

Transcript of a Recorded Interview with Kenneth Bomar, 5 Dec 1978

I am conducting an interview with Kenneth Bomar, a retired school teacher. The interview was conducted by Bobby Graves, a student at Lindsey Wilson College for the Oral History Center of Eastern Kentucky University. The interview was conducted in or at the home of Kenneth Bomar on December 5, 1978, at 5 p.m.

BG: Mr. Bomar, where were you born and raised?

KB: Columbia, Kentucky.

BG: What schools did you attend?

KB: I attended the elementary schools here in Columbia, and I attended the Jackson, graduated from the Jackson High School.

BG: What were some of the names of these elementary schools if you remember?

KB: Yeah, I remember one, the Columbia Elementary School.

BG: Were most of those schools there black?

KB: All of them were black, that was before integration of schools.

BG: Where was this school located at?

KB: On Burkesville Street.

BG: How were the educational conditions when you were growing up?

KB: Well, they were very poor when I was growing up. We had no facilities. And ah, it was very poor compared to what the children have today.

BG: Did any of these conditions inspire you to go out and want to teach and try to improve the system for the black students especially?

KB: I think I was inspired by a teacher that I had in High School that made me want to go on and, and get a teacher's certificate. This teacher was a Mr. Samuels, a young man who came here from the Bluegrass. And, he talked to us boys and girls and I think that was the biggest inspiration I had to want to go on and complete my education.

BG: Was this school, that you first attended, was it a one room schoolhouse?

KB: Two-room school.

BG: Were all the grades combined together?

KB: Yes, we had the two rooms and from the fifth grade to the eighth grade was in one room and first grade through fourth grade was in the other one.

BG: Did some of the older kids help to teach the younger kids in those days?

KB: Well, I think we got quite a bit from them even if they didn't help to teach us, ah, directly. We was in there where they were havin' their classes, and I think that helped us quite a bit because we could here them reciting. Then, when we got there, there was so much that we knew because we had heard and seen them, ah, reciting.

BG: Who was your very first teacher that you recall?

KB: My very first teacher was Mrs. Cora King.

BG: Was she pretty nice?

KB: I loved her. Ah, she did more for me than any teacher I think I've ever had. She was a lovely lady, loved children. And, we felt like that we were her own.

BG: When did you start teaching?

KB: I started teaching in 1939.

BG: When you started teacher, was this in a one room school?

KB: One room school, in a one room school.

BG: Where was this located at?

KB: Montpelier, Kentucky.

BG: Could you tell me some of the experiences that you had? For example, the facilities that you had to use, and how you got your water.

KB: Well, we, when I went there we got our water from a spring down under the hill. And, that's about, we had two water buckets and no cooler at that particular time. The first year, the county said they wasn't able to provide coolers for us. So, our water was kept in those two water buckets. And, the children brought their own individual drinking cups. And, that's what we used. We got nothing from the superintendent's office. We went to school and the only thing that they gave us was those two buckets, a broom, and a box of chalk. And, that was the only facilities that we got from the superintendent's office. And, all of the other equipment that we needed, we had to buy personally ourselves.

BG: What about the books and everything?

KB: The books was issued. The state gave the books and they, they were free. They were issued free to the children at that time.

BG: Other things that you needed for the classroom, did you have to pay for them out of your own pocket?

KB: Yes, we had to pay for them out of our own pocket, and oftentimes, we would have programs and charge five and ten cents at the door, and we would take that money and buy equipment for the kids to use.

BG: About how many kids did you have in your first class?

KB: My first year, I had the largest group of, of the one room schools in the county. I had 42 kids the first year.

BG: Were they all black?

KB: All black.

BG: What was the name of this school?

KB: The Montpelier School.

BG: Where did you go to teach afterwards? Was that school done away with or did you just decide to move out?

KB: Well, I moved then from that school to the school in Kellyville, Kentucky. I taught there for five or six years and then I went back to Montpelier for the second time. And, I stayed there until the schools was integrated. And the next year after, after integration ah, well that is, the teachers were integrated the next year. And, I came over to the old junior high school and taught ninth grade math.

BG: When you ent to Kellyville, did you teach all blacks?

KB: All black students.

BG: Did you see any difference between the first time was at Montpelier and the second time you was at Montpelier? Were the facilities any better?

KB: No, there was no better, no better facilities.

BG: What about the number of kids, was there an increase or decrease?

KB: They, there was a decrease. We didn't have as many kids the second time. I guess, the second time I went there, I had about 22 or 3 kids.

BG: How were you treated, as far as being a black instructor, at this time? Were people willing to let their kids come to school? As I understand that from my parents maybe that some of the kids weren't allowed to come to school because they'd be working. Did this have any bearing?

KB: No. You mean while I was at Montpelier?

BG: Uh huh.

