

Interview with Lowell Toliver
Lucy F. Simms School Oral History Project

Interview status: Open to the Public

Name of interviewee: Lowell Toliver

Name of interviewers: Avery Chandler, Owen Longacre

Date of interview: Feb 16, 2023

Duration of interview: 01:11:10

Place of interview: Google Voice

Language of interview: English

Interview with Lowell Toliver

Google Voice Notification 00:00

This call is now being recorded.

Avery Chandler 00:05

Mr. Toliver, do you consent to this recording and give us permission to interview you today?

Lowell Toliver 00:12

Yes, I do.

Avery Chandler 00:13

Awesome. And for recording purposes, my name is Avery Chandler. I will be interviewing you Mr. Lowell Toliver. Today is February 16, 2023. And we are interviewing in SHS [Spotswood High School]. All right, Mr. Toliver. I know you graduated from the Simms school, but what years did you attend the school, begin your elementary years, and when you graduated?

Lowell Toliver 00:42

Whoa. You know, I was afraid you were going to ask that [laughs]. Let me see. I've got to do a little multiplying. I graduated in '52. And so why don't we say 1941 I started.

Avery Chandler 01:07

Yeah.

Lowell Toliver 01:07

Okay?

Avery Chandler 01:08

Yeah, that's about 11 years.

Lowell Toliver 01:10

Because yeah, okay. 1941 I started in in the first grade with Miss Jean Francis.

Avery Chandler 01:20

Jean Francis, that was your first grade teacher?

Lowell Toliver 01:23

That was my first grade teacher. Now, I'm not too sure whether she was kindergarten, too. But that was the first class that I attended with her. And that was in 1941.

Avery Chandler 01:36

1941.

Lowell Toliver 01:38

Incidentally, you know, World War II was going on then.

Avery Chandler 01:42

Yes.

Lowell Toliver 01:44

Okay.

Avery Chandler 01:46

What was your experience like at the Lucy Simms School? Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Lowell Toliver 01:53

For all the years?

Avery Chandler 01:56

Yes. Your whole experience throughout your time at the Simms School.

Lowell Toliver 02:00

I think it was really okay. It could have been better, but during those times, you know, it wasn't going to get any better. So we just had to make do with what we had.

Avery Chandler 02:15

Would you like to elaborate on what you mean by "okay?" What are some details about what made the experience "okay."

Lowell Toliver 02:27

I guess I got the basic foundations of education, because we had to multiply, subtract, and do the general work from first to second grade.

Avery Chandler 02:56

And what was your average school day like? Besides all the curriculum and what you were learning?

Lowell Toliver 03:03

You're taking a big bite at the apple here because you said average school day. You're talking about from kindergarten to high school?

Avery Chandler 03:13

Your early years. We'll be talking about your early years.

Lowell Toliver 03:15

So we stick with the early years now.

Avery Chandler 03:18

Yeah.

Lowell Toliver 03:18

Okay, well, first of all, I would get up in the morning. We would have breakfast. And I had to walk to school, which was around about maybe a mile, a mile and a half away. And we had no snow days.

Avery Chandler 03:34

[laughs] So you didn't get that free day off of school, like we do?

Lowell Toliver 03:42

No, and I didn't get a free ride to school [laughs]. I was walking, you know, patting and turning. That's the old term that they used to use. Anyway. By the time we got to school, in the first grade, there was tables set up. Miss Jean Francis would teach us different colors and nursery rhymes and things like that. And we would be in there until about three o'clock in the evening. And then we'd go back home. And that would be the end of the school day.

Avery Chandler 04:28

And what time did the school day end? Around three o'clock like we do now? Yeah, it started at nine o'clock and it was over with at three. And we had an hour for lunch. During those days, you would bring your lunch. You'd fix a bag lunch at home. In the first and second grade, you wasn't old enough to go to the cafeteria. Did you have a favorite lunch went that you brought to school?

