Delta Oral History Project
Community Studies Center
239 West Louther Street
Dickinson College
Carlisle, PA 17013

I, Juanita Turney, give to the Community Studies Center at Dickinson College the permission to post my interview with Delta Oral History Project researchers on a website that will be administered by the Community Studies Center.

Signature: Juanita Turney
Date: June 5, '06
Address: 204 N. Eureka St.
Greenville, MS 38701

Restrictions: College access usage

Please send me the web address of the Delta Oral History Project Web site, when the site is constructed. ____________________________________________________________________________________________ (If yes, check here.)
The Delta Oral History Project
Tougaloo College Archives

JUANITA W. TURNLEY

July 31st, 1996

Owen Brooks,
Interviewer

Q: Your name is?

Turney: My name is Juanita Wright Turney.

Q: W-R-I-G-H-T?

Turney: Correct.

Q: T-U-R-N-E-Y.

Turney: That is correct.

Q: You live at 224--

Turney: North Eureka, Greenville, Mississippi. I was born in Greenville, Mississippi. Not very many people are born here.

Q: I was going to ask you that. I'm certainly going to ask you that. Yes, you are a lifelong resident. Today is July the 31st, 1996, and we shall proceed, Mrs. Turney. Are you comfortable?
Turney: Very much so.

Q: I want you to be comfortable.

Turney: See, that's why I wanted it in my home. You see these I have on?

Q: Yes, ma'am.

Turney: These are my working things. I'm not dressed, you know. When I go out, I try to dress, but when I'm at home, I'm comfortable. I didn't even put on any earrings, and no lipstick, no earrings.

Q: That's all right.

Turney: Okay.

Q: These recordings, tapings, will be in the archives of both institutions of higher learning. They will be also accessible to public libraries in the various communities where we have recorded people, and they will generally be available to young people and students that want to do particular kinds of research where this information will be helpful to them.

Turney: Well, I asked you before, how was I chosen to give you some information? There's so many people in Greenville, perhaps you've already talked with them, but how was I chosen?

Q: Well, I've chosen probably thirty people in Washington County. I've had a little bit of help. Like I said, this project is in four counties in the Delta: Bolivar, Coahoma, Washington, and
Sunflower. We have done Bolivar, Coahoma, and Sunflower. We have a little more Coahoma to do, but we're currently taping in Washington County. I was chosen to be the field director of this project, and in the capacity of field director, I use either people that I know, or I consult with people in these communities and ask them about appropriate people that can give us good life histories. That's how you got to be chosen.

Turney: On your recommendation, or someone else's?

Q: Mine.

Turney: Okay, okay. All right.

Q: Mrs. Turney, you said you were born in Greenville.

Turney: I was born in Greenville, not too far from where I live now.

Q: Do you mind giving me your date of birth?

Turney: I do mind that.

Q: Yes, ma'am. But anyhow, this is for posterity, so you're going to cooperate.

Turney: Yes, I am a senior citizen.

Q: Yes, ma'am.
Turney: Yes. I have been married for fifty-three years, so you can see from that, that I'm not a teenager.

Q: You're not going to give me the date of your birth?

Turney: August 14th. I did not give you the year.

Q: You choose not to?

Turney: That's my choice, isn't it?

Q: Well, yes, ma'am, most definitely.

Turney: Okay. I tell some people my age, but since this is going to be broadcast all over, I just don't--

Q: No, it's not going to be.

Turney: Well, I don't mean broadcast, but it's going to be in the archives, so I do give my age when I think it's pertinent to the project.

Q: All right. You're the only one that has not. In the three counties that I've been in, you're the first person.

Turney: Because you know what? You might have to delete some of this, but I think I look good for my age. I think I move well for my age, I do well for my age.
Q: I've known you for thirty-odd years.

Turney: Yeah, okay.

Q: Mrs. Turney, so I know--

Turney: Now, how old do you think I am? Just give me a rough guess.

Q: Well, I would say, let's see now. Judging by I'm sixty-eight, I would say probably you're in the range of seventy-one or seventy-two.

Turney: Oh, that's a good guess.

Q: Is that a good guess?

Turney: That's a good guess, but I'm older than that.

Q: That's fine.

Turney: I'm seventy-six.

Q: You look extremely well for your age.

Turney: Thank you.

Q: Your parents, were they from Washington County?
Turney: My mother was from Washington County, having been born in Burdette [phonetic] Mississippi, which was just south of Leland. My father was born in Tennessee; Covington, Tennessee.

Q: Can you give me a little about their backgrounds?

Turney: Well, my mother and my father were only married for a short time. I think they stayed together something like two years. So I didn’t really know my real father too well, but my mother remarried, and I considered my stepfather my real daddy.

Q: What was his name?


Q: That was your stepfather.

Turney: That was my stepfather. The J.B. is James Booth, and he was a blacksmith.

Q: Was he from this area?

Turney: He was from, I think, somewhere around Vicksburg, down that way, I believe, somewhere around that way. My mother met him somewhere--

Q: Vicksburg area, is what I’d say.

Turney: Yes, okay.
Q: He migrated to the Delta?

Turney: Uh-huh.

Q: When you were?

Turney: I was just a tot.

Q: You were a little tot, maybe two, maybe three?

Turney: Yeah, maybe two or three.

Q: Where did you live as a child?

Turney: You mean the city?

Q: You lived in Greenville.

Turney: I lived in Greenville, yes. I lived at the corner of O'Hare [phonetic] and Harvey. I lived there until I married, in a home that was owned by my family, and it's still in our family.

Q: It's still there?

Turney: Yeah, it's still there. It's being rented.

Q: Paul [Williams] lives there?
Turney: Paul lives across the street.

Q: You know, Paul goes to my church.

Turney: Yes. Paul lives across the street, and I was born on the other side of the street. You can picture that house, can't you?

Q: Yes, I can.

Turney: It's a gray house, yes, okay.

Q: Were you the only child?

Turney: Yes, I'm an only child.

Q: Your father was a blacksmith.

Turney: That's my stepfather.

Q: Your stepfather.

Turney: Yes.

Q: You grew up with your stepfather.

Turney: Yes, right.
Q: And your mom did what?

Turney: My mother was a schoolteacher. She taught here in Greenville, and the nice thing about it, the first classroom I taught in in Greenville was the first classroom that she taught in.

Q: Is that right. What school was that?

Turney: That was Number Four at the time. It's now Lucy Webb. She was a teacher, but, of course, when she married a blacksmith and moved to the rural, then she became a county teacher and was the principal of the school.

Q: Now, you're taking me too fast. Say that again.

Turney: Okay. I said that, having married a blacksmith, he was in the rural, so then she had to move to the country with him. She became the principal of the school in the country.

Q: What school was that?

Turney: Four Mile, they called it. And that's at Darlove, Mississippi.

Q: Oh, okay, at Darlove. I'm familiar. Now, you didn't attend there.

Turney: Oh, no, no. My schooling was all right here.

Q: That was while you were at Number Four School?
Turney: Oh, no.

Q: Were you going to Number Four School when she was the principal at Darlove?

Turney: No. I must have been out of elementary school by that time.

Q: Then tell me about your sojourn then.

Turney: Okay. Let me see. Where do you want to begin? I attended school here at Number Two School, elementary school. Number Two, but I just mentioned that the fact that the first classroom she taught in was the first classroom I taught in, which gave me a wonderful feeling when I walked in that room, you know.

Q: So you were attending Number Two.

Turney: Yeah, elementary school.

Q: What grades?

Turney: First through third. Then I moved over to Sacred Heart Catholic School, where I remained until I finished high school, fourth through twelfth grade.

Q: What was it like? What are some of your vivid remembrances?

Turney: At what stage?
Q: Well, if you take me--

Turney: You know, I tell people all the time, I had a very happy childhood. I had a very happy childhood. I had all the toys that any child could want. I had all the attention of my uncles and aunts. Having been an only child, they gave me all the attention in the world.

Q: You had aunts and uncles in the area?

Turney: Yes, yes. I had a very loving grandmother, who devoted, I guess, her life to me, and I spent most of my time with her. I did not spend a lot of time with my mother and stepfather as such. I would go and visit with them, but I spent most of my time in Greenville with my grandmother.

Q: What was her name?

Turney: Her name was Sally Cowan.

Q: C-O-W-E-N?

Turney: A-N. Wait a minute, that's not all. Sally Cowan Jackson Gladney. She was Sally Cowan before she married, then she married twice. She married a Jackson, and then she married a Gladney. G-L-A-D-N-E-Y.

Q: You say you spent a deal of time with her.

Turney: Yes.
Q: And she was a great influence in early years.

Turney: Very much so, very much so. She was a very strict person, very loving, very strict. wanted the very best for me, wanted to expose me. Didn't have a lot of formal education, as such, but I remember that she said when her children were born in Burdette, she told her husband that, "I'm going to move to town, so that my children can have an education," because, as a child, her father had sent her to Greenville to go to school, and she wanted the same thing for her children. Of course, she always encouraged me to get an education. As I say, my mother was a teacher also, so she always encouraged me to look for the finer things of life, to try to be with the better class.

