

Interview Date: Thursday Dec. 11th, 2014

Interviewer: Lake Slabach

Interviewee: Dorothy Collins

Location: Ms. Collins' home

Length: Approximately 37 minutes

LS: This is Lake Slabach, interviewing Dorothy Collins and it is December 11th, which is a Thursday. So what do you remember about growing up in High Point?

DC: In High Point? I remember as a young child, my parents would take us to church. It was mandatory, so we went to church every Sunday at Temple Memorial Baptist Church under the leadership of Reverend L.L. Macon. And after church on Sundays we would go out, my parents would pack something up and being young we thought it was fabulous for us to be able to go somewhere. We always had a vehicle and we would go to the airport and watch the planes fly off and land. That was so exciting to us and just recently at a friend's repass, it was Janice Nesbitt that was at the repass, she was a childhood friend who was along with my brother and sister. She just recently said that when we were little, they always thought, the kids in the neighborhood thought that we had money because every Sunday, not every Sunday but just about every Sunday, we would go off and we would pack up our car and just take off and they thought that we were going on a long trip. I said, "are you serious? Are you kidding me?" and she said, "no, we would see you all just take off and go, we thought that y'all had money." I said, "on the South-side?" But we grew up on South-side, starting out at Vails Alley because my parents came up from South

Carolina, Bennettsville and our grandparents Wadesboro area, Bennettsville, Dixon, North Carolina, that area. So they came here when I was two years old, and I just remember having such good memories of our childhood. We stayed in Vails Alley first, and then we graduated around to the corner of West Willis and Fairview Street so we were moving up. And then eventually we moved uptown about a quarter of a mile down the street to the corner of Fairview and Vail Street, so we all teased everybody and said, "well we were moving uptown now," but it was just great, it was like a family. The parents in the neighborhood would all raise, pretty much, all the children in that area and we knew not, like if our parents were gone, we knew not to go out of the yard until they came home. We had to stay in the house and not go past our yard and no one else could come to your yard. We could wave and say hi across the street and wave, yell, whatever we wanted to do, but we could not go out of that yard. And it was the same with all the parents in that area and if any parent found us doing something wrong, they would report us to our mom and dad but they would chastise us as well. So, you've heard to Hillary Clinton saying something about "it takes a village"? Well I think back then it really was a village and I think our parents back then instilled more values into us and the way we were brought up it helped build our character. You looked out for other people and you cared for other people, so I loved that. Going to school, I remember when we were old enough to go to Griffin, and we'd have to catch the bus and to William Penn we'd have to catch the bus, but from south-side the bus comes around and I remember the bus came to Vail Street at the other end. So you'd have to try and run to get to that bus stop at the other end so that you wouldn't be late because we knew that Mr. Burford would be

standing at the door somewhere. Then if you missed the bus stop on Vail Street, you would have to run and try to get to the bus stop on Taylor Street and Fairview. So I remember that and back then, we thought we were fortunate and blessed because we didn't want for anything. We had pretty much everything we needed, because we didn't know that we were lacking as far as probably other people who were a little more affluent than we were. We didn't realize that then because we felt like we had just as much as anyone else did. My dad and my mom worked hard, and we never went lacking for anything.

LS: So the community kind of just raised everybody together? I know my mom, when I was little, and went to elementary school told me just know, now that you're leaving our house, if you get in trouble outside of the house, you're in trouble when you get back in the house.

DC: Absolutely. That's right, that's the same way that it was and you could see Mr. Burkett, Mr. and Mrs. Burkett, they were the elderly couple in the neighborhood down on Hilltop Street. So its like, you go there and there were the elders and so you knew that if you go in trouble there, they were going to make sure that your parents knew it, or Mr. and Mrs. Nesbit up there, or my grandparents lived down the street, my mom's mom and dad. Mrs. Vera Carr, she lived in that area, all of them. Mr. and Mrs. Guaner and then Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Grey, she was the principal at Fairview Elementary, and Mrs. Jones I believe she taught there and then there was Mrs. Brown up the street who was the music teacher. So we grew up knowing our teachers and listening to them and they disciplined us. Now you can't even hit a child, but back in the day when we were in elementary school, they would use those

little rulers to spank our hands if we did something naughty and then they would report it to our parents and there was nothing wrong with that. I think the way we were brought up is a testament to the fact that many of us have still maintained those values. They didn't let us get away with too much, they disciplined us and we knew it was out of love but it paid off and I'm glad they disciplined us the way they did back then.

