

Transcript of a Recorded Interview with Helen Fisher Frye

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This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed conversation. The reader, therefore, should bear in mind that he is reading a text of the spoken rather than the written word.

The following is an unrehearsed taped interview with Helen Fisher Frye, a retired librarian. The interview was conducted by David R. Davis for the Oral History Center at Eastern Kentucky University. The interview was conducted at Mrs. Frye's home at 143 Rose Street, Danville, Kentucky on September 25, 1980 at 6 o'clock p.m.

DD: Okay. I need to . . . Can you give us your full name?

HF: Uh, I'm Mrs. Helen Fisher Frye.

DD: Okay. Can you tell us something about your family background?

HF: I am one of nine children. My father was George Fisher and my mother was Lettie Moran Fisher. Uh, I was the seventh of the nine. I had a twin brother.

DD: What was his name?

HF: His name was Matthew Fisher. Uh, he was an undertaker. I had one brother who taught at Bate School. He coached at Bate School at one time. Uh, I . . .

DD: What did you . . . What did your father do?

HF: My father was a railroad worker. My mother, at times, did home laundry work. Uh, she finished with sixth grade and my father was just about fifth or sixth grade. Had a fifth or sixth grade education.

DD: Was this . . . He lived Danville?

HF: My father was born in Jefferson City in Boyle County, Kentucky. My mother's family originated from Madison County, Kentucky. Uh . . .

DD: What about your education background?

HF: My own personal background?

DD: Yes, ma'am.

HF: Well, I have a Bachelor of Arts degree made in elementary education from Kentucky State College in Frankfort, Kentucky, a Master of Arts degree from Indiana University in secondary education, a master's degree from the University of Kentucky in library science, and I've done work at Ohio State University in Columbus, and I was the first American negro in enroll at Centre College. I did one summer's work at Centre College. I intended to get a bachelor's degree with a major in English from Centre College, but I began working summers in the federal Head Start program and I worked every summer and never did return to Centre.

DD: What about your occupational experience?

HF: Well, I . . . I started out as a sixth grade teacher. I enjoyed it. I loved sixth grade. I loved the children. I loved their daily development, their quick understanding, and I really enjoyed every aspect of it except grading papers. I am one of those who believe in testing, in written work, as well as much oral work, and there were about 7 or 8 different subjects in sixth grade and the written work and the papers to grade every night of the week, though I consider myself quite professional. Um, I've always been involved in church work and in community work. I didn't have time for anything. I only had time for teaching in the day and grading papers at night. So, that's when I decided to go into library work, because I did like reading. So, that's when I made the change.

DD: You started teaching at what school was it?

HF: Well, I started . . . I came out of college on May 19th of 1942, and I began teaching in Casey County on July 5th, 1942. Then, I . . . That was a six month school. I taught straight from July through January and then, the school year closed. And, uh, the following year, I taught in Boyle County system for one year. Uh, I had to transport. I was teaching, bus driver, janitor, and everything. So, I liked the one room teaching situation, but to have the responsibility of transporting students, having to make the fire and coal there and everything, was too much of a hardship. So, I then went to Columbia, Kentucky. I taught there a short while. And, I taught in a federal program in Danville in one year, and then, I went into the Danville Public Schools as a sixth grade teacher.

DD: What school was it?

HF: This was at Bate School. Bate School then was a 12-grade all-Negro school.

DD: Was it part of Danville?

HF: It was part of the Danville system, yes. That was a part of the segregated system.

DD: I didn't know that.

HF: The negro students were in a one building high school-elementary school all, but part,

definitely part of the Danville system.

DD: Um, when you went to get your degrees in secondary ed and library science, what years were these?

HF: I . . . I received my degree from Indiana University in 1949. I received my degree from the University of Kentucky in 1960.

DD: And Kentucky State was?

HF: Uh, 1942. I had one little unfortunate experience with the University of Kentucky. Have I ever told you about it?