Lowell Toliver 05:12

Well, whatever my mother and father fixed for me, that's what I ate. No, I didn't have a favorite lunch.

Avery Chandler 05:21

Okay. Do you recall what street you grew up on?

Lowell Toliver 05:26

I recall two streets that I grew up on. Rock Street and Mason Street, which are the main streets. It was during the redevelopment period. Well, the streets are there, but the houses are not there. I know you're not familiar with Harrisonburg, but on Mason Street, where my house was, an Advanced [Auto Parts] store is there now. And there's a big rock. And that was in our basement. And I think around the corner is the fire department, the new Hose Company No. 4. And on Rock Street, which was 160 Rock Street, which was around maybe five or six houses, and across the street was an open field and that field was where a [chicken feed] bag company eventually built a store or a cleaning facility for bags.

Avery Chandler 05:26

I do recall the streets, Rock and Mason. My dad actually works at Hose Company No. 4 in downtown Harrisonburg. He's the captain for the Harrisburg Fire Department. So I just made that little connection between the two, which I thought was pretty cool.

Lowell Toliver 06:01

It was downtown. Was he in the new department or the old department?

Avery Chandler 07:12

Well, he currently works for them. So it's the new House Company No. 4.

Lowell Toliver 07:14

Okay, because No. 4 was located on Wolf street. No, it wasn't Wolf Street. It was the next street over where the post office was. And they were down there Hose Company No. 4. But during the redevelopment, almost all of the county government's offices were built in places where the new Hose Company is now, which is on Rock street.

Avery Chandler 08:00

So back to the Simms School. How were the teachers in your early years at the elementary school?

Lowell Toliver 08:07

Well, I can remember two teachers and what I'd learned under them. Miss Jean Francis, who I probably learned my colors from. And then there was another teacher called Ruth Hollins. She had third, fourth, and fifth grade. And boy, did she have a job [laughs]. In the first grade, we had tables, and the teacher could set up the tables in any way that she wanted to. But with the third, fourth, and fifth grades, there were desks lined up for three rows. Now don't ask me what would happen if there was more people than there was desks in a row. I'm still trying to figure that one

out as I got older [laughs], but fortunately, it wasn't enough to fill up. I think it was about nine desks in a row. And it was three rows or that was third, fourth, and fifth grade which Ruth Hollins taught. She actually taught us how to read, write, and sentences, multiply, subtract, everything. That's where I basically got the learning of the basic foundation.

Avery Chandler 09:31

And could you say that Miss Hollins was one of your most influential teachers in your years at the Simms school?

Lowell Toliver 09:39

She was. No questions asked.

Avery Chandler 09:45

So, she definitely made a significant impact on your experience there?

Lowell Toliver 09:51

She took time to understand each individual kid. Now maybe because we had a small class she could afford to do that. But she made sure when you walked out of there every day you learned something, if it wasn't anymore than how to tie up your shoes [laughs].

Avery Chandler 10:19

So as you got older, you obviously moved up in grades. And what was the dynamic like between the high school students and the younger elementary school students? Because I know you guys were all in the same building.

Lowell Toliver 10:31

Yeah, well, when you said high school, you mean what grades?

Avery Chandler 10:36

The grades would have been 9 to 12? 8 to 12?

Lowell Toliver 10:47

All right. Our junior high was sixth and seventh. And then our high school was eight, nine... Wait a minute, I got that wrong. Seventh and eighth was junior high, which was still on the elementary level of the school. We didn't move upstairs until eight, nine, ten, and eleventh. There was only three high school grades now. So seventh and eighth were still on the elementary level. Nine, ten, and eleven was what were considered high school.

Avery Chandler 11:42

Okay, and when you were a younger student, what do you remember about the high school students? Did you ever interact with them whatsoever? Or did you guys stay to your separate ways since you were on different floors?