Q: So she thoroughly encouraged you to get an education.

Turney: Right, oh, yes.

Q: And seek the finer things in life.

Turney: Right.

Q: What kinds of sort of cultural things did she share with you?

Turney: Well, as I said, she did not have a lot of formal education, but whenever anything came to Greenville that we could attend, she saw to me attending that. Now, as I grew older--

Q: Did she nurture you in music, for instance?

Turney: Oh, yes.
Q: Were you introduced to music through her, would you say?

Turney: Through my mother, my mother, and, of course, my grandmother evidently had introduced my mother to music, too. My mother sang. She didn’t play the piano too much, but she sang, and, also, my father sang.

Q: Oh, mother and your father sang.

Turney: Yeah. I don’t know what your next question was now, what was it?

Q: The cultural things I was talking about, reading, literature, that kind of thing.

Turney: Oh, very much so. We had all kinds of books they had wanted me to read. I was not a person who read a lot. I didn’t like to read.

Q: Is that right?

Turney: No, I didn’t really like to read.

Q: You’d never know it.

Turney: [Laughter] I read a lot now.

Q: You impress people as being very well read.

Turney: Well, I didn’t like to read, but they made me read.
Q: Did you acquire a fondness for it through their pressuring you to read?

Turney: Yes, yes, I did. But to begin with, I didn't want to spend that time, you know, reading. I guess most children don't really like to read, you know. You have to be encouraged to do that. I liked the piano, and nobody had to ask me to practice. I could sit to the piano and practice all day, you know. Nobody had to encourage me with that. I liked that. I enjoyed the piano.

Q: That was your thing.

Turney: Yeah, that was my thing. I enjoyed music.

Q: How did you begin to sing?

Turney: I remember the first time I sang a little solo, I sang it in the Sanctified Church on Harvey Street, on Harvey Street that Charles Mullen [phonetic] belongs to that church now, yeah, and it was "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam."

Q: That's what you sang?

Turney: That's what I sang.

Q: How old were you when you sang that, do you remember how old you were?

Turney: I don't know how old I was now.

Q: Four, five, six?
Turney: Oh, I must have been a little older than that maybe.

Q: Little older than that. maybe eight or nine.

Turney: About seven, eight. "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam." Oh, I sang all over town. Every time they had a program and they wanted a child to sing, I was the child chosen to sing. [Laughter] Because I loved to sing. I loved to be the center of attention, because I had gotten that at home. I guess I was a spoiled brat. My husband tells me that I was, and he has continued to spoil me.

Q: Grandmother and mother had particular kinds of influence on you as a child. What teachers do you remember in school?

Turney: Oh, my teachers in school.

Q: Did you have great fondness for, took time with you?

Turney: Mary Jane Hill she is now, Mary Jane Crockett Hill, had a great influence on me. She played the piano, and I used to spend a lot of time with her.

Q: She was a teacher where?

Turney: She was a teacher at Number Two.

Q: Teacher at Number 2 School, that's one to three.
Turney: Yeah, and she lived in my neighborhood. She was a neighbor, so I spent a lot of time with her in her home.

Q: What kinds of things did she interest--

Turney: Music. We sang and played all day, we sang and played. She was the one person who had a car. There were not a lot of black people with automobiles at that time. She had an automobile, and she would carry us riding.

Q: Had a car and would take you all out.

Turney: Yes.

Q: You had close chums in the neighborhood?

Turney: Oh, yeah. all of my neighbors, you know, children played. little boys with little boys, and little girls across the street over there where Paul lives now, where Paul Williams lives now, those were my neighbors. Each Sunday morning, I remember as a child, there was a boy, the oldest boy--

Q: Where did you go to church, Sacred Heart?

Turney: Oh, no. I want to church at Mount Harp where I am now. I'm a fifth generation of that church.

Q: That was your church.
Tourney: That was my church. Yes, that was my church, fifth generation of that church. One of my ancestors was one of the slaves that established that church.

Q: It's the oldest black church in the region.

Tourney: Yes, yes.

Q: Mount Harp. Were you there the time Mrs. Alexander, Dr. Alexander came and did a little history of Mount Harp? Were you there that time? That's some years ago.

Tourney: I must have been out of town. I can't remember.

Q: She came to speak. I brought her to speak in Greenville.

Tourney: And she spoke at Mount Harp?

Q: She spoke at Mount Harp.

Tourney: I must have been out of town, but surely I would have known it was advertised.

Q: She did a little history on the church.

Tourney: Margaret Walker Alexander from Jackson?

Q: Margaret Walker from Jackson State, yes. In fact, she introduced me to the fact that Mount Harp was the oldest black church in Greenville.
Turney: Is that right?

Q: I had not known it up to that point.

Turney: Oh, you had not known, but you see the marker there now. You've seen that on the marker.

Q: Oh, yes.

Turney: I was baptized there and always attended church there.

Q: What is Mount Harp affiliated with, is it National Baptist?

Turney: Yes, National Baptist.

Q: What did you do in church?

Turney: What do I do now?

Q: What did you do in church as a young lady?

Turney: Oh, as a young lady, I played for the Youth Choir. I sang with the Youth, I was the secretary of the Sunday school. What else did I do in church? I attended all of the auxiliaries that children were involved in. I can remember when I was sixteen years old. I was in the Easter program. I was in the Easter program at sixteen. You know, today children--
Q: Is that odd? What does that mean?

Turney: That's odd. Because children don't want to be in the Easter program when they get that age.

Q: Oh, I see. Yes, these are your little eeny weeny little ones, yeah.

Turney: Yeah, that's right. The parents will say, "Do you want to be in it?"

"No, I don't want to be in it."

"Well, she says she doesn't want to be in it." But that was never a question. When they announced in church that there was going to be Easter practice tomorrow at four o'clock, you know you got to go to Easter practice today at four o'clock. I went until I was sixteen, and I could well have been in it when I was seventeen, until I left to go to college. In some way, they used to have what they called--I didn't have a recitation, as such, but they had dialogue, you know, a little playlet, and the big girls were in that.

Q: Let me ask you, as a child, a young lady, a child, the community, was it hard living in this area, as you remember? It was tough?

Turney: I guess we were poor, but we didn't know it, and I know you've heard that expression before. I had plenty of food. I had school clothes, I had church clothes, I had play clothes.

Q: You were well provided for.

Turney: Yes, I was well provided for. I didn't know that I was poor. There were people at our house. We had company all the time. We had living room and dining room. We didn't have
indoor toilets at that time. Nobody had that. As I said, we had a five-room house. You know, a lot of people didn’t have five rooms. That was a big house. I did not know that we were poor, as I say. I had plenty of food. I had plenty of clothes.

Q: What about your classmates and kids you went to school with?

Turney: Well, there were a number of them where we really knew were poor, and there were a number of them who were in the same situation that I was. I think I mentioned that across the street, every Sunday morning, I would go over there and give this boy an orange each Sunday morning, and I called him "Tank." I don’t know why I called him "Tank."

Q: You called him "Tank"?

Turney: Yes. His name was Melvin Neal [phonetic], but I called him "Tank," and I would carry him an orange every Sunday morning and kiss him. [Laughter]

Q: Is that right? [Laughter] But was that a genuine fondness you had for "Tank"? Was he your age?

Turney: Yes. I was born in August, and I think he was born in either September or October. His mother and my mother were friends and neighbors, so I guess that was our association with each other. Oh, I had a number of friends, all boys and girls. I always had a lot of friends. Where our house was located, it was a direct path from the south end to the north end. People going from the south end to the north end, seemed to me, always went down that street, down Harvey Street. All the young men would pass by there, and they would stop at my house. We’d play the piano
and sing. All of my friends, mostly, were musically inclined, almost all of them either played or sang.

Q: Did kids in your school during those days go to the fields to pick and chop cotton?

Turney: Yes, some of them did.

Q: In those days, you were at Sacred Heart.

Turney: Right. Yes, there were a number of kids who did not come to school when school opened, because they were picking cotton.

Q: That just did not come.

Turney: Just did not come until the cotton picking season--now, I had the experience of picking cotton three days. I picked cotton three days. I picked cotton three days, and I was picking with my godfather, who owned a little plot back out here near Fairview.

Q: Fairview Street?

Turney: Yes, it was out in that area. I don't guess it was Fairview Street at that time, maybe it was just a cotton field. I know it was behind Fowler's [phonetic] Grocery Store. I remember that I helped him three days, because it took us three days to pick a hundred pounds. We put it in the sack. I never chopped cotton, no. There were a number of them who did, and some of them, I think, did not really need it, but they went.
Q: They went for extra money or something?

_Turney_: I don't know why they really went, but I never did.

Q: Were any of the parents involved in agriculture, in farming?

_Turney_: Well, yes, my mother, and my mother and father had a farm. Raised cotton and cows and chickens and things.