DD: I think so. Tell me again.

HF: Do you want it on the record? Or let it stay off the record?

DD: No. On the record is fine.

HF: Um, the . . . I believe the judge was H. Church Ford who made the decision. I may be wrong on the name there. He made the decision that segregation in schools was illegal and that negroes had to be admitted because of a suit filed by Lyman Johnson, a teacher in the Louisville system. That Negroes had to be admitted to the graduate school. The reason I went to Indiana University was because I could not do graduate work at the University of Kentucky because of race. Then, after that decision in 1954, I decided to enter an extension class from the University of Kentucky held here in Danville at the Danville High School. I was permitted to attend two sections of the class. However, I had not been officially accepted. I had filed for admittance but I had not been officially accepted by the University of Kentucky. But, there were others, whites, who were in the same . . . At the same date of registration that I was, but they were permitted to go right on. And, um, I . . .

DD: Did they give reasons?

HF: I received the message that the interpretation that Negroes could attend the University of Kentucky graduate school did not extend to extension work. It covered only on-campus work and because this was extension work, I could not remain in the class. So, I had to get out of the class. I filed a suit. I attempted to file a suit, uh, and there were . . . I retained a lawyer, but we could get anyone in the class who, like myself, had not been admitted, could not get anyone of those to admit that he had not and to testify to the fact that he had not been accepted and been admitted to the college. So, I couldn't prove that there were others because they would not testify to it. So . . .

DD: Were there any members of the class that were active in education in the Danville system today?

HF: Right now, yes.

DD: Who . . . Who are they?

HF: I had rather not impersonate.

DD: But, they . . . They didn't come to your defense?

HF: No. No.

DD: Had you known them?

HF: I knew them and they knew me. At that point . . . At that point, I already had my master's degree from Indiana. So, they knew me, yes.

DD: This was . . . This was what year?

HF: It'd have to be after 19—. Between 1954 and 1960. I don't know the exact year.

DD: You decided to go back then to the campus then to . . . complete your master's work?

HF: Yes. After . . . We . . . We changed superintendents, and I would . . . I would certainly like to give Mr. John E. Robinson, who was our superintendent, following my expulsion from class. He was not superintendent when I was ousted from the class, but he came in a year or two later and he went to the University of Kentucky and told them that he wanted extension classes for all of his teachers or none of his teachers. And, uh . . .

DD: These . . . These teachers in your class were fellow teachers in the Danville School system?

HF: In the Danville system, but the local schools had not been merged and integrated. So, they were in their buildings and I was in my building. But, we had our initial in-service together and we knew one another. We communicated. We had good relationships.

DD: What about the superintendent at that time? What was his reaction?

HF: The University did not notify me that I could no longer continue the class. They notified my superintendent who was at that time a Mr. John Glenn and Mr. Glenn came to notify me for the University.

DD: What'd he . . . What'd he . . . When he notified you, in what way did he tell you that, uh . . . ?

HF: You know, I regret to inform you . . . That sort of thing. That the University has reached this decision and that you can no longer continue the class.

DD: Was it a sincere regret that he expressed?

HF: I think so. Evidently, he had been notified by the University and the way he expressed it to me, that he felt that he could soften the shock by telling me himself rather than some of them telling me. So, I think he regretted it.

DD: Was this . . . In 1954, when the court decision, Brown versus Board of Education was rendered, were you teaching at Bate at the time.

HF: Yes. Yes.

DD: Do you remember what the reaction was in the school system, in the community or just generally in this area?

HF: I . . . I think most people felt that sooner or later, it was going to happen. It was just a matter of time and when. There were some who welcomed it. I think the majority of people, uh, did not accept it very well. People have a way of fearing the unknown. They didn't know how they would be accepted or how they would be treated, so there were fears, I suppose, and yet, there were those brave souls who welcomed it. Didn't mind at all, because when the Danville Schools were first opened, there was no . . . there was no organized plan of integration of the Danville Schools. After the decision, I do say that the superintendent at that time, who was Recton Newlin of the Episcopal Church . . .