Lowell Toliver 12:01

If you was in high school, you didn't have anything to do with the elementary. Anybody that was on the first floor [laughs]. I'll put it like that. Because actually, high school was considered a second floor. It was only two floors in the school. So, it was the top level.

Avery Chandler 12:28

Did you have a younger or older sibling that attended the Simms School alongside you?

Lowell Toliver 12:33

I had a younger sibling, which was a brother. He came along about three years behind me. Everything completely changed. I think they had more studies and more educational work.

Avery Chandler 13:04

Go ahead.

Lowell Toliver 13:05

No, go ahead.

Avery Chandler 13:07

So they got a little more curriculum and a little more education than you guys did, persay?

Lowell Toliver 13:14

Oh, my older brother and sister were about four years ahead of me. When they graduated from Simms, it was the place to be then because they were coming from Effinger Street School. And it was altogether different to have a school of their own. A modern school, I'll put it like that.

Avery Chandler 13:49

So do you remember your relationship with your older and younger siblings? Were you guys close?

Lowell Toliver 13:56

Oh yeah. We was all close because we lived in the same house and we was a close knit family. And if my younger siblings didn't do what we were supposed to do, then my oldest siblings was right there to make sure we did it.

Avery Chandler 14:22

And how did your school day and experience change as you got older and moved up in grade levels?

Lowell Toliver 14:38

I'll say there was more book work. But we would have books that we would work out. Like the third, fourth, and fifth grade, Miss Hollins had books. And she would stay strictly on those pages. So we learned what she had down for the year. In the beginning of the year, we had used books. Half of the pages are gone. They were all marked up and everything. But eventually, by the time we got to the fifth grade, we was getting new books straight from the press. And we

would have to buy those books, and then we'd have to sell them to the next grade for half of the price that we paid for them. But they had all the pages in them.

Avery Chandler 15:49

So what were some of your fondest memories of Simms School?

Lowell Toliver 15:56

Memorial Day. Because that was the day we got out of school the next day.

Avery Chandler 16:05

Did you say Memorial Day?

Lowell Toliver 16:07

Yes. We got out for the summer.

Avery Chandler 16:11

Yes.

Lowell Toliver 16:13

Yeah, we got out Memorial Day and then we didn't go back until after Labor Day. And I guess that was because you were needed around the house or whatever to do little odd jobs like. You didn't go up until July or August or anything.

Avery Chandler 16:48

Do you recall any celebrations or extra curricular activities that you've enjoyed at the Simms school?

Lowell Toliver 16:58

All the way through elementary, we had what you call operettas, which was plays that the teachers would practice. Each student had a talking part and we had costumes. And I never will forget it. The costumes were made out of crepe paper. Crepe paper. If you can imagine that. And they were all hand sewn by a lady called Miss Goodell. And she did all of this on the crepe paper. And you would have to go to her house and be fitted. And you never put on that costume until the day of the play. And that was it. And for half the kids, the paper would tear and they would be crying and it was a grand mess [laughs].

Avery Chandler 17:57

So what did you say that play was called? What is this?

Lowell Toliver 18:00

It was an operetta that we had every year. I think this is the only place that they had it was in black schools. Because we actually learn how to sing "Lift Every Voice," and sing. And we had operettas at the end of the school year for all the elementary grades. And they all participated in it. And that was a big thing. That was almost equal to our May Day.

Avery Chandler 18:39

So what can you tell me about May Day? I know you mentioned in our previous interview that you enjoyed it but what's a little more about your experience with May Day and details that you remember?

Lowell Toliver 18:49

You know, I don't remember a whole lot about May Day. Because our operetta probably took the place of May Day. The older kids in high school would probably do a May Day program which would last for about 25 to 30 minutes. It was just wrapping a band around around the flagpole. That was our May Day celebration.

Avery Chandler 19:26

And you really are talking about that play. Did that celebration and activity unite you guys as students?