LS: So the teachers were part of the community as well, you didn't just see them at the school?

DC: The teachers were part of the community, and they knew our parents. I knew Mrs. Cleo Robertson was very good friends with my mother and she would come to the house and discuss things with us and she did that with other parents too. The teachers were a vital part of the community back then.

LS: That's one of the things we've been researching is the faculty, and a lot of people have been saying that when you weren't at home with your biological parents they were your parents.

DC: They were like your parents away from home, and we listened to them and you know we loved our teachers, because they were really, truly, genuinely concerned for our growth and teaching us the right thing to do and making sure we got our grades.

LS: When you were at William-Penn, did you do any extra-curriculars? I know I saw some of them over here.

DC: Yes, I was in the drama club, the Spanish club, majorette during marching season, a cheerleader during basketball season and during concert season I played

alto saxophone. Mr. Bell was instrumental in the students becoming good students and good musicians and he was the best. We used to go to different competitions and play at the games and I don't know if you've ever heard but William Penn was the bomb band back then.

LS: That is what everyone has been saying; we have heard and heard and heard.

DC: So I loved my high school years. I was also a hostess my senior year, and there was also a group of young women who were presented their senior years and it was called the cotillion. There were about 50 girls selected in the beginning of sophomore year and as it went on and progressed, you were told whether or not you made that presentation to become a cotillionette your senior year. So I think there were about 20 of us presented out of the 50, and that was really nice too.

LS: So what did it mean to be a cotillionette?

DC: It just meant that during the progression of the selection process you had to keep a good reputation, you had to be good with your grades and learn proper etiquette, things like that just about how you present yourself into the world. When you are presented as a cotillionette, then you have gone through those steps as far as how to present yourself in society and try to be the best person you can be, developing your character, things like that.

LS: Just being professional and well rounded and things like that?

DC: Yes.

LS: Okay, so what else about the band?

DC: Oh wow, we would go to places like Spencer and just compete. We'd play Carver, Atkins and Dudley they were our rivals. There was competition, and the football team was great too. We just had excellent athletes and William Penn just gained a reputation for having great athletes, teachers, the band was awesome, nobody could really touch us. They couldn't and when we marched in the parade, the Christmas parade, everyone would wait for William Penn's band. I've even had girls tell me as I have met them as we grew, and I'd run into them. I had one girl say, "man there was nothing like William Penn," and she said, "I'd be waiting just to see you come down strutting," because I was really good (laughs). People just tell you that to swell your head and I let it go to my head.

LS: So William Penn gained this reputation for being very good academically, very good athletes, very good band, what do you think contributed to that? Was it just the people that lived in the area, was it the atmosphere?

DC: It was the atmosphere, the people, the teachers and Mr. Bell. He started with us in elementary, he would start with us just like Mrs. Brown did for the choir; he was that for the band. He would work with us and try us out on different instruments. Because I started out playing the clarinet, but then he would get you to the best fit for you and he would develop you. And he was instrumental in that band, Mr. Bell was what made the band, J.Y. Bell, he made that band and then just all of us just had a good camaraderie because we all wanted to be the best. And he instilled in us that you can be the best and still be humble. We tease everybody like, "yeah, we know we're the best," and everyone else would tell us that so naturally that's what we thought, but then we worked hard also.

LS: Well, we've talked a little bit about principal Burford, but what was he like? Do you have any memories of him?