DD: Spell that for me. N-E-W . . .

HF: W-L-I-N.

DD: N-E-W-L-I-N.

HF: Uh, he was a fine person. Fine Christian. He recommended to the board that the entire system be integrated and not take it grade by grade as some systems had done. But the board rejected that proposal, and they started each . . . The first effort was volunteer at the high school level. If you wanted to go the Danville High School, you may. Otherwise, if you want to stay at Bate High School, you may.

DD: This was before . . . This was after '54 on.

HF: This was after '54. I think I'm correct on that. I'm sure . . .

DD: No one before '54.

HF: I think not. And some few brave souls did go to the Danville High School. Some remained and graduated. Some decided they didn't like it and before the school year was over even, they came back to Bate School. And for a period of time, I really don't remember how many years that situation existed. But then gradually they decided to first integrate the high school. Then,

they went to the lower level and took grades one, two, and maybe three and did it by grades.

DD: Can you can remember any board members at the time in '54?

HF: No. I do not.

DD: And the superintendent at that time was the . . . ?

HF: Episcopal Church minister.

DD: Uh, what was I going to ask you? Oh, how would you compare the city school system in Bate 1 through 12 as far as the quality in education is concerned during the time that Bate was a part of the system, but it was separate?

HF: Well, there were some things that you knew and certain other interim, uh, situations you really had no knowledge of. But, we knew, number one, we were much overcrowded. We knew that . . . We knew that the Negro teachers were technically better qualified than the white teachers because more of them had graduate hours percentage wise than the white teachers. Of course, naturally, we knew at the high school, they had a much broader curriculum than we had, because we were limited to the bare basics. We had even gotten down to the point that we didn't even have a foreign language in the high school. So, we had the bare essentials in our curriculum.

DD: As well as students, teachers were segregated according to schools?

HF: Right. Right.

DD: Completely?

HF: Completely.

DD: What about the . . . the monies appropriated for sports?

HF: I really was not in a position to know much about that. I don't know . . . I do know that, uh, so far as uniforms were concerned. Football athletic uniforms, we either got what the Danville High School discarded or we had to raise money to buy our own. But so far as boarding money for athletics, if there were any, I have no knowledge of it.

DD: Do you remember any black students who went to Danville High School who graduated that early . . . Say between '54 and '60?

HF: I can only say I believe that Michael Smith, the undertaker's _____.

DD: Is that at Smith Jackson?

HF: At Smith Jackson. Uh-huh. And there is a young lady over at Lancaster, who was a fine student, and I was working toward her matriculating at Centre College being the first Negro to be matriculated at Centre College. She went to the Danville High School and finished, but then she decided not to go to college at all and then she decided on marriage and so she married. Beyond those, I don't remember who else did finish and I don't even remember those who came back, but I know some of them did come back to Bate.

DD: What was the attitude of teachers at Bate as far as . . . ?

HF: Toward integration?

DD: No. Toward the situation, let's say, after '54.

HF: I think the teachers were quite content. I think . . . I think maybe nationwide, had there been equality of educational facilities, I don't think anyone would have pressured integration. Incidentally, let me inject here . . . My brother, my twin brother went to . . . My twin brother went to Kentucky School of Embalming in Louisville, and at that time, the Day Law was still in effect. And you know about the Day Law.

DD: I think so.

HF: Prior to, I think, 1905, from the Civil War up until 1905, Negroes and whites had gone to the same school, but in 1905, I believe it was a person who's name was like . . . Who's surname was Day. Um, um, had this been state legislature in the past that Negroes and whites could not sit in the same classroom. That's the reason we had Lincoln Institute, because Negroes had gone to Berea and some of the other schools, and from 1905 up until 1954, the Day Law was in effect, and Negroes and whites could not legally go to the same classroom.

DD: That was in Kentucky?