KB: No.

BG: Ok, when do you think that the education for the black really improved around this area?

KB: I think the education for the blacks improved after the schools were integrated. And, I say that because I think that there was more to offer the black kids. Ah, I don't think that so far as their learning the basics was any better, but there was so much more ah, curric, ah, extra curricular activities that children could participate in which I think helped to develop the whole child. And, we didn't have that in the rural schools. But, so far as the basics, reading and writing, arithmetic, I don't think they were any better in the integrated schools than they were in the one room schools.

BG: Were there any racial problems in the first year of integration that you can remember?

KB: The first year of integration, I have to say that there were no problems. It was surprising how well that I was accepted, from the students, the faculty and all. They were very loyal, I'll have to say. And, we had no problems.

BG: Were there any other black instructors there besides you?

KB: Yes, there was one other black teacher within the school I was in. That was, Mrs. Molly Lace and I were in the same school.

BG: The first year, that there were no problems, did black kids seem to participate in these extra-curricular activities?

KB: Ah, gradually. I think that they began to participate more and more each yeah.

BG: Did you notice that the black people stood off to themselves? Were they pushed aside? Did the blacks stay on one side and the whites on the another? Or, did the kids pretty much begin to understand each other?

KB: Very, very, very easily I thought. The kids began to understand each other and mingle together as kids. It was almost unbelievable how quick that most of the whites and the blacks

began to just actually, I mean, it didn't seem that they felt there was any difference. So, many of them became buddies and that type of thing.

BG: Do you remember any of the kids that you had at this certain period of time, the very first year you taught in a...

KB: ...integrated school?

BG: Yes.

KB: What do you mean? Do you mean any...

BG: ...individuals that stood out, that made more of an effort to go to the other side. Do you know what I mean? To reach out and try to extend the friendship, whether they were black or white?

KB: No, I guess I can't, I just can't think right now about any particular ones.

BG: Ok, back in the one room school house, you were the only teacher there teaching?

KB: Right.

BG: And, you taught all...

KB: ...all grades, first through eighth.

BG: And you taught all the classes? What classes did you have back then?

KB: I had all of the classes. I had reading and writing, arithmetic, geography, health, English, and History.

BG: That was a full day for you then, wasn't it?

KB: Uh huh, surely was.

BG: When they started this integrated school, was there such a thing as school buses?

KB: No.

BG: Well, how did the kids get back and forth to school?

KB: They walked, walked with those, ah,... There were a few parents that had cars, and the would bring them or they would walk 4 and 5 and 6 miles.

BG: Was this at the high school you was talking about?

KB: No, now this was in the one room school where the kids did the walking. When I came to the integrated schools, of course, buses were very popular. And, they were used by both black and white.

BG: Well, how did you get around back in the days with one room school? Like at Montpelier, did you have a horse and buggy? How did you get to work?

KB: No, it wasn't quite that far back. (both laugh) I remember the first school I had, I had a, I bought a '29 "A" Model Ford. And, that's how I got backwards and forwards. I lived at home and commuted back and forth to school everyday, which was about 10 miles, in this "A" Model Ford.

BG: Ok, up where you taught in Kellyville, Kentucky, aha, what age group did you teach there? Was it just a one room school?

KB: It was a one room school.

BG: All black?

KB: All black.

BG: Whereabouts is this located at?

KB: It's located on ah, well 55. I guess it's about, ah, 3 miles beyond Cane Valley, I would say, 3 miles beyond Cane Valley.

BG: Was there any certain reason why you transferred from Montpelier to Kellyville?

KB: No, there wasn't any reason why, that I transferred. It was a thing that the board did. We were placed by board members. And, this board member, ah, who was over the Cane Valley, Kellyville district asked for me. And, the superintendent granted his wish.

BG: What was your first salary back in those days.

KB: I think my first salary when I first started teaching school I was making, my salary was sixty-eight dollars a month.

BG: Well, I don't think things were quite as expensive.

KB: No, I did more with that then I do with what I've got now.

BG: Ok, as you moved up each year, did it increase?

KB: Yes, it began to increase after the first, ah I'd say by 1942 or 3 we began to get a little increase.

BG: Did you have any other source of income besides this? Did you work anywhere else?

KB: No. I did in the summer. When school was out, and we were out then, you know we only had 7 months when I began to teach. And, we would be out of school about the first of February. And we wouldn't start back anymore until the first Monday in July. So, I had that time in between and I did work. I went to Fort Knox and worked on the Fort Knox Army Post during the Spring, and worked from February up until July.

BG: What kind of work did you do while you was there?

KB: Well, I worked, ah, as a waiter at a country club.

BG: Seems pretty interesting. Back at the old junior high school, were all the kids there integrated?

KB: Yes.

BG: Could you tell me some of the sports that were available for kids to join back in those days?