DC: I do, as a matter of fact. Mr. Burford was stern, he was a little man, but he was a mighty little man. And, you better not be late for class because he was going to be there somewhere around the door. So I particularly remember this, because I had competed for Miss William Penn at my school and I sang and did a skit. I had some of the kids in the dance class help me with my skit. The Middlebrooks, they were singers, they were popular during that time and then Benjamin Moore and some of the dance group helped me do this skit. So, then the kids had to vote right, and I didn't want to go to school because I said, "dog I'm not gonna get it," because I thought that Sandra Kendall was going to win because she was the teacher's daughter. And I thought, you know how you think. So I said, "I'm not going to school today," and my mom said, "girl you gonna get outta here." So what happened was I was running behind because I was a little despondent and I said, "Dog, maybe I should win, but I probably won't." So, when I got to school late, guess who the first person I saw? I'm trying to sneak in the door and I hear, "Miss Collins." I thought, Oh Lord no, and I didn't have any excuse, so I don't know what I told Mr. Burford. He wouldn't scold you, but he had a stern voice and said, "get to class." I do remember that about him, and it was so funny. You just revered him and some of the other teachers like they were you parents, so that is one thing I remember in particular.

LS: That is one thing that we've talked about too, that nowadays, there isn't as much respect from student to teacher.

DC: That is a big difference. Back then we respected our teachers, we wouldn't dare talk about to our teachers. First they'll chastise you, then they go tell your momma that you did. Then our mothers and our fathers would back them up. So, we didn't have a lot of disrespectful kids back then. Every now and then, if we were playing a rival school, you might have some episodes with some of the students, but nothing major. Nothing like they have going on today. I think kids were more respectful then. I think we more grateful, and more appreciative of what we had back then.

LS: I know you mentioned briefly that you were a hostess, where was that at?

DC: Well actually, I meant for the senior class, because I did win Ms. William-Penn.

LS: Congratulations.

DC: Thank you (laughs). And my best friend at the time was Diane Dickey and she was Miss Homecoming so we got to pick out our gowns and stuff together and I was also the business manager for our senior class, and I was voted most talented with Steve and then I was a cheerleader, I said that already. I was voted with Hank Wall for most versatile. Hostessin means if people came to the school, we had a group that was like, I guess you would call them the hospitality team and I was a part of that.

LS: Like if new kids came to the school?

DC: Or if people just coming to visit the school, we had a hospitality committee that would great them and Mrs. Stewart was in charge of that and we would just take them around the school. This is our yearbook and some of these

same pictures (motioning to poster) she got them from this book. There was Mrs. McConnell, who was one of my favorite teachers and some of the kids would say, "well you're her pet," I said, "no I'm not her pet," but she was just so sweet, she was the sweetest lady. So this here was as a hostess (motions to poster), it was the North Carolina Teachers Association meeting and I was serving as a hostess there. Mrs. Stewart was in charge of the hospitality committee, and right here I was leading the students in a cheer at a basketball game and right here, this was before one of our football games. And this is me here.

LS: So, just showing people around the school when they came. Did you have a job?

DC: Oh now, when I was 15, yes, I worked at the country club in High Point at the pool. Mr. and Mrs., gosh what were their names? I can't think of their names, but they were in charge of the pool at the country clubs, Bowles, Mr. and Mrs. Bowles. And I was up there with them during the summer, fixing food and things like that, hot dogs, but do you know what I remember? And I don't know if this is the same guy, but there were two young boys up there then always getting into something and I was always on them, but they would always come up to me and rib me and I said, "boys, you all better stay out of trouble, but I just love those two boys." One was Walker Lee, I would love to see Walker Lee, and the other was a little redheaded boy by the name of Bencini but that's all I can remember. So, I don't know if it is the same Bencini that just was elected mayor. But I remember his name was Bencini and he was a little chubby guy with red hair, and Walker Lee, kind of blondish hair, always into something, both of them. But those were my two little buddies, so I did

work up there during the summer. Then I worked while I was in college during the summers.

LS: So, when you saved up a little money, what was there to do around here?

DC: Go to the movies and go to High Point theater up there, but you know at the time it was segregated and we would sit upstairs but I'd buy some popcorn and then I would buy some clothes. Then it was pretty reasonable, but my mom and dad never make us have to buy clothes or anything, they always provided for us. The little extra money helped us be able to do some other things. Buy my sister and brother few little things. We'd go to High Point Theater and throw popcorn down on other people. Those were the days, but I also participated in the marches back then with Reverend B. Elton Cox and Dr. Little and some other ones during the segregation period when we were marching. I participated then and I was arrested once, when we were sitting down on North Main Street from the theater and I wouldn't take those experiences way for anything.