HF: In Kentucky. That was in Kentucky. And my twin brother, uh, who finished high school in 1938, as I did, wanted to go to embalming school. Of course, there was no Negro embalming school in the state, but the Kentucky School of Embalming in Louisville. I don't know for how long they had done it, but they evaded the law by having an adjoining room, an adjacent room, for the Negro students right where they could be in full view. And they were told, now you come on in this classroom with everybody else, but ever anyone comes in here and we are knowledgeable it might be a person who will check to see if we were adhering to the law, all you do is say you came here in this room to ask a question and you were going back to your room. But, he earned his training through the segregated system also.

DD: Can you think of any black students who, when they had this option of going from any school they wanted, were there any white students who came to Bate?

HF: No. No. And I could only assume that that interpretation meant go to either school that you want to or whether it was just a one-way street that the Negro students could go to Bate or to

Danville High School whichever they choose. Now, whether the board implied that the whites could go to the Bate School if they desired, I don't know, but none did.

DD: Who . . . Who was the principal at the Bate School at this time?

HF: At Bate School was Mr. Summers. William Summers, and when the high school was finally merged, they placed him over federal programs in the main office at the board of education.

DD: So, he was transferred up in some position.

HF: So, he was relieved of his principalship.

DD: So, you mean, it was not really a promotion rather than?

HF: No. It's all in the way you look at it. I think to save face, some people wanted to regard it as a promotion but I did not.

DD: Did he regard it as a promotion?

HF: I hesitate to say.

DD: He did? Okay. Let's take a break for a second.

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BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2.

DD: Um, we were talking about the court decision and then it was several years then before the actual full integration to the Danville schools.

HF: Right.

DD: Now, you remember when this took place?

HF: Nineteen and sixty-four, I think.

DD: Sixty-three. Sixty-four, maybe.

HF: Perhaps.

DD: Because I was looking at some microfilm of newspapers and it seemed like there were 12 Bate graduates in 1963 and then the next year, next May, they were talking about Bate being part of the system and the new high school opening. So . . .

HF: I'll tell you what, now I don't know what Mrs. Dean, the new librarian has done with material that I had on file there, but there was a vertical file there, I don't know whether you ever

used it or not.

DD: I think I did.

HF: In the vertical file under Bate, if that material is still there, there are newspaper clippings there of commencement programs. There should be several yearbooks someplace in that file. I don't know whether they'll discard them or what, but that is school history.

DD: Was it . . . Was it full integration the same year as the opening of the new Danville high school?

HF: No. No. Uh. . .

DD: How long before? It must've been just one year.

HF: That . . . That could've been so. Um . . .

DD: I looked at May through August of '63 and May through August of '64.

HF: Yes. I'll have to retract that statement. It could possibly have been.

DD: Um, who was the superintendent of the city school at that time?

HF: Mr. Taylor, who is now in Richmond at Eastern Kentucky.

DD: What's his first name?

HF: Um, I can't think of his first name now.

DD: Um, well, I've had it at the time of my tongue. Leonard Taylor.

HF: Leonard Taylor, right.

DD: And, do you remember any more members during that time?

HF: I believe Dr. Renfro was on the board. I believe Helen Davis was on the board. Somewhere during this integration period, Dr. Caywood was on the board. Because he was . . .

DD: John Caywood?

HF: I suppose that was him.

DD: Um . . . Was it was a board decision to do it?

HF: To integrate?

DD: Yeah.

HF: It was finally a board decision, yes.

DD: Was it a unanimous vote? Do you remember?

HF: I don't remember. And I don't know whether they'd even reveal. Because at that time, the public did not attend board meetings. Probably were not admitted, had they even tried, because it has not been too long that the public was entitled to attend board meetings. Am I right there?

DD: Well, I think it must be because I looked through the papers for board meeting reports in the paper and it was rare that I found one.

HF: It was more or less of a secret society.