Q: How many acres do you remember?

_Turney_: Oh, boy, no. I don't remember how many acres. I didn't know about that.

Q: They lived in town, but they had a farm.

_Turney_: They lived in Darlove. They were in Darlove. Had a little plot of cotton and whatnot. He was a blacksmith, and she was a teacher, but they still had a little farm, you know, little cotton field.

Q: And they worked it themselves?

_Turney_: Or they had other people come in work, too, to help them.

Q: School, church. Were you conscious of race relations during those years?

_Turney_: Oh, not at that time, not at that time. I was aware that there were two fountains.
Q: That there were what?

Turney: That there were two drinking, water fountains, and that I was not to use one, but to use the other. But my thing was that I seldom had to drink water, because when I went downtown on Washington Avenue, I was always with a relative, and I usually drank my water before I left home. I didn't like to use public toilets anyway, and to this day, I don't like to use public toilets. I was trained to go to the toilet before I left home, I was trained to drink my water before I left home, so I didn't have to use those things, and it didn't mean much to me.

Q: You were aware that white children didn't go to school with you?

Turney: Oh, yes, yes.

Q: You were aware that white families didn't go to your church, right?

Turney: Of course, of course.

Q: So there was at least the recognition.

Turney: Yes, but didn't mean anything. It didn't mean anything to me.

Q: You'd look on it as a separation?

Turney: No, I didn't look on it at that time as a separation. It was just that they were over there, and we were over here. I mean, it didn't mean anything to me that I was over here and they were over there. That came up in later years. Now, when I really became aware of the separation was
when I wanted to attend some of the cultural events that they were having here. I'll just say--I can't think of the person now who was going to perform down at Greenville High School, and they were selling memberships and that. I guess it was Delta, maybe it was Greenville Symphony. I don't remember which one.

Q: Performing artists from another, from somewhere--

Turney: Yes, from New York or someplace, and I wanted to buy a ticket. I saw a person, and that person said, "Well, you see this person, and you see that person. It's all right with me." And it kept on that I got back to the first person and I realized that they didn't want to sell me a ticket. And all I wanted to do was just go and sit and listen to this artist. In later years, though, I became the secretary of this same organization.

Q: Oh, really.

Turney: Yes.

Q: What's that?

Turney: I'm trying to say that it was Greenville Symphony. It could have been Delta Music Association, and maybe it was, one or the other, but I became an officer in both of them, so either one, you know. I was refused a ticket to even just sit and listen to the artist years ago.

Q: Greenville Symphony.

Turney: Or Delta Music Association. I know I was a secretary--
Q: Either one would not allow--

Turney: It must have been Greenville Symphony.

Q: --you to attend or participate.

Turney: Yeah, right.

Q: So you became conscious at that time.

Turney: Yeah, I did. I did become conscious then.

Q: Were you a college enrollee at that time, or younger, would you say? Were you in high school, or were you in college when you actually became aware of at least that kind of--

Turney: I must have been in college.

Q: Tell us about college.

Turney: Well, I joined NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] when I was in college, when it was fifty cents to join. [Laughter] My college days were very happy days, too. I was recognized--

Q: You went from where?

Turney: Sacred Heart, to Knoxville College. I received a scholarship.
Q: Let me ask you about that.

Torney: Yes, I received a scholarship to Knoxville College, because my family wanted me to go to Spellman or to Fisk. But at that time--

Q: Was that scholastic?

Torney: Music scholarship, yes. But at that time, as I said, we were not rich, but teachers were not paid very much, and my mother did not want me to have to work in college, so we chose to--

Q: Why Knoxville? You're not a Presbyterian.

Torney: Because of the scholarship.

Q: How did you come by it?

Torney: Well, it was given to the school.

Q: To Sacred Heart.

Torney: And I qualified for it, yes. I believe I was the only one from my class to go to college, because my mother said--

Q: You're the only one in your class?

Torney: Yes. The only one in my class.
Q: In your high-school class?

Turney: To attend college at that time.

Q: How many graduated with you?

Turney: There were ten of us.

Q: Ten of you graduated?

Turney: Yes.

Q: From Sacred Heart?

Turney: From Sacred Heart.

Q: That particular year?

Turney: Yes.

Q: Do you mind telling me what year that was?

Turney: 1937, certainly. I remember that. I was the only one to go to college that September.

Now, others went later, but that September, I was the only one to--some of them never went to college, never attended college.

Are we still recording? Because I was going to tell you a little story.
Q: You don't want to tell me your story on tape?

Turney: Well, I wanted to marry.

Q: You wanted to get married?

Turney: I wanted to marry. When I finished high school, I wanted to marry Elgin and live in a three-room house, because we had some friends who were married and lived in three-room house, and I wanted to marry, and my mother said, "Well, I would like for you to go to school, go to college one year, and then if you go one year to please me, we'll see about letting you get married, and I'll have a big wedding for you."

Q: Oh, Lord.

Turney: "All right. Well, I'll go to please you." See, at that time you did what your parents wanted you to do.

Q: Oh, yes.

Turney: Yeah, at that time. You see, children now make the choices. Children make the choices for themselves now, but I went to satisfy. I attended college to satisfy my mother, because she knew, being as wise as she was and the education that she had, she knew that once I got there, it would be no problem having me go back, you know. So I was tricked. [Laughter]

Q: You were tricked.
Tourney: I loved it, however.

Q: So, off to Knoxville.

Tourney: Yes. I had a very happy college life. It was my good fortune, I guess you'd call it good fortune, to have the dean's son as my boyfriend, so I was exposed to a lot of different things that everybody on campus was not exposed to. Everything they were invited to, they took me to it. I had an education to sit and eat with so many of the celebrities--I'll just say Mary McLeod Bethune and Roland Hayes and Judge Hastie. Those are just a few of them. Benjamin Mays, and Clements, who was the president of Morehouse. I mean, I sat at the table with all of those people and ate.

Q: Many distinguished people.

Tourney: Yeah, many distinguished persons, because of being with that family.

Q: You heard Roland Hayes sing?

Tourney: Oh, yes, yes.

Q: You know he's from my home town.

Tourney: Yes, I guess I did. I guess I knew all about him at that time, but, you know, through the years I've forgotten, but I did hear him and had an occasion to shake hands with him.

Q: You shook hands?
Turney: Oh, yeah. I sat on the second row with the Liston [phonetic] family. I was with the dean and his family. [Laughter] But with all of that, I loved my husband, Elgin, and, of course, I came back home and married him.

Q: Before you finished, or you finished?

Turney: Oh, I finished college.

Q: You finished college first?

Turney: Yeah, I finished college first.

Q: When did you come out of college?

Turney: 1941. You know, I tell everybody that all of the boyfriends that I had, their parents wanted me to marry their sons, all of them. I never had one boyfriend whose parents--

Q: You see, you were described to be a good catch.

Turney: I guess so. Well, this is off the record. Everybody but my husband's mother. His mother did not want us to marry, and her reason was that I could not cook. My mother did not want me to marry him, so it was a mutual thing. My mother did not want me to marry him, because she said he didn't have enough money to carry me for a honeymoon. [Laughter]

Q: But that didn't make any difference.
Turney: That didn’t make any difference to us. We married and it has survived for all of these years.

Q: 1941, is that the year you got married?

Turney: No, I married in ’42.

Q: What month?

Turney: September.

Q: September 1942. Now, the war had just started. What impact did that have on you?

Turney: See, they took him to the war. Well, now, not to the war.

Q: So he went to the service.

Turney: He went into service. We were married in September, and he went into service in May. Of course, as long as he was in the States, I gave up my position teaching and went to live with him.

Q: May of 1942, that’s when he went in?

Turney: No, no. we married in September of ’42. He went in in May of ’43.

Q: Did you stay in Mississippi, or what happened?
Tourney: Well, he was stationed in Virginia.

Q: Fort Eustis, or Camp Lee?

Tourney: Camp Lee.

Q: Camp Lee. I was there.

Tourney: You were there?

Q: Oh, sure.

Tourney: Oh, is that right. When were you there?

Q: I was in there 'til 1952. The Korean War.

Tourney: We were there for World War II, and we stayed there, I guess, until—well, he was drafted here in Mississippi, and he spent a time at Camp Shelby, and then they transferred him to Fort Lee, and I went with him there, spent the summer with him. Then I came home and taught school for a little while, and he wanted me back, and I stopped teaching in January, and I went back to Petersburg.

Q: Where were you teaching?

Tourney: I was teaching at Number Four, and I went back to Petersburg and stayed with him until December when they sent him overseas, and I came back home.
Q: He went December '43?

Tourney: Yes.

Q: He went overseas?

Tourney: Uh-huh. Was it '43?

Q: You stayed at Camp Lee--

Tourney: It was '43 or '44.

Q: Where did he go to port of embarkation, do you remember where he went? We used to call it POE.

Tourney: I guess New Jersey, maybe.

Q: Okay. Kilmont [phonetic], Dix?