Lowell Toliver 19:40

In those days, our whole community, now it's called Northeast, was called the colored section of town, and everybody sort of stuck together. They worked together. Nobody needed anything. You never saw kids walking around hungry. Somebody was always feeding them or somebody took you in and bought you used clothes or something. It was a tight knit community.

Avery Chandler 20:23

So that community: what impact did that make on you? What do you recall from your experiences living in that community?

Lowell Toliver 20:33

Well, I could go to anybody's house and ask for help, if I needed help. I just felt safe in that community, because everybody knew everybody, and everybody looked out for everybody. And we all communicated and played together.

Avery Chandler 20:59

So you guys were very close as a community, not just as a school, but as a community as well?

Lowell Toliver 21:05

In that part of town, yes, it was. We were all together. That was the only thing we could do. We couldn't go anywhere else. So we had to stay in that community and the older generation would have unorganized baseball games. And then we had a lot of talent programs. Talent shows that the whole community would take part in. And then we had a strong religious community. Because we had two churches, the Baptist and the Methodist. And you belonged to one of the two churches.

Avery Chandler 22:03

Which church did you belong to and attend?

Lowell Toliver 22:06

I belonged to the Methodist, John Wesley, which was on Liberty Street. Which there again, we had to walk to it down around the Court Square. I think the Wetsel Seed Company has a restaurant or something there now. The church had special programs where you had to go in the evenings to them. And they would have Bible study during the summer. And we used to go on day trips on the train from Depot Hill to Linville and have a cookout, a lawn party. And then have a picnic. That was one of the big things that we did during the summer was go to summer Bible school.

Avery Chandler 23:14

What were these picnics like with your church? Like what food did you guys serve? What activities did you guys work with?

Lowell Toliver 23:22

Well, there was always three or four chaperones. We had picnic baskets that each family would fix for their kids. You would get off the train, and you probably have to walk maybe about two miles down the road to the area where we would have picnics set up. You would sit out there and eat and dance and sing and play ball. Whatever kids would do when they were out like that.

Avery Chandler 24:04

I've heard you mentioned baseball a few times. Were you able to play any sports when you were younger?

Lowell Toliver 24:12

Yes. We had a basketball team. And that was about the only sport that we really could participate in because our the coach was also a teacher. And he was also an instructor for the shop. He would coach part time, do shop part time, and was also the health instructor. So everybody had part time jobs. I don't think of any teacher that had a single job. They always had combination of jobs. We had the basketball team. That was really an outlet for our high school days, because you were like the upper class. Everybody looked up to you. And especially if you had a home game. But then we had to travel. We would leave school, say on Thursday, and have games on Thursday and Friday. Maybe in Richmond, Lynchburg, Clifton Forge, and then back around. We would be gone for about two or three days. And we would go in the coach's car, and one other car, whoever the other driver would be. And we would miss school those two days. And I don't know how much they paid the coaches to travel that distance, but they seemed to enjoy it. But then we would stay in private homes. And by the time we got back on Saturday morning, all of the parents was looking for us. And we had to tell them what kind of experience that we had. And believe me, it wasn't any experience. You would eat in the school cafeteria. And from the cafeteria, you go upstairs and practice and then you have a game. And then whoever you was staying with would be right there to pick you up to take you to their house. And you spent the night twisting and turning. You didn't know what the heck to expect, you know. We was always glad to get back on the road the next morning to go somewhere else.

Avery Chandler 27:13

Was it uncomfortable or awkward for you to stay in people's private homes while you were away traveling for games?

Lowell Toliver 27:19

Uncomfortable, very uncomfortable. But then those days you couldn't stay nowhere else.

Avery Chandler 27:31

Did the people who took you in nice? Were they very accepting?

Lowell Toliver 27:35

They were really a friendly bunch of people. And to this day a lot of us (I guess all of my contacts are dead) kept in touch with people during the years. And whenever we'd go to someplace like Richmond or Roanoke we'd always look them up and we always felt welcome.