DD: And only what they wanted to release. Um, so, after the board made this plan, then, how did . . . How did the community feel about full integration?

HF: There was a series of meetings held by the board. I know I attended a meeting at Tolliver School. I know I attended a meeting at Bate School. Now, whether there were meetings in every school . . . But I know these meetings were sponsored by the board to get the feel of the public and the people, and there were some citizens in the community who were strongly supportive and there were some who were strongly opposing.

DD: Were those lines drawn along skin color?

HF: No. No. Because there were white people who strongly supported and felt that it should be and then there were some whites who strongly opposed it and were very vocal in so doing.

DD: How did . . . How did the press handle the whole business safely?

HF: I think they attempted to be objective about it. During . . . During the 60s and the civil rights period, there was always . . . Maybe I should say were always some individuals on the staff at the paper who were objective in their reporting of the integration process. And I suppose there were those who were opposed to it, but generally, the paper was objective I would say.

DD: What about any particular editor?

HF: I think there were persons on the staff who were more liberal than the editor himself.

DD: What . . . Now, when the change came, when . . . Like I didn't find much in the paper about it, but . . . Was it something that was built up of a lot of . . .

HF: Emotionally.

DD: Well . . . that and a lot of exposure in the press or anything like that.

HF: No. No. There were no photographers around to show the first Negro entering a white school or the closing of the Bate School or . . . No.

DD: Of course, this is the same time when other things were going on in the country.

HF: Nationwide.

DD: Birmingham.

HF: But, I think they tried to play it low key, and there were no incidents to my knowledge. There were no racial incidents to my knowledge.

DD: What about the change as far as the teachers' standpoint?

HF: That was one of the worst aspects of the whole thing. When the entire system was integrated, uh, and Bate School was made the junior high school, and all elementary students went to the three elementary schools in Danville. Senior high school students went to Danville High School. Most of the Negro high school faculty was released. They did not take our high school faculty into the high school, the Danville High School. They dismissed them. And that was one of the most unfair and unjust things. I certainly would like to see those people if the 15-year expiration date had appeared and it hadn't expired. I'd like to see them file for financial . . .

DD: How many . . . How many are you talking about?

HF: I'm talking about 8 or 10 people anyway, I think.

DD: Did they have tenure? Did they have tenure in those days?

HF: All of them did not have tenure. No. But, some of them had the qualifications that was needed, because for instance, we had one of the best math teachers that you could find in the place. Well, the Danville High School was seeking a math teacher.

DD: What was his name?

HF: Hurston Frison.

DD: Is that an F?

HF: F-R-I-S-O-N. Incidentally, he was from somewhere in Eastern Kentucky near your area.

DD: I know some, but the girl . . . I went to school with a girl named Dorothy Frison.

HF: Hmm-Mmm. Could've been related. Frison was a whiz in math. You just couldn't beat

him. But, they had to go out and seek and search and find a white math teacher. They were not going to put a negro man in a classroom.

DD: Did they try to . . . Was there an attempt made to have a percentage of black teachers in any school?

HF: No. No. No. What they actually did, they tried to place the local individuals and those whose homes were not in Danville and Boyle County, they released them and let them go.

DD: They used that as a reason to . . .

HF: That was their yardstick. They didn't express it that way, but that's what they did.

DD: So, besides you, what other black teachers were retained at that time?

HF: Uh, Mrs. Burton was placed at the Jenny Rogers.

DD: Is she still?

HF: She's still there.

DD: What's her first name?

HF: Amelia. And Mrs. Bowman and Mrs. Stephens were placed at Danville High School. Um, Mrs. Dale who was teaching at that time, first or second grade, was placed at Tolliver School. They were all local people. Uh, Mrs. Lay was placed at Danville High School in seventh or eighth grade and when they made Bate School a Junior High School, they brought her back there. And Mrs. Pittman was placed out at the high school in the library and that was it.

DD: Were you a librarian at the time?