Tourney: Maybe it was Dix. He could give you that information. I can't remember right now.

Q: So, after he went overseas--

Tourney: I came back home.

Q: --you returned.
Turney: To Greenville.

Q: And to your teaching career.

Turney: And to my teaching career, went right back to Number Four.

Q: And you stayed teaching--

Turney: Until I retired.

Q: No, that ain't what I was going to say. [Laughter]

Turney: Okay. [Laughter]

Q: Started Number Four School, okay, through all the time he was in the service.

Turney: Yeah.

Q: For the duration in the war?


Q: Oh, you did? It wasn't Number Four then.

Turney: See, when they tore down that building, it was Lucy Webb.
Q: When did they rename that? It was before I came.

Turney: I think it was in the fifties.

Q: Yeah, it must have been in the fifties.

Turney: It was in the fifties, I think, '52 maybe, or '53, but Lucy Webb and Number Four were one and the same school. When they rebuilt it and put it in a new position, they gave it a new name, because all of the schools were numbers before that, Number Two, Number Four, Number Seven.

Q: You retired from Lucy Webb what year?

Turney: I retired from Lucy Webb in 1974 with thirty-one and a half years. That's the half year that I left going to be with my husband. Oh, wait a minute, wait a minute. I have missed some. I forgot, the first year I taught, I did not teach in Greenville. I taught at Lake Village, Arkansas. I forgot that. Yeah, I forgot that. I taught over there one year. When I graduated from college, I taught at Lake Village.

Q: So you came back from Knoxville College and got a job at Lake Village.

Turney: Lake Village, and taught there one year, and then I came to Greenville to teach. They wanted me back over there, though.

Q: Were you always elementary school teacher? You always taught elementary?
Turney: Always taught elementary. Now, this is not being recorded. I taught elementary, but when Coleman High School was evaluated for certification, I taught at Coleman High School. I was the music teacher who was drafted from the elementary school to come into Coleman High School, because they needed a licensed music teacher.

Q: They didn’t have one?

Turney: They had a teacher, but I guess she did not have a license at that time. I’m not sure, but she became ill, and they took me over to Coleman High School, and I worked over there for three weeks while the visiting committee was here so that they could be certified.

Q: Accredited.

Turney: Accredited, yes. Well, I'm going to pat myself on the shoulder. I did such a good job over there that I was invited to evaluate other high schools.

Q: Oh, isn’t that interesting.

Turney: Yes.

Q: That’s very interesting. Now, memories of your days teaching at Number Four. Did anything stand out in your mind?

Turney: It was a very poor, very poor building with the poorest facilities. Very poor facilities. Toilets were outdoors. In the rainy weather, they would overflow. Then some of the children could not get to school, because the streets were flooded when it rained.
**Q:** Number Four, did it have multi classrooms, did it have two, three, four, five classrooms or something? Did you have classrooms for every grade?

**Turney:** They had. let's see, two, four, six, must have been six rooms. Must have been eight classrooms. I think there were eight rooms. My first year teaching at Number Four, I had seventy-nine and eighty first-grade students.

**Q:** Wait a second now. You had how many?

**Turney:** Seventy-nine and eighty first-grade students, so many that they were divided so that I taught a part of them in the morning and then a part in the afternoon.

**Q:** That was in your first year?

**Turney:** That was my first year.

**Q:** Did it get worse or better?

**Turney:** It got better. It got better.

**Q:** The second year, was it a radical reduction?

**Turney:** Well, I guess that had fixed it for more than one year.

**Q:** The seventy-nine kids?
Turney: Well, not seventy-nine, but a big number.

Q: You were a music teacher? You were teaching music?

Turney: No, I was teaching first grade. I was not a music teacher then. I was not a music teacher then. I was teaching first grade, and even though I had a license for music for elementary and high school, there was an opening for first grade when the principal approached me, and I said, "I don't know what I can teach first-grade children," but, as it turned out, I was a very good first-grade teacher, and every child in that room learned to read. Some were very good readers, some were not so good, but everyone learned to read. I can name a few of them now who have done well, and you know some of them. You know Dr. Robert Young. I was his first-grade teacher. I can name a number of them who are still in the teaching profession that I've taught as a first-grade teacher. We were talking about the building, as such.

Q: You talked about the equipment and the facilities.

Turney: There was no equipment. We had books that were passed to us from the other school.

Q: From the white school.

Turney: From the white school. They would give us their books. Every child did not have a book. We'd have to put work on the board sometimes and read from the board, because we didn't have enough books for each child. We didn't have enough seats for each child. We had desks that three and four children sat.

Q: To one desk.
Turey: To one desk. They were the long desks. The ones on the end, naturally, would fall off as they tried to write. I think that's when they decided to divide the classes, because it was just too many in the room.

Q: Who was your principal then?

Turey: Mr. Weston was principal then, T.L. Weston.

Q: Is that the T.L. Weston--

Turey: Yeah, that school down in south side was named for him. I was the only one in the school with a degree.

Q: Is that right.

Turey: Yes.

Q: How large was the faculty?

Turey: It must have been eight teachers. We had eight classrooms.

Q: You had your eight rooms.

Turey: Uh-huh. At that time.

Q: Was Mrs. McBride [phonetic] still teaching when you were there?
Turney: Mrs. McBride, yes. She was my third-grade teacher.

Q: Third-grade teacher?

Turney: Yeah, because I went to Sacred Heart. I went to Sacred Heart in fourth grade or fifth grade.

Q: She was a fine lady.

Turney: Yes, she was.

Q: It was a privilege to know her. She was a fine lady.

Turney: Yes, she was. You know, I need to make a correction on that.

Q: Go ahead.

Turney: I went to Sacred Heart in the fifth grade instead of fourth grade.

Q: You went to Sacred Heart in the fifth grade?

Turney: Yeah, because Mrs. McBride was my fourth-grade teacher. Louise Garrett was my third-grade teacher.

Q: Okay. All right. You have just corrected it.
Turney: Okay, I'm sorry.

Q: My notes need to be corrected, but that's all right.

Tuney: I'm sorry I made that mistake.

Q: That's all right.

Tuney: I told you about sometimes I get confused.

Q: All right. Now, where are we?

Tuney: Where are we?

Q: You stayed how many years, you said?

Tuney: Where?

Q: You just stayed until they built Lucy Webb.

Tuney: Which replaced Number Four.

Q: Which replaced Number Four.

Tuney: Yeah, and then I moved over there.
Q: Do you remember when they built that?

Turey: I'm not sure about that. It seems to me it was in the fifties. I'm saying '53. I could be wrong. I'm saying '53. I'm not sure about that. It's in the building, you know, when it was built, but I'm not sure about that. I did know at one time, but, you know, I don't remember.

Q: Ma'am, I got to ask you. '54 to '60.

Turey: How did it affect me?

Q: How did it affect you? How do you measure the effect it had on the community, on some of your peers, and some of your co-workers, all of that?

Turey: Well, actually, what was that '54 decision right now that I'm trying--what was it?

Q: That's Brown vs. the Board of Education [of Topeka, Kansas]. That's no such thing as separate and equal. Either way, it's separate.

Turey: How did it affect--I was teaching then.

Q: 1954, right?

Turey: Yeah, I was teaching then, and how did that affect me? I hate to make this so personal, but I was given an opportunity to be one of the first ones to move into one of the other schools. I don't remember whether that came in that year or not.
Q: No, not that year. It was later on.

Tunney: Yeah, okay. But I chose not to go. I chose to remain where I was.

Q: Was there discussion amongst you all when the NAACP won their case?

Tunney: I don't believe so. I don't believe any, no. Nobody discussed it. I can't remember being a part of that discussion.

Q: The administration didn't have anything to say?

Tunney: No, no. It might be that they had--

Q: Who was the superintendent, do you remember?

Tunney: Who was the superintendent?

Q: Do you remember?

Tunney: Who was the superintendent? I can't remember whether that was Buchanan [phonetic]. I think it was Buchanan, or Koontz [phonetic]. I can't remember which one of those now.

Q: Now, nothing happened for years. The decision came down in '54, but no movement or desegregation of schools.
Turney: No, no, no. I think they gave the children a choice of schools. Those people who wanted to go to— that was the first thing, I think, that they could choose to go. Freedom of choice.

Q: That's right.

Turney: I might not remember the sequence of this, so you might have to remind me.

Q: No problem, no problem. I just wanted to hear your version.

Turney: Okay.

Q: What about the Chinese community?

Turney: Well, Chinese attended, most of the Chinese community attended Sacred Heart before they had their own schools.

Q: What do you remember about that?

Turney: That they were at Sacred Heart, along with me.

Q: Chinese?

Turney: Uh-huh. until they had their own schools. I think they must have had their schools before the days of integration.
Q: Oh, definitely. They had their own church, too.

Turney: Chinese?

Q: Uh-huh.

Turney: I don't know whether they attended Sacred Heart Church or not. I can't remember that. I think in later years they did set up a Chinese mission from the white Baptist church, but I don't remember when that started.

Q: They allowed the Chinese to go to the white schools?

Turney: Yes.

Q: Probably in the late fifties.

Turney: Before they allowed the blacks to go.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Turney: I don't miss that. A lot of people don't like him, but so far, I mean, I go every year to get my physical, and I go every four months to get my eyes checked, got a good report for my physical.

Q: That's great.
Turney: Isn’t that wonderful. I eat right.

Q: You eat right.

Turney: I don’t abuse my body either.

Q: Well, that’s good. You eat right. No sweets?

Turney: Oh, yes, sweets. yes.

Q: You love sweets?

Turney: Love sweets. I love sweets. and use salt in my food.

Q: You do?

Turney: I do.

Q: You don’t suffer any high blood pressure?

Turney: No heart condition. no high blood pressure. I was just reading just yesterday in the Commercial Appeal. maybe it was today. that they are saying that salt has been portrayed as something that’s not good for you.

Q: I read that article.
Tuney: Did you read that?

Q: Yes, ma'am.

Tuney: But it's all right to use salt.

Q: Yes, I read that article. I was astounded. You know I have to take a pill once a day.

Tuney: You have high blood pressure?

Q: Yeah, slightly. Not bad. I keep it under control.

Tuney: Yeah. Elgin does, too.

Q: Do you exercise?

Tuney: No more than what I do here at the house.

Q: Is that right?

Tuney: Yeah, well, you see. When I was teaching, I taught dancing. I taught everything, so I think that has helped me. I was a dance teacher, when they had the programs and things.

Q: Do you know what helps you?

Tuney: What?
Q: The fact that you don’t carry around a lot of weight.

Turney: Yeah.

Q: That’s what helps you.

Turney: Yeah, the most I’ve ever weighed was 125 pounds.

Q: That and your temperament.

Turney: Yeah.

Q: This is not for the record. Shame on me, now.

But, anyhow, let’s continue. Okay. The Chinese built their own church.

Turney: I don’t have a lot of information about them, you know, but I do know that they--

Q: Well, you observed there were Chinese businesses in the black community.

Turney: Oh, yes. They had grocery stores and whatnot. They lived in the black community.

Q: They lived in the white community, too?

Turney: They lived in the black community. They lived where their stores were, as a rule. They just began moving out in later years. They would have their stores over here, and then they’d move over there. But they lived where their stores were, to begin with.
Q: Were you ever told about how they came to the Delta, did you ever hear stories about that?

Turney: You know, it's a strange thing about. As children, we weren't as interested in those kind of things as children are now. We were not made aware of that you're black and you're different.

I was always something. somebody, you know. It was not said that you're black and you're different. You're just somebody. Nobody ever said that you're somebody, but, you know, you were brought up like that.

Q: I'm just trying to determine what stories you heard in your younger life, because everybody hears stories, and they're not topics of discussion.

Turney: No, but, you know, when we were children, parents didn't discuss things in the presence of the children like they do now. If a teacher said that you did something, you did it. you know, whether you did it or not. Your mother did not say, "Did you do it?" If the teacher say you did it, you did it. But, see, now things are different. Parents talk about any and everything in front of their children now. They didn't do that when I was a child. When company came, you went outside to play, or you went in the room and played with your dolls, and you didn't hear their conversations about things that happened, you know.

Q: Absolutely.

Turney: My grandmother would try to tell me about like my family owned a lot of property down at Burdette. It's gone over to the white people now. I think the last ninety acres of it, they got it some way, I think the last ninety acres of it. But she used to tell us about old aunt So-and-so, Uncle So-and-so. So-and-so was a postmaster. So-and-so was this. So-and-so had the store. All
of our family folks were good livers down at Burdette. But, you know, you don’t listen to those things. Alex Haley was able to write his because he listened. I heard it and didn’t hear it.

Just very recently I had a cousin to die up in Tacoma, Washington. She was married to Bob Watson, who was owner of Watson Funeral Home. She would call me day, night, anytime. She lost her sight, and she could dial my number without looking it up. So she was telling me all of the things about the family that she could remember, and I wrote some of it down just very recently. Some of those things I had heard my grandmother say, but it went in one ear and out the other, because I didn’t think that was important at that time. See, I’m much older than you. You became aware of black and white very early.

Q: You’re much older than who?

Tunney: I am much older than you, yes.

Q: Not that much.

Tunney: Well, you became aware. I was not aware—

Q: Not that I thought I was different.

Tunney: Yeah, yeah. I was not aware of black and white. I had a lot of white people in my family, as such, because if you could see my grandfather, my grandfather had straight black hair. He was whiter than my husband, but he had straight black hair. I never knew him. He died before I was born, when my mother was, I think, seven or eight years old. But, anyway, I never knew him. But from his pictures, he was a very fair person. But I never had a lot of experience
with the way whites treated blacks, because, as I say, I didn’t go to field. They didn’t have to tell me I had to pick so much cotton. Now, on the bus, we rode the back of the bus.

Q: You had a bus line.

Turney: Had a bus line. However, the bus driver was very, very nice. The bus driver was very nice. I rode the bus to school. He would stop. If he saw me coming, he’d stop and wait for me. You know, I’m running to the bus. If I miss this, I’m going to be real late. He would stop right in front of the school instead of going to the corner. He would stop in front of the school and let me out.

Q: Do you remember the boycott?

Turney: Oh, yes.

Q: What happened there?

Turney: That was just not too long ago. I can't remember now why they were boycotting. I can’t remember. Charles Moore, and, I guess, Page, and this was in--what year was that? I can’t remember the year now.

Q: Early sixties. ’60, ’61, ’62, somewhere in there.

Turney: I guess so. I guess it was about that. Then we were not allowed to go in certain stores. I can’t even remember now why we were boycotting. I don’t remember that. Do you know the story?
Q: The stores, you mean?

Turney: No, the story of why they decided to boycott. I can’t remember.

Q: Are you talking about the transportation or the stores?

Turney: The stores.

Q: Oh, the stores were for people to hire black people to work.

Turney: Oh, is that what that was for.

Q: That was about jobs, yeah. You know, we spend our money there, and they wouldn’t hire anybody to work there, so it became a cause that was pursued by a portion of the black community to open up the black employment.

Turney: Well, I’m trying to think, when did that start. I don’t even remember when—did they boycott the bus?

Q: Yes, they put the bus company out of business.

Turney: Well, I guess, by that time, I had a car. [Laughter]

Q: Oh, did you really.

Turney: Yeah, maybe that’s what it was.
Q: They sure shut it down.

Turney: I was not riding the bus, I guess. Maybe by that time I had an automobile.

Q: Do you remember the mill, the Greenville Mill demonstration back in '65? Do you remember that?

Turney: You know, I was old enough to remember that '65, sure, but what was going on then?

Q: Employment of women.

Turney: Greenville Mill, that's the carpet company out here?

Q: Carpet company, that's right, and they wouldn't hire black women. They wouldn't hire women. They wouldn't hire black women, right? So that was a demonstration. Of course, they've never become unionized. They've always voted against the union.

Turney: Well, I guess, like I said before, the things that interested one person, didn't interest me. Maybe I should have kept up with those things much better.

Q: That's fine. You remember what you remember. I'm here to find out what you remember. See, all I'll do is ask you about specific kinds of things that I know happened, and if you can speak to them, that's fine.

Turney: If I can't, maybe I read it and it didn't dwell with me. It didn't stay with me, because I was not personally affected. I was personally affected in that I was black--or I was "colored" at
that time. But you understand what I'm saying. Like to drink the water out of the fountain didn't bother me, because I didn't drink water anyway, you know. I was not drinking water when I went downtown.

Q: By the way, who pastored Mount Harp when you were a little girl? Did you tell me that?

T urney: No, but when I was baptized, Reverend Threadgill was the pastor.

Q: Reverend Threadgill. He was there a long time.

T urney: Oh, yeah, he was there a long time. But I remember some of the other pastors. I can remember that we had one pastor who was a member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers one time, Reverend Myers. I remember that they said that people would pass by as the choir sang, and they would stop outside and listen to the music.

Q: The Fisk Singers?

T urney: No, he had been a member of the Fisk Singers.

Q: He was a member of the singers.

T urney: Yeah, not the original, but the Fisk Singers at one time. He became my pastor, and he had such a beautiful voice, that added to the choir--we used to have a very good choir that sang--that used to sing what they called special numbers that nobody knew but the choir. They still call that special. It's not special anymore.
Q: It's not special anymore. [Laughter]

Tune: It's not special anymore, because we just as soon sing some out of the hymn book. But there was a choir, full choir, that sang anthems.

Q: That's what Myers at the church--I sang in his choir.

Tune: Yeah, well that's what they did back then when I was a child.

Q: Yes, every Sunday.

Tune: Right, we did, too.

Q: And on special days.

Tune: Yeah, we had congregational singing with the hymnal, you know, but the specials were done by the choir, and they were usually anthems, and that was something to look forward to. As I was saying, there were things that were affecting some people that were not affecting others. I really became, as I mentioned before, conscious of the separation when I was trying to go to these concerts and things. That's when I really realized that they don't want me to come there, because I'm who I am.

Q: I understand.

Tune: But beforehand, I really had no experience, because when I went downtown, I went with my mother or my aunt, you know, and they had a lot of my clothes that were made by a
dressmaker, growing up. But as I say, I had Sunday school. I had Sunday clothes. I had school
clothes, I had play clothes. I had my hair cut. They kept my hair cut short. I had good hair then.
[Laughter] They kept it cut short, so I didn't have to worry about hats and things too much. Sun
hat, you go to a five- and ten-cent store and buy a sun hat, you know. But I imagine there were
experiences that my parents had that I was not even aware of. I imagine so.

But my grandmother took in washing and ironing. She washed and ironed for the white
people, so that meant that she was at home. She was not away from home. I was taught at a very
early age to be compassionate with the elderly, and especially the ones who were sick. I would
have to go to their houses, sweep for them, sweep their floors, go to the store, get their gowns,
bring them to my grandmother. She'd wash them, their sheets, I'd carry them back. So I was
really taught at an early age to care for people who could not care for themselves.

Q: When did you come into the knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement?

Turney: When I started really reading about it, and when, I say, they wouldn't let me go to these
things. Then, of course, now being a teacher, when SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating
Committee] came here, and here you have to register people for sugar and all of that, well, I
worked with that. I really became conscious of it, I think, when SNCC came here.

Q: Do you remember Charlie Cross [phonetic]?

Turney: Yeah.

Q: He's here, you know.

Turney: He's here in Greenville? Oh, he wouldn't remember me.
Q: He's doing research on his family.

Turney: Oh, is that right.

Q: His family has roots up in New Africa. That's a town outside of Alligator.

Turney: Yeah.

Q: In Bolivar County.

Turney: It's in Bolivar County?

Q: Oh, yeah, started by black people before--

Turney: I was thinking it was in Coahoma County.

Q: New Africa, it's right on the border.

Turney: Yeah, okay.

Q: There's a back road out of Clarksdale.

Turney: Yeah, okay.

Q: And then there's a road from Alligator that goes east to it, but I really think it's in--
Turney: It's in Bolivar County. Well, I mean, I don't really know.

Q: But it's very close to Coahoma County line.

Turney: My mother used to carry me to Chicago, I mean, you know, when other children were not traveling. My mother was well traveled. She never got out of the United States, but she went all over the United States. She went all over the United States. She liked to travel, and she really wanted to go to Europe. But at eighty-seven--she died at eighty-seven--she was curious enough to want to know about computers.

Q: Is that right?

Turney: Yeah. She read everything in the newspaper, want ads. houses for sale, houses for rent, she read everything in the newspapers, and took her exercise every day, at eighty-seven.

Q: Now, see there. [Laughter]

Turney: At eighty-seven. She'd come in here, she lived with us for ten years when the doctor said that she would have to be a rocking-chair patient.

Q: Did she live with you here?

Turney: For ten years. She would come in here and take her exercise, and on nice days, she would go out in the backyard and do her arms and do her exercise and all of that.

Q: Oh, really. She was serious.
Turney: Oh, yes. One day she came here and she fell, and Elgin and I both jumped up and ran here, and when we came here, she was smiling. She said, "Elgin, you’d never guess what I was doing."

He said, "What were you doing?"

She said, "I was exercising on one foot," standing on one leg exercising. Eighty-seven!

Q: She was eighty-seven then?

Turney: Eighty-seven.

Q: Oh, merciful Lord.

Turney: Eighty-seven years old. [Laughter]

Q: Oh, my goodness.

Turney: I know my mother was aware of all of those things, and I should have been more aware of them, and maybe people who are my age were more aware than I was. I guess I was shielded from a lot of things. I didn’t have a bicycle as a child, because they didn’t want anything to happen to me. They didn’t want a car to hit me. I can remember I was on a bicycle, somebody else’s bicycle, and Levi Chapel was driving a car, and he was teasing me. I ran in a ditch because he pretended that he was going to hit me with the car.

Q: Oh, Mr. Chapel was a great man. I liked Mr. Chapel.

Turney: He was something else.
I hope that you don’t regret having chosen me, because I don’t think I have given you too much information in the light of things that you were wanting to know.

Q: This is your life, and I agreed that you were willing to talk and share some of your life.

Tourney: I’ve had a happy life. I had a happy childhood, I had a happy teenage life. I’ve had a happy adult life.

Q: Right, and you’ve seen a lot happen.

Tourney: Oh, yes. I’ve seen a lot happen.

Q: You’ve seen a lot of change in this place over the years.

Tourney: Oh, definitely, definitely. I can remember when we knew everybody, just about, in town. You knew your neighbors, you know. You knew everybody. Miss So-and-so. So-and-so, you knew them, but you don’t even know the people next door.

Q: You could leave your door open.

Tourney: Oh, yes, indeed, leave your doors open.

Q: The children had respect for the adults in the neighborhood.

Tourney: Oh, yes. We used to have to sleep under mosquito bars, the mosquitos were so bad. You know what a mosquito bar is? It’s a net thing that fits over the bed. Mosquitos were so bad. That
was before the days of air-conditioning and all of that, and fans. Well, you had an electric fan, and then you had your palmetto fan and your newspaper and cardboard, and all of that, you know, you sat out a lot.

Q: Mrs. Turney, you were a schoolteacher all your life.

Turney: Yes.

Q: And you've see a lot of changes in education.

Turney: Oh, definitely.

Q: And the manner in which education has been dispensed in this community, this county, this school district.

Turney: Uh-huh.

Q: I need to hear from you, number one, how "integration," in quotes, so called, impacted on the educational process in this community. I need you to say something about that.

Turney: Well, people say that when the schools were integrated, teacher-wise, the educational system declined, went down. That's what they say. But there were some good white teachers as there were some good black teachers, and vice versa. There's some bad white ones and some bad black ones.

Q: Absolutely.
Tourney: So I don't really know that the integration caused the educational system to decline. I really think that when they said that you could not discipline a child, that's when it started. Now, their reason for saying that, I have heard that the reason was that they didn't want the blacks to whip the white children. So I don't know what their reasoning was. That's what they say. So they said, "Well, nobody could be whipped, except in the presence of the principal," and blah, blah, blah.

But I know that there was a decline. Children had more respect for teachers before the days of integration, and I know, too, that there could not be separate and equal, definitely there could not. Even though the same teacher--and I'll tell you from personal experience, when I became a music teacher. I had, say, thirteen sections of music, and maybe I had six sections of sixth grade, and as I taught, I would have to say to the children, "Have I said this to you already?"

They said, "No, you haven't told us."

I said, "Well, I've said it six times or four times already, and I don't know if I've said this to you." Each time I said it, I said it a different way. It came out to be the same thing, but I might have said it a different way, because you cannot be separate and equal. I was the same person, I was the same person, but if I told you whatever I said in the music line, depending on the group I was dealing with, I chose different ways to say it, because I knew the mentality of the different groups that I had. Some people could understand it if I said it like this. Some could not understand it if I said it like that. So I'd have to choose another way to say it to get it over to them, you know, make it a fun thing for some, make it a serious thing for others. So it cannot be separate and equal.

Q: You left the school system in--

Tourney: In '74.
Q: So the unitary school system had been in place maybe three years before you retired.

Turney: Oh, it was more than three years.

Q: The unitary school system.

Turney: Okay. I don’t remember the sequence of things.

Q: We had the Committee on Education, a local committee on equal education here in Greenville, and we met with the peers downtown about elevating black people. They were going to one high school, and then they decided to go to--

Turney: Well, see, you were on those committees.

Q: Yes, I was very active on those committees.

Turney: I know you were.

Q: But do you think that we benefitted? All the work that you did of trying to better the educational process, do you think we have benefitted by this in terms of what you observed, just in terms of what you observed? What do you think? What’s your candid opinion on this?

Turney: I notice that with the education the children are getting now, they’re not as well prepared, as many of them are not as well prepared as they were at one time. Now, what’s the reason, what’s the cause of it, I do not know. I don’t know if it’s the lack of good teachers, I don’t know if it’s the lack of good parents, I don’t know what it is, but I know that children are not as
well prepared to do what they are trying to prepare themselves as they were at one time. I don't know what causes the difference. I got out of the system. I was fully able to continue working. I could have still been working now, mentally and physically. I still could have been working, but I got out of it because I could see that I was not doing what I was hired to do. I was not getting the results. Children were not interested. I tell you what, even the teachers, they would play. I mean, I was trying to teach them that—and I give children an example all the time that no matter how much you like ice cream, you cannot live on ice cream alone. You have to have a variety of foods.

**Q:** The spice of life.

**Turney:** Yes, you have to have a variety of foods, and even though I would let them have one day that they could bring any record to school that they wanted to bring, you know, this is your day to bring whatever you want to bring, we'll listen to that. But there were teachers who would encourage the children to bring their records to school every day, and they would play that in their classroom. So when they got to me, and I wanted to teach them something about the composers and the other parts of music, they wanted no part of that. They didn't want to hear that, and I said, "Well, I'm not doing anything. I can't compete with the teachers who are trying to do one thing." They'd put the records on and listen to the music all day, the children in class listened to it. "La da da da da da da." When they get to me, they wanted to continue that. Now, that wasn't all the teachers.

**Q:** If the education is not well rounded, when exposed to really good music, serious music, classical music, even folk music, or--

**Turney:** Right, whatever.
Q: Or spirituals. There's so much music in the world.

Turney: There's so much music in the world, but the teachers would let them play the same thing. I'd let them have some days, and the white children would bring their little records to school, and the black ones would laugh at theirs, but I had to control that, you know. "Well, now, they listen to yours, let's listen to theirs. We have to listen to each other's." But I only had thirty minutes with them, so I couldn't do a lot of that. I was rushing, rushing, rushing, because I had things that I wanted to accomplish. Even to this day, some of my former students will come up. "Mrs. Turney, I remember so and so and so. I remember this. I remember this you told me. I remember this you taught me. You started me off," and, "You did this, that and the other."

I said, "Well, I did some good." When I first started teaching, we were not getting contracts. You didn't know what you were going to get until you got your first check. First year I taught, I got $59.15.

Q: Oh, my goodness. What year was that?

Turney: 1942.

Q: Amen. I've got to write this down.

Turney: 1942. I was the only one in the school with a degree. I got $59.15.

Q: That was for how much pay? How much work was that from?

Turney: That was a first-grade teacher, for nine months, school started.
Q: You got $59 for nine months?

Turney: A month. No, one month.

Q: One month, you got fifty-nine.

Turney: Every month was $59.15. I had worked a while, and then a friend of mine came from the county and began teaching at Number Four. She had taught for a number of years. You know, they will tell you, "Don't tell anybody what you're getting."

Q: What you're making.

Turney: Yeah, you don't tell nobody. So when she got her check, she got $62 and something, and I got $59 and something. She called me Baby, still calls me Baby. "Baby, you know, you're the only one with a degree. I don't even have a degree," but she had some years of experience. So we made an appointment to go to the superintendent, who at that time was Dr. Murphy.

Dr. Murphy said, "Well, you know you can get a job some other place."

Both of us said, "But we'd like to stay at home. Since we're here, we'd like to stay at home."

So he says, "Well, we'll see what we can do another month. We'll see." The next month, I got an increase. I got $72 and-some-odd cents. I don't remember now. She got a seventy-five-cent increase.

Q: Seventy-five cents.
Turney: From $62. She must have been getting $62.25. Then the next it was sixty-three.
Evidently it was something like that. But, anyway, she got seventy-five cents. So then when I
wanted to know what happened, the maintenance man, who was white, was fixing the windows.
He was nailing the windows, putting the window panes in, nailing this board, putting a little paint
on. He was observing the teachers. I didn't know that. He was observing the teachers, and he
was giving a report to the superintendent.

Q: No.

Turney: Yes, he was. That's how I got my raise. He had observed me.

Q: He made a report.

Turney: He made a report on me and told the superintendent that I was doing a good job, I was
the best teacher they had down there. I got my raise. Now, what the others got, I don't know. I
only knew about mine and hers.

Q: What did you think then, and what do you think now, the exodus of white children from
public schools, public education, and the rise of the private academies, what did you think when
it was happening, and what do you think about now what effect has it had on public education?

Turney: I hate to let this be a part of the record, but I think--

Q: Go ahead, just speak freely.

Turney: I know. I think we drove the white people away.
Q: Go ahead.

Turney: I really think we drove them away. We fought them; I mean, the school children fought them. They would take their money. They would abuse them. They'd pull their hair. They would talk about them. They even talked about the fair children who were not white, if you had any color. I think we misinterpreted what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, you know, when black is beautiful, and these are things and we should go and take them. I don't think he meant go and just take something that belong to somebody else. I think he meant that we should see that things will open up so that we can take advantage of the things that were being offered. Like when things happen and they go in the stores, and they steal things, I don't think he meant that.

Q: Of course he didn't.

Turney: But people misinterpreted what he said. But I really think that we are responsible for the exodus of the whites from the black schools.

Q: That's what you think.

Turney: That's what I think. That's a personal opinion. Now, I could be wrong, because everybody had their own reasons, because the white people tried to support us. The upper-class white people sent their children to the black schools, and then, I guess, the poor class decided that they didn't want their children to go with our children, and they took them out, and some of the rich ones started this school I know. Why do you think they left?

Q: No, I'm here to ask you.
Turney: I know, but you don’t have an opinion?

Q: Oh, sure I do.

Turney: Okay. What’s your opinion?

Q: Sure I do. I struggled to integrate schools. I don’t know whether, in retrospect, I have succeeded about how right I was in coercing black mothers and fathers to send their children to the white schools. Well, sometimes I wonder was I doing the right thing. Anyhow, you asked me about whites leaving public education and deserting it. I saw that. I interpreted that differently than you, sure I did. It was certain in my mind, okay, that they did that simply to avoid integration, full integration of the public schools. See, this didn’t just happen in Greenville, Mississippi. This was an occurrence.

I grew up in an area in New England in Boston where private schools had its origin. They had their origin in Boston. All right. There was the Latin schools, the classical schools, and there was an exodus, and St. Paul’s and St. Mark’s and all those beautiful private schools. That when I was growing up, I couldn’t get there, okay, for two reasons. They knew I couldn’t get near, I couldn’t afford. My mother and father didn’t have anything to send me to those plush private schools. So they didn’t have to say to me that they didn’t like my color. They didn’t have to say it. Okay. And the only ones I knew when I was growing up as a young fellow, there was like one black who was such an excellent football player that they invited him to come to Tilton [phonetic] Academy. [unclear], and he was never the same afterwards.

Turney: Oh, is that right.

Q: That’s another story.
Tourney: Never the same in what way?

Q: It destroyed him.

Tourney: Oh, is that right.

Q: Oh, yeah.

Tourney: Because he was the only one there, and then they didn’t treat him as if he was a part of them. They treated him differently.

Q: Yeah. My uncle went to Bates, and he was such a genius as a musician, okay, and there were only two or three. Bates is a very plush college in the state of Maine, and he went there in a year and a time when no blacks in any great number were going to any of the white schools. But, you see. I was aware then who taught. When I came to Mississippi, I know who showed white people in Mississippi how to organize private schools.

Tourney: Oh, you know that.

Q: Sure I know that, because they were the taskmasters in other parts of the country.

Tourney: See, you were exposed to more things than most of us were. See you know the background of all of that that we were not—of course, maybe there were some people here who were, but I was never one to be forward in things. I’m a good follower, but I don’t follow everything.
Q: Oh, I understand.

Turney: I follow some things.

Q: But you asked me about my opinion, you know, and I was very certain that they had done this. It was not the children's fault.

Turney: Let me say, that's why I'm saying, that's why I'm saying that I should not have said that, but that did happen. That did happen. A lot of their people took their children out of school, because the last day of school, those black ones would beat the white ones. Now, that wasn't all over. I know. That wasn't all over. That was not their reason for setting up their private schools and taking their children out, but that was one of the factors. There were other factors.

Q: We're on a very interesting point. Kids today, I observe black youngsters today, you know, I look at them and I see that they are not getting a good education, by and large. They're still relatively on the lower rungs of the ladder. They have a distaste and a dislike for white folks.

Turney: Yes, they do.

Q: But, you know, what saddens me is it's a sin enough to dislike someone, okay, but to not have it grounded, right, in some rational reason. That's what gets me, because they have no sense of history, these children, and they really don't understand. All right. Sure, black people suffered a long time.

Turney: Yes, they did.
Q: All right. But these kids today, they're not even interested in even looking at their history.

Turney: I know they're not. I know. I know it.

Q: They're not listening. They're not listening. They're not being taught. I don't mean to be preaching.

Turney: Oh, that's fine, that's fine. Actually, I like to hear you talk about that, because I certainly agree with what you're saying, and I hope that you would delete that part that I put in there, because I know we did not, I mean, the children did not run all of the white people away to the private school, but that was one of the things. Some of it was that we had some poor teachers, too. We had poor facilities. Even though the schools were new, we didn't have equipment, didn't have books, didn't have all of some of the other things.

Q: And that's well documented.

Turney: Yeah, some of the other things that we didn't have that they can afford to have at the other schools, you know.

Q: You know, I knew Dr. King. I met him when he was in Boston University when I came out of the service.

Turney: Oh, yeah.
Q: 1953, he was doing graduate work up there at B.U. I didn't see him again until I really came South and got involved in the Movement, and I met him two or three other times. But, you know, he didn't want for anything when he was growing up.

Turney: Yes, I'm sure he didn't.

Q: His father was a very well-respected Baptist preacher in Atlanta, and you know there were so many black elites, you know, they had a high lifestyle.

Turney: Yeah, right.

Q: Right, and middle class, in Atlanta. So, you know, he was just a person who really cared about people and believed what his religion taught him. I knew that, there was no question in my mind.

Turney: Well, he just came along at a time when people were really becoming aware of the different treatment of blacks and whites. We were not always aware of that. We knew it existed, but I say, I mean, it didn't matter to me that they were on that side, and we were on this side. It just didn't bother me, and there were others who came along at the same time, it just didn't bother them. He made us conscious of that. It was Martin Luther King making us aware of things. Now, take Rosa Parks. She had been riding on that bus and had been getting up, giving people her seat. But when he came along, then it made her aware, "I'm not going to get up and give you my seat." If he had not come along, she probably would still would been getting up giving him her seat. But somebody had to come along, and that was in the plan of God to send him along.
Q: Absolutely.

Turney: That he made us aware of the way we were being treated. Can I serve you something?

Q: Oh, no.

Turney: You don’t want anything?

Q: Oh, no.


Q: Let me ask you a couple more questions. I really would like you to say what you think about life when you were growing up and life today in a sort of closing statement. I’d like you to also say, if you had the opportunity to be among young children again, what would you be telling them if you were a young schoolteacher? After having all of the experiences that you have had, and you have seen all the changes you have seen, what would you say to those children?

Turney: I might use some scriptures. To do unto others as you would have them do unto you. To love your neighbor as yourself. To treat everybody right, because you have a conscience that you have to live with, and you have to seek God. You have to face God. Don’t mistreat anybody because of the way they look or the way they think. I think, if I had an opportunity to talk with them, aside from the subject matter. I think I would teach them something of that nature. And choose your friends wisely. Birds of a feather flock together. You know, children don’t
understand those things that we used to be taught. Empty barrels make the most noise, you know, and all of those kind of things. See no evil, hear no evil, and whatnot.

I think I would integrate that into my subject matter from time to time and try to get them to understand that you must show courtesy to people no matter what or how, and a smile is more winning than a frown, you know. I went to the nursing home the other day. I go out there and play for them occasionally.

Q: Oh, which one?

Turney: I go to any of them. The last time I was out at Mississippi Extended Care. I played some little games with them out there, and they said they had never had those kind of games for the people. But, anyway, I went out there. My husband’s aunt was in the nursing home out at Autumn Leaves, and she had a white roommate whose family did not visit her very often, but we visited Helen all the time. Some of us were there every day. So this lady kind of took us on as her family, and when she left here, she would call us. She’d go from to nursing home to nursing home. She’s been all around Vicksburg, over to Lake Village, and whatnot, but now she’s back over there. She told them about me, and they called me and asked me if I would come. So I went over there and played for them.

We were there the other day, when I left the doctor. Elgin went with me, and I said, "Well, let’s go and see Agnes," and we went over there and talked with her. She had to sell her home, and she began crying, because she says, "I don’t have any home now," because she was paying her way, you know, and she couldn’t afford to keep paying her way. So she had to sell the home so she could get on Medicaid.

Q: I know that story.
Turney: Yeah, so she cried, and we talked to her and convinced her that this was the best thing and blah, blah, blah. But we were there, and I saw one of the ladies working give the lady a cookie in the hall. She just took the wrapper off, snap. I don’t think she even knew what she was saying. So she took it and gave it to the other lady. Maybe the other lady wasn’t supposed to have anything sweet. I don’t know. Had I been the one, I would have said, “Now, this is your snack for now. You eat this.” When I was on ombudsman program, one of the residents of the nursing home said, “They don’t say a word. They just come in here and do what they have to do. They don’t say good morning. They don’t ask you how you feel. They don’t say nothing.”

I said, “Don’t say a word to you?”

“No, ma’am, baby.”

Q: Just a job.

T urney: It’s a job with them. I said, “But now somebody should tell them when they are hired, be pleasant with the people, talk to them. Make them feel like they’re somebody, you know.”

n-- said, “They just come in here and do their job.”

Q: Don’t you believe some of the teachers are like that that you see?

T urney: Yes, yes, uh-huh. I think so. Some teachers are very prying, want to know what goings on at home. I never allowed a child to tell me what happened at home. I said, “That’s your home business. I don’t want you to tell me that. Don’t tell me that your mother and your father had a fuss last night. I don’t want to know that.” Some teachers thrived on that. That’s all they want to talk about all day, didn’t teach, wanted to listen to what happened at the home. I never allowed children to do that. If a child made a grammatical error, I’m teaching music, but I corrected him.
Q: Sure.

Turney: I didn’t let that go, and it bothers me when people who are in positions like that make grammatical errors. I know I make some errors. I might mispronounce a word, especially for a word that I’ve never seen before, I might put the emphasis on the wrong syllable. If it’s a foreign word, really, I might say it wrong. But I try not to make grammatical errors, and it grates on me when someone does.

Q: Now, what about the quality of life here?

Turney: In Greenville?

Q: Today as opposed to when you were--

Turney: Oh, mainly it has improved. You know, since--

Q: You got to say it.

Turney: The quality of life has improved. It’s not great, but it has improved. As I told you before, we didn’t have paved streets. We didn’t have indoor toilets. My grandmother was the first one to get water in that neighborhood that was brought. She was the first one to put sidewalks in front of her—we had to pay for sidewalks that you had in front of your house at that time. She was the first one to get a sidewalk in that neighborhood, and it ran out down the street because she couldn’t get that neighbor to sign up, or whatever she had to do, go pay for it or something, it ran out. I guess by now they have put sidewalk all the way down.
Q: In your judgment, are we closer together as a community--

Turney: Oh, no.

Q: --today than we were thirty years ago, thirty-five?

Turney: No, I don’t think so. In my judgment, I don’t believe so. I think that we are not as close. We were close before in a servant/master relationship. We are closer in another relationship now than we were then, but we’re still not close.

Q: Citizen to citizen.

Turney: Yeah, we’re still not close. We’re not close, no, we’re not close.

Q: Would you say there is an element or degree of polarization?

Turney: There is definitely.

Q: Between the races.

Turney: On both sides.

Q: In your judgment, how--

Turney: How can we correct that?
Q: Are we moving to fix that?

Turney: I think we have to accept people for what and who they are. It does not matter what race they are. As I said, choose your friends wisely. You don't choose a friend over here because he's white if he does not meet your standard. You don't choose a friend over here if he's black if he does not meet your standard.

Q: You know what Mama used to say.

Turney: What?

Q: Show me your company and I'll tell you what you are.

Turney: Yes, exactly right.

Q: You remember that?

Turney: Sure, why certainly.

Q: I know that's what my mama used to say.

Turney: That's what I said, birds of a feather flock together. If you're no good, you're just going to be with the no-good crowd. I'll tell you this, when I first went to college, you know, you don't know anybody. The first group that I found, we called ourselves "The Big Five," there were five girls. Big Five. They were good girls, but they didn't want what I wanted. I wanted to know the people--
Q: Their values were a little different.

Tourney: I wanted to know the people who were up there. They were satisfied just knowing anybody, you know. I kind of pulled myself away from them, but being an only child, I was selfish and didn't realize I was selfish. There were girls there who were from the same place. They knew each other, and when their parents would send them things, they would call my roommate.

Q: They would call your roommate.

Tourney: Call my roommate. "Come on over. Mama sent me a box. Come on over."

[End of interview]
Index

Bates College (Maine) 70
Bethune, Mary McLeod 29
Boston University 72
Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) 42, 43
Buchanan, ___________ 43

Chapel, Levi 59
Chinese community 44, 48, 49
Civil Rights Movement 56
Clements, ___________ 29
Coleman High School 36
Committee on Education 63
Cross, Charlie 56

Delta Music Association 24

Fisk Jubilee Singers 54

Garrett, Louise 40
Greenville Mill boycott 53
Greenville Symphony 24

Haley, Alex 50
Hastie, Judge 29
Hayes, Roland 29
Hill, Mary Jane Crockett 15

Integration 61, 62

King, Martin Luther Jr. 68, 72, 73
Knoxville College 25, 29
Koontz, ___________ 43

Liston, ___________ 30
Lucy Webb School 9, 34, 35, 42

Mays, Benjamin 29
McBride, Mrs. 39
Moore, Charles 51
Morehouse College 29
Mount Harp Church 17
Mullen, Charles 14
Murphy, Dr. 66
Myers, Reverend 54
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) 25, 43
Neal, Melvin 20
Number Four School 9, 32, 34-37
Number Two School 10, 15

Parks, Rosa 73

Race relations 22-24, 50, 55

Sacred Heart Catholic School 10, 26, 27, 40, 44
Sanctified Church 14
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) 56

Threadgill, Reverend 34

Walker, Margaret 17
Watson Funeral Home 50
Watson, Bob 50
Weston, T.L. 39
Williams, Paul 7, 16
World War II 32

Young, Robert 38