at the time, and then he moved to Acworth. I had another uncle that stayed in my grandmother's house from time to time when he was in town.

Interviewer: Did you go up on the square at all when you were here?

McCrae: Yeah, I go to the square. I walk past the square on the way to school sometimes. I had a couple of friends who I walk with and they would walk that way, but I didn't patronize the square.

Interviewer: Why is that?

McCrae: One day, I remember some of the classmates were going in to get ice cream. I observed the people behind the counter are waiting on the white people and making the Black people wait. I just said, "Well, I don't need ice cream that bad," and I just came on. I've never, ever been in the Strand Theatre, never. We went to the theaters, Roxy and The Foxy down in Atlanta in high school. I just don't have a desire to go in there. Nothing about it today is wrong. It's just I've never been in there.

Interviewer: Right. So, you returned to Marietta in about 1969?

McCrae: Correct.

Interviewer: Where did you enter school at that time?

McCrae: I went to Park Street for one year, and then the high school, Marietta High School the last four years.

Interviewer: Who was your teacher at Park Street? Do you remember?

McCrae: Nope.

Interviewer: Was that eight grade?

McCrae: Yeah. I don't remember. I know we had somewhat split classes. I know Jenny Carter was there, but that's about it.

Interviewer: What do you mean split classes?

McCrae: Well, when I came to Georgia, we were doing the high school thing. We change classes. We went to math, English. We had different teachers for different specific things. Here, I think we had maybe one teacher that taught it all and another teacher that taught maybe one item or something like that.

Interviewer: How did the education compare?

McCrae: Oh, it was not even the same.

Interviewer: How?

McCrae: I would give Georgia a two and the Virginia a five, if five being the highest. I mean, I left Virginia, we were doing science labs and dissecting animals and all kinds of things. I came to Georgia, and we were... I felt like I was in elementary school. Plus, in Virginia, I was in junior high. So, when I came back to Georgia, I was in elementary again.

Interviewer: So, it felt like a real backwards movement.

McCrae: Oh, it was. It did feel like it was.

Interviewer: So back here in Marietta, how did you get to Park Street? Was that walking?

McCrae: I walked to high school and elementary.

Interviewer: Every day?

McCrae: Every day.

Interviewer: Okay. You said that, I think, your mom did go to work at one point?

McCrae: She went to work somewhere at the end of my high school year, high school term.

Interviewer: Okay. What was your dad doing when you came back?

McCrae: He worked for the Department of Labor.

Interviewer: So, he retired from the military?

McCrae: He retired from the military. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you tell me about an average day. You started at Marietta High. From waking up in the morning, can you take me through your day?

McCrae: Get up, get dressed, eat, walk to school. Usually, we'd walk with one or two classmates as a norm. We pick up some more as you go down the road. On the corner of Lemon and Cherokee Street, there was a Texaco gas station and there was a gentleman in there. I don't know. Whatever reason, I can't remember his name, but he sold candy. So, some people might stop by there in the morning and get some candy and some may not. We just walked to school, go to school, take our classes and walk back home. And then some people might stop in there and get candy on the way back.

Interviewer: And then this was '69, '70, I mean, right after the demolition of Lemon Street High and this were full integration of the schools. What did you know about Lemon Street High School at that point? Did you have any conception that a school had been there and that students had been going there, and then it was suddenly done and demolished?

McCrae: Yeah, I was fully aware of the integration process. I did go to the school as, I don't know what they call it, a visitor with one of my cousins one time. And so, I got to walk around and that kind of stuff. I do know that they had a very good band at the time, because for some reason or another, I remember them play a couple of times. I know they had a good football team back in the day, just from everybody talking about this player or that player or whatever, and how they beat up on their high school and that kind of thing. So, I do know that the school was there, and I was fully aware that things had changed when I got here, and everybody was going to an integrated school system.

Interviewer: Was there a talk about that? I mean, I'm just trying to imagine. I mean, were people like, "Yeah, we're going here. It's a good thing that it's happened," or "We really miss Lemon Street"? I mean, what was the mood?

McCrae: I think the generation, probably two... I mean, not generation, two or three classes above me, that like that, that they were there, but they really didn't want to be there because they didn't feel like they were getting treated as well as they were at Lemon Street. There was a commodity at Lemon Street. There was this home feeling. The football players, they weren't happy with the integration because it felt like Vince Johnson wasn't playing them the way they thought they should be played. I remember a couple of incidences, where one Black gentleman who ran the ball down and get to the 10-yard line and then they'd give it to the... The white players get the touchdown and that kind of stuff. So, if you wanted to get a scholarship, it's not helping you when you don't get to play your full best, play to your full capacity.

Interviewer: I see. What was the ratio of white to Black students at Marietta High when you were there?

McCrae: If I had to guess, I'd probably say 15, 20, just guessing.

Interviewer: Okay. How many white students in your classes?

McCrae: I'd say if it was two or three Blacks in there, that was probably the max versus how many were we within the classroom. I don't remember how many we had in our class.

Interviewer: Did you associate with mostly Black classmates or white classmates?

McCrae: I guess mostly the Black ones, because we had to walk together. We had to be together. We were all on the same page. We all had the same community. If you want to go to the rec, we all... I mean, there weren't any white school into the recreation center.

Interviewer: You were going to see each other outside of school much more so than you would have. Were there students of other ethnicities or backgrounds?

McCrae: There was very few, very few. I would guess that there's probably one or 2% of other nationalities. It's not the same today as it was when I was in school. I would go there, and I was like, "Wow, this is amazing."

Interviewer: Yeah. Can you describe the layout of Marietta High as you remember it?

McCrae: It's changed so much. I know we had an old gym, or what they call the old gym. They had a pool at the time. There was an outdoor pool. The gym was like the one in that movie. Was its Hustler? Not Hustler, a famous one that everybody... Hoosiers. Yeah, it looked just like that. I remember that. The school was just... I mean, it wasn't as big as it is now, so there's... Yeah. But other than that, I don't remember a whole lot more about it.

Interviewer: Do you recall teachers that impacted you or meant something to you?

McCrae: Ms. Collier, she taught math, algebra. I really liked her. And then we have... She had a funny name. Why can't it slip me? Oh, I can't remember her name. It'll come to me later. And then we had Ms. Love. Ms. Austin was the principal. What was the other principal's name? She was good. It was a white lady that was the real principal. Ms. Austin was the assistant. We had Mr. Hill was there. Mr. Walker was there. He taught... Oh, what's it called? Not mechanics. Woodwork.

Interviewer: Chaff.

McCrae: Yeah, chaff. We had a home economics teacher. Her name just slipped my mind too. She was a Black lady, so we did that.

Interviewer: How many Black teachers? I mean, not an exact number, but I guess a percentage.

McCrae: I think I had two actual... No, only one I actually, Ms. Eloise, not Eloise. What was her name? That's her sister. Ms. Wright, okay, that's her maiden name. She taught home

economics. She's the only one that I've had that was Black. The rest of them were other colors or all white.

Interviewer: Yeah. One of the things I feel like I've heard or has been repeated through many conversations is that most of the Lemon Street teachers went elsewhere. So, there wasn't a lot of carry-over except maybe Coach Wilkins.

McCrae: Yeah, Coach Wilkins was there.

Interviewer: Yeah. What kind of a student were you?

McCrae: I was probably a B student.

Interviewer: What made a teacher good in your eyes?

McCrae: Well, when they taught, and you listened, and you could pick up on what they were saying and it made sense. They were able to explain things in a manner to everyone. Yeah.

Interviewer: What subjects did you do particularly well in?

McCrae: Math.

Interviewer: That's completely foreign to me. So, I know you were a cheerleader and I want to talk more about that, but were there other extracurricular activities that you were involved in?

McCrae: We have Future Black Leaders. I was in that. Cheerleading back then was done for football and basketball, so it wasn't two squads like it is now, or I think it is now anyway. I did track. I did do some tennis. But other than that, that was... I think we had a home economics club, but I can't remember that's true or not. But yeah, I know I did the track and the cheerleading. And that's probably about it, besides the Future Leaders of America.

Interviewer: Were you encouraged to do that by your parents, or did you want to?

McCrae: No. No. My dad wasn't too big of a fan of me being a cheerleader, but my mom was.

Interviewer: How did it come about?

McCrae: I just went out and tried out. I came home and said I'm... I didn't think I'd make it, but I came home and said, "I've made the cheerleading squad." They said, "Oh, okay."

Interviewer: Now, is it correct that you were the first Black cheerleader?

McCrae: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: Were there others who tried out?

McCrae: Yeah, I'm sure there was others tried out way before me. I was the first Black freshman one, so I made the freshman squad and then I eventually moved up every year. But yeah, Donna Belfer was a cheerleader at the time, Virginia Shaw. I know that there was other that tried out, but just didn't make it.

Interviewer: So, there were others that already on the team that were older or on the squad that were older?

McCrae: Yeah. Virginia Shaw and Donna Belfer were older than me. I think they made the sophomore cheerleading squad and I was freshman.

Interviewer: How did you try out? Where did that take place? Who did you do it in front of?

McCrae: We did it in the gym. They had judges that came in and just judged the cheerleading squad. They tallied up and gave us the... Said, "This is who it is." And after I graduated for a few years, I did the judging too. So, I came back and judged the new ones. Ironically, my daughter-in-law is a cheerleading coach, so it just kept...

Interviewer: It keeps coming back. All right. So, you said you're talking about a freshmen squad, a sophomore squad, and I assume junior and senior.

McCrae: Correct.

Interviewer: So, on the freshmen squad, when you joined, were the others all white?

McCrae: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Interviewer: How did you get on with the other cheerleaders?

McCrae: I got along fine. Yeah, it wasn't a problem.

Interviewer: Were there any issues, anything that you've ever encountered in that experience?

McCrae: No. I mean, I pretty much just came to practice, practice and came home. That was pretty much the gist of my cheerleading experienced. Now, as we got into the junior-senior squad, they would have gatherings. Sometimes they'd go out for breakfast or whatever, have sleepovers or whatever. I didn't do a whole lot of those. I might've gone. If it was somebody that I felt like I was comfortable with, I would've gone to the house and had breakfast with them, but it just wasn't... One, it wasn't me. Two, I'm a picky eater. So, I'm like, "Okay. If they're going to have omelets and blah, blah, blah, I think I just stay home and eat what I want to eat." I know they had gatherings that they did. But yeah, that's something they did, and I hung out with my friends.

Interviewer: You've mentioned multiple sports that cheerleaders were cheering. So, were you doing it for basketball and football?

McCrae: Correct.

Interviewer: Okay. How much time was taken up with practice?

McCrae: We practiced three or four times a week.

Interviewer: All after school?

McCrae: After school.

Interviewer: So, how long were you in there? All four years?

McCrae: Correct.

Interviewer: Okay. So, let's transition to the homecoming queen. Talk to me about this from the beginning, how this played out for you.

McCrae: They talked about the homecoming queen and it's time to nominate. And so, one of the teachers made a comment during class that, "Hey, we should nominate Brenda Russaw," at the time, and I didn't take nothing about it. I went on about my business. And then later I found out I was going to be part of the homecoming team. And then the night of the homecoming, me and my cousin, my cousin was my escort, Johnny James, and we went out on the field and they announced my name. One side of the crowd was with their mouth open, and the other part was, "Yay!" I was just like, "Okay. Did they really say my name? Yeah, I guess they did." So, I was just in shock that I was chosen.

Interviewer: Do you know how that process was done and who voted and how the choices were made and things like that?

McCrae: Every student voted.

Interviewer: Yes. So how did you feel getting that honor from, I mean, to be very honest, a mostly white student body?

McCrae: I felt good, then, too, I also felt like, okay, there was a couple of people on there that were really popular that I thought would probably have gotten it. So, I think hindsight being 2020, I may have gotten that because the votes were split. I think I had enough white votes to... I must've had enough white votes to get me where I ended up. I mean, I don't think that every white person in that school did not like me or anything like that. So, it was an honor to be representative for the school.

Interviewer: I think you've painted yourself as maybe, I don't know, shy, maybe or more at home.

McCrae: I was a homebody. I mean, I'd speak and say, "Hi. How are you?" and that kind of stuff, but I wasn't wanting to really have a whole lot of conversations with people. I mean, nothing, just pretty basic stuff, "How was school? Blah, blah, blah. What about this, that and the other?" That's just my nature.

Interviewer: I see.

McCrae: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: What was the response of your family to the-

McCrae: Oh, they were ecstatic.

Interviewer: And then the community?

McCrae: I think they had more understanding of it than I did. Yeah. Yeah. The community was really ecstatic too, so it was nice.

Interviewer: Can you talk to me a little bit about your goals for the future when you were in high school? What were you planning to do after high school?

McCrae: Oh, that's a bad question, because I didn't do any of that. I wanted to go to interior design, and I wanted to go to with the equipment or any school that I could do interior designing. From my perspective, they were all out of state. My father said, "Oh, no, you're not going out of state." So, I thought, "Okay." So, I ended up at West Georgia, which they didn't have anything in home economics really. So, I ended up there. I didn't get to do what I wanted to do, because I liked to sew and all that kind of stuff. Back then, Ralph Lauren was the item and my dad was like, "You can't make money selling clothes." I'm like, "Look at Ralph Lauren. Everybody's got his name on their butt." Then he bring his stuff, "Can you fix this for me?" I'm like... But it's okay. I know a part of it was the cost. He didn't want to pay that out-of-state tuition fee. He probably didn't have it either. So, that was the thing. And then my brother ended up going to Georgia Tech. So, I guess he figured for me with going out of town, so just go to tech.

Interviewer: What did you study at West Georgia?

McCrae: I was studying psychology and social.

Interviewer: What drew you to those or what prompted that choice?

McCrae: I just liked just figuring out society as a whole, because I don't talk a lot, but I do a lot of observing. People telling me that, "Oh, God. She sees everything." I do. I just sit back. I don't say anything. I just absorb. So, that was one of the reasons.

Interviewer: How long were you there?

McCrae: I was there two and a half years.

Interviewer: Why did you not stay?

McCrae: I fell in love and married, got married.

Interviewer: Was it a guy there? Okay. Do you want to talk about that at all? Okay. So, when you fell in love and got married, where did you go? Where did moved?

McCrae: Moved to D.C., and stayed there for about two years, no, a year, and then came back to Georgia.

Interviewer: Why D.C.?

McCrae: That's where he was from. Plus, I had been in D.C., so getting back to the North was one of my things like, "Yay, let's go."

Interviewer: As an adult moving back there, what did you notice about the differences between D.C. and here in Marietta?

McCrae: D.C. is much fast paced. Yeah, this is a slow pace.

Interviewer: Did you work?

McCrae: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I did.

Interviewer: What did you do?

McCrae: I worked for Safeway.

Interviewer: And then I know you went from there to... Was it First National?

McCrae: Yeah, I came back here and went to First National.

Interviewer: Okay. And then when did you start at Kroger?

McCrae: I started in Kroger in '79.

Interviewer: Was that here?

McCrae: Yeah.

Interviewer: How long did you work at Kroger?

McCrae: '78. Sorry, September '78. It's 42 years.

Interviewer: So, you retired in 2020.

McCrae: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's this year, 2021.

Interviewer: Oh, goodness.

McCrae: Yeah. So, September would have been my anniversary.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you tell me about your career trajectory there at Kroger? What you were doing?

McCrae: Well, being at Kroger, kind of got me back into that home economics thing, because then I could design, because I started off in the deli, so I could do the baking. We have cookies and sandwiches and all that kind of stuff. And then as I got out, put displays together. So, it was more of that, "Let's put the puzzle." Because I kind of like put the puzzles together, so it was something where I could put the puzzles together and then build displays and make them look good. So, it got me back on the home economics side of the field, which I enjoy.

Interviewer: I see. Just clarify for me how long you've been back in Marietta.

McCrae: I came back in '79.

Interviewer: You have been here since then?

McCrae: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: Okay. Would you call it your hometown?

McCrae: Yeah.

Interviewer: How has it changed since you were a child?

McCrae: Oh, that's a wild question. Well, just this area right here has changed since I've been here, because all of this community that we're sitting in used to be all Black, I mean, from one corner to the other corner. Now, it's a mix of everything, which is not a bad thing. Back then, it was just everybody literally knew all of their neighbors and they knew all about all of their neighbors. They knew their mama's mama's. You see kids going on the street and you say, "Does your mama know where you are? I'm going to go tell her," that kind of thing. My kids could walk the streets, and everybody knew that that was my child. They knew my grandmother was up on the hill, so they knew if he did something wrong, they all... Everybody just knew. I mean, my aunt would watch... I mean, I could be sitting in here cooking, whatever, and everybody knew my kids were outside. They would keep an eye on, and I'd keep an eye on their kids and that's gone. I don't have kids anymore either. Still, when I talk to people, I go, "Well, so-and-so's house," and people look at me like, "Oh, who are you talking about?" I have to talk with somebody that's been around a while and they go, "Oh, you know..." Yeah.

Interviewer: So, you talked about it not being a bad thing, but I mean, is there a sense of loss?

McCrae: It is. It is, but that's just change because some people have died off. I mean, when they die off, it's just something different has to come about.

Interviewer: If newer people, younger people, people who don't have family lines here move in, what are your connections to the past, other than where you live?

McCrae: It's the trees, the house, the grass, the bushes. I mean, that's pretty much my connection. To be honest, the generation that's moving in now seems to be my age. I missed the fact that we don't have kids in the neighborhood. Everybody's got grandkids. And so, I really miss the fact that we don't have kids in the neighborhood.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your legacy, what you think your legacy is?

McCrae: I have no idea. I just made it one day at a time. Thank you, Jesus.

Interviewer: Well, I appreciate this.

McCrae: No problem.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

McCrae: No, I think that's it.

Interviewer: All right. Well, thank you so much, Ms. McCrae.

McCrae: You're welcome.