HF: Yes. I had already taken library science. Mr. Taylor, at one time, told me that he wanted me to go. But you see, I was one of those outspoken people and they wanted to keep me in my quote "place", so . . .

DD: Had you . . . You had some experience in the civil rights movement?

HF: Oh, yes. I was working very actively and very publicly in the civil rights movement. As a matter of fact, I organized the young people who made efforts at sitting in at public lunch counters here in Danville and I was teaching at Bate School then. And I was called in and chastised for doing that, but I told them that it was part of my citizenship rights and my obligation as a Christian and I was not going to stop and then... There was quite a bit of flak about my participation in civil rights activities.

DD: Were you ever threatened the loss of a job over your activities?

HF: I had a white citizen say to me well, I'm going to see the superintendent about you. The superintendent never did say anything to me. However, there was the time that quietly, undercover, secretly, he told some of the teachers that he didn't want me president of the Education Association.

DD: But you did serve as president twice?

HF: Yes. Well, I served as president of . . . I served as president of the Negro group and I served as president of the integrated group. I was the integrated teachers group.

DD: Uh, who was . . . who was the principal at Bate the first year of integration.

HF: Mr. Snowden. Kenneth Snowden.

DD: What was the atmosphere like at Bate School itself?

HF: It . . . There was a good atmosphere, and he . . . he made an effort to have a good school and good harmonious working conditions. I . . . I would say looking at the administration as a whole, those from the main office and as individual administrators in the school, that they have made an effort to be impartial.

DD: Do you think that's true today?

HF: Yes. Yes. I think so. I think . . . I think maybe there are personality conflicts between administrators and some individuals and I don't think that is a thing of race. I really don't. Uh, I think it's because of other circumstances, but not racial. I don't feel that it is racial. Now, I think . . . I think only one superintendent leaned toward racism, but other than that, I think they've all been perfectly wonderful.

DD: Which one was . . . a previous one or . . . ?

HF: A previous one.

DD: A previous one.

HF: The one who didn't want me to be president of the Education Association.

DD: Who was that one? I can't remember which. We'll erase it if you want.

HF: No. No, I don't mind it being . . . Leonard Taylor.

DD: Oh. And he was the one who was the superintendent in '64.

HF: Right.

DD: At the time, of '63. Well, can you reflect a few minutes on your career as a teacher and Danville Schools and through the trials and tribulations.

HF: I suppose one should expect this day to come when you should have to reflect and summarize, and I am not prepared for this day, statement wise, but I love teaching. I wanted to be a teacher before I started school in the first grade, and I enjoy teaching. Not subjects, but people. I was, have been, and hope to always be intensely interested in people and, uh, I still continue to work with people. I just think teaching is the greatest profession that there is. [clock chiming] I don't regret one day that I spent. I had whatever difficult situations I might have gotten into was because I think I was overly zealous and overly eager for people. And, uh, my zeal maybe once or twice or a few times ran away with me, but I love teaching. I didn't like grading papers. That's the only . . . only aspect of teaching I didn't like.

DD: You retired in 1980, right? In May of 1980?

HF: May the 30th, 1980.

DD: Are you enjoying your retirement?

HF: Very much.

DD: Are you still active in the . . . Well, I don't guess I want to say civil rights movement, but you would be . . .

HF: Community work?

DD: Are there are any barriers that still need to be?

HF: Well, presently, I am on the human rights commission, appointed there by the mayor of the city of Danville, and I'm also on the public housing commission of the city of Danville, and there's a lot of work to be done in all areas. Yes.

DD: And you're active in the church as well?

HF: Yes.

DD: Well, I want to express my thanks to you for giving me this time and I hope . . . I hope the interview can be used as a research tool for researching integration as a whole. I appreciate having your view of it.

HF: Well, thank you. I hope my remarks were organized and pointed enough so that they would have some meaning. And if I can . . . at any other time, shed any light on anything, I'll be happy to. Thank you.

DD: Okay, thank you very much, Ms. Frye.