LS: So you were arrested, what did your parents think about that?

DC: Oh a lot of us were arrested, we were marching. My parents didn't have a problem with it. I don't think they had to pay for us to get out of jail back then, because so many of us were arrested, but they were glad. And see I've always been kind of outspoken and I remember my grandma always saying, "honey, learn how to fight your battles, and which battles to fight," and sometimes you have to hold your peace. But the battles I know I may be able to win or have some say so in, I'll try and tackle those so that my voice can be heard. I think they appreciated the fact that I

was a pretty strong young woman and I thought I was contributing to a cause, so I think they appreciated that.

LS: So who organized those type of sit-ins and marches? Like how did you find out about it?

DC: A lot of times, you'd hear in the churches because our leaders in our churches, our pastors, would let us know what was happening and you'd hear at school what was going on. There was a church on Washington Street where we would meet and at that time it was reverend B. Elton Cox, Dr. Perry Little and some others and I remember another lady, Pat, she used to have a beautiful voice but I can't remember her last name now. But she would lead us in song and then we would march and they were instrumental in organizing all that for us.

LS: So you said you went to the movie theater, did you go to any others? Where were the other marches to?

DC: We would march so we would be able to be integrated.

LS: Ok, yeah, where were they though, like what was their physical location?

DC: High Point Theater, do you know where High Point Plaza is? High Point Theater was right across from that, I think it's a furniture store now.

LS: So y'all would meet up?

DC: We would meet at the church on Washington Street and then march downtown. Which isn't a long way, but back then it seemed like a long way, but now when you see it its not because you come up Washington Street to Kivett Drive and then walk on around to North Main Street.

LS: Was the national civil rights movement, was that on your radar?

DC: Yep that was all over it, but we did what we could do locally, and then I guess the organizers for us were more in contact with the other people on the national level and then they organized it here.

LS: So what were, obviously by participating in the marches and the sit-ins you were for the cause, but what were your feelings at the time?

DC: I just felt it was unjust because once you get to a certain age you're more aware. When you're younger, you're not aware of injustices and the disenfranchisement that is going on against your people, but as you get older, you feel like, well why are we being treated this way when we're supposed to be humans too? And we're citizens, our parents pay taxes, they work and pay taxes just like everybody else, so why shouldn't we have a chance to share some of those things that they share; things just as simple as going to a movie and being able to drink out of a water fountain. We shouldn't have to go to an establishment that says, "colored," what color are you talking about? Pink, red, blue, green? You know, whites, coloreds, that was a major injustice and so I've always been a person who has felt like if there is any way that I can speak out or contribute in any way I'm going to do that. I'm still like that.

LS: What about when they switched over from William Penn to High Point Andrews? Did you graduate before that?

DC: I graduated in '68, see we were the last class, and then after '68 I went off to college. I found that they switched over, I didn't know that they were going to close, I know they closed the school because I was hoping that it was going to remain William Penn. Maybe they could introduce some better technology and

upgrade the schools, Griffin and William Penn. I thought that just like Dudley, some people tried to take Dudley over there, and I'm not sure of the intricacies, all the details, but I felt like if Dudley could maintain and sustain their school, keep it, why couldn't William Penn with all of our leaders here? I don't really know the circumstances of how that came about because I lived in Georgia. I went to school in Durham and then I moved in Georgia for a long time and I'd come back and forth home, but back then I wasn't as into political comings and goings and things like that. I wasn't into it that much because I was doing a lot of caregiving too back and forth so when I found out that it had become Penn-Griffin, I'm not sure what year that was.

LS: '68 was the last graduating class like you said from William Penn before they shut it down.

DC: Yes, and then it was a few years, quite a few years. Then I found out it had become a school of the arts and I was disappointed, I think a lot of us were. But then again I don't know the circumstances surrounding it, I don't know if the people around here fought against it being closed or if it was a part of the integration whatever, but I was wondering why they didn't close Central, or integrating both schools? So, that was one of the things that I was wondering.