KB: Well, I think basketball was the main sport when I first went over there as an integrated set up. I think basketball was the leading sport. And, we did have some softball ah, that the kids participated in. But, by and all, I think basketball was the main sport that the kids had.

BG: Can you remember who the coach was then?

KB: I believe, when we were integrated over there, Mr. John Burr was the basketball coach. And, yeh, I think that's right.

BG: Did the boys seem to get along with him pretty good?

KB: Well, ah, yes they got along with him real well. I mean, there wasn't, there wasn't a racial problem. And, they got along real well with Mr. Burr.

BG: What did the kids do on weekends back then? Where there ball games scheduled for weekend activities? Was the show open?

KB: The show was open. And, all times there were ball games that the kids went to on Saturday. And, oftentimes, we, we, when ,we was, ah, in the on room schools, the rural schools, we would get together and have, ah, the different schools competing with each other on Saturday baseball. Well, I guess, it's more or less softball. But, that, and then they did have, as I said the picture show on Saturday that they would come in to see.

BG: What about T.V.?

KB: No, we had no T.V.

BG: How about the radio?

KB: Some, most, well, radios were not plentiful among our people at the time. I remember when I went to ah, Montpelier during my first years of teaching, there was one family out there that had a radio. And, it was amusing how the different, other different families would go to this particular house on certain nights to listen at the radio.

BG: What kind of things were on the radio? Were there scary hours, like they have scary hours on tv certain nights of the week?

KB: Yeh, no, they didn't have anything like that. They would, ah, well, I guess it's more or less nothing particular, just I don't know what they were really. But, it was just listening to the radio. Then, sometimes it might be something special you know.

BG: Did kids dance like they do nowadays? Or, were there certain kinds of dances?

KB: No, they didn't know anything about the type of dance that the kids do today. Now, some of the older kids would dance, but it was a different type of dance. They didn't know anything about the rock music and, and, ah, the type of dancing that is done today.

BG: Did you know some of the dances that they were doing back in those days? Was the jitterbug out in those days?

KB: No, that was before the jitterbug and all that type of thing. I don't remember the jitterbug then. And then, kids didn't dance then like they do now. I know when I was in the one room school, I don't know, that is, when I first began to teach in one room schools, I can't remember a time when the kids ever danced. I don't believe they knew how.

BG: Do you think it was from being in the house or...

KB: I think it was from being in the rural area. Ah, the rural area it was, now in town here, at this particular time in, in Columbia, the kids were different. Now, they were dancing, because they had a place to go and dance. A restaurant where they had a juke box. And, they would dance. But, out in the rurals where I was, there was, there was no such places. And the parents were quite religious and they would not permit their kids to even dance. (chuckles)

BG: Were there quite a number of kids from one certain family going to school at these country schools?

KB: Yes.

BG: Were those in the majority? I mean, each family has had a lot of kids going to one school? A lot of big families were back in the country?

KB: A lot of big families, yes.

BG: Did you all have plays and stuff?

KB: Yes, we would have plays, pie suppers and things like that, but no dancing. I guess if we had attempted to tried to of had a dance out there, we would have been run out of the community.

BG: What, the schools?

KB: The parents, if we'd of tried to have a dance at school you know, and had children dancing, I guess we would have ben run out of the community.

BG: Are things different today?

KB: It's much different, it's much different.

BG: Well, Mr. Bomar, I think this is about all the questions that I have to ask you. We really appreciate your giving your time for me to interview you. And, I'd like to say thank you.

KB: I hope I've said something that's been helpful. I've tried to and anytime, why, I can be of any kind of help I'd be glad to help. You're free to call on me.

BG: Ok, thanks a lot Mr. Bomar.

KB: You're welcome.

BG: Mr. Bomar, I forgot one important question. Where did you attend college at?

KB: Kentucky State College at Frankfort, Kentucky. I did my undergraduate work there. And after completing my undergraduate work I went to Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana and completed my work for the Master's degree.

BG: Was there very many blacks at these colleges at the time that you attended?

KB: Yes, quite a few, there was quite a few. And at the time now, ah, Kentucky State College at the time I did my undergraduate work at Kentucky State College, it was an all black school. Of course, you know, that was before integration came in Kentucky. And, it was an all black school. But, of course, when I went out of the state to Indiana to do my Master's work, that's where we had integrated schools and white and black both went to this particular....

BG: What were some of the fields that most of the kids were going into at this time?

KB: At this particular time, I think most of the fields, there weren't too many fields open then, and most of the kids were pursuing a teacher's certificate. It was very different from what it is today, You'll find any number of kids today who are pursuing many fields. They're pursuing fields that were not open to us in the day when I was in college.

BG: Well, I guess that will be all Mr. Bomar, and I thank you a whole lot.

KB: Ok, thank you.