LS: One thing that we've heard from some people is that it wasn't necessarily that you wanted to go to a school that was all white, but that you wanted the same equipment, the same access to information.

DC: Absolutely, and that's why I was wondering why did it have to close? Why couldn't they have, like I said before, do some more upgraded technology and

equipment, all the necessary tools were provided to us that were provided to the other schools. Even then, I don't know that it was so much as we had to go to school with the white kids if we had had the same access, but at the same time we still had excellent teachers and we were still able to achieve. We've had plenty of our classmates go on to achieve wonderful things, academically and otherwise, but I don't know what happened with that as far as I think that if they had kept the school open and provided for us, the students, going forward more access and equal opportunity then it would have made a difference.

LS: We've studied some other places in North Carolina too, like in Charlotte instead of just moving African Americans into white schools, they did it to everybody. They would bus white students just like they bused African Americans.

DC: Absolutely, and that's what I thought they should have done here. Sometimes you say, "well you didn't really have a voice in it, if you didn't live there and know what was going on." So sometimes I regret that because I didn't know the logistics of everything and if more could have been done.

LS: Was there something that I didn't ask that you would like to share about your high school experience? Any stories or anything?

DC: I just remember those were my best days, in high school. It was such a happy time, and the teachers were great, the students, it was just more like family. Even though you had Southside and we were considered to be growing up on Southside and right now, Southside is like family. Anything happens, especially to someone who grew up on Southside, we're all there; we're still like a tight-knit

family. So we're proud of being from Southside, and we always say "south siiiide" and that's family. Have you ever driven over on the Southside?

LS: I don't think I have, I've been over to William Penn a couple of times.

DC: Well see this is east side compared to where I grew up. Fairview, Bill Street, West Willis, all that's Southside, back over in there. So when we come over in here it was like we were coming to east side. I don't know, there are just so many good memories about William Penn. From the students to the teachers, all the activities and it was a very prestigious school back then.

LS: One thing that I didn't ask you about that I just thought of was that we were talking about the marches and the sit-ins. What did teachers and like Principal Burford and the school think about that, did they ever talk to y'all about that?

DC: I don't think they ever talked to us about that. That was pretty much outside the topic of discussion at school. That was usually after school and I'm sure they all were aware of what was going on, but that was not really a topic that was talked about. But we all knew who Martin Luther King Jr. was and other leaders. Ralph David Abernathy, John Lewis, Jesse Jackson and some others, because when I moved to Atlanta in 1979, I was able to work with some of those. Like the PUSH operation in Atlanta, SCLC I joined down there, so when we were in high school we were familiar with some of those people, but the teachers didn't really discuss it in class.

LS: What would you say that your experience, the impact has been of William Penn after you left?

DC: After I left? The impact it had on me from when we were growing up as children and teenagers being a part of Fairview, Griffin and William Penn, our teachers the whole village has made me a stronger individual, it's made me have better self-esteem, and it's made me try and treat people right and do unto them as I would like to be done unto and to do what I can to help people and be, not necessarily a role-model, but to be able to help the next young person coming up. Contributing as much as I can to society as an upstanding, moral individual. We're not flawless, nobody's perfect, and you know what I read every day? The Prayer of Jabez, that's for God to increase my territory and for me to not do any harm to anyone and to bless me and help me be able to bless someone else so to speak. And you try and live like that. I think that's all a part of everything we've come through, from childhood to adolescents and as adults.

LS: Well I thank you very, very much for the opportunity to interview you.

DC: Oh, you're welcome. Anytime I get an opportunity to talk about William Penn, I love it, I love it. I can't think if there's anything else, I just love our teachers: Mr. Gary and Miss. Stewart, Miss. Kendall, Mrs. Davis, I love Miss. Davis she was a biology teacher. My classmates, the class of '68, even though we all went to William Penn, we consider William Penn the best, so Class of '68 since we were the last at one of the reunions we had our theme was the last of the best.

LS: That is very clever.

DC: Yep, the last of the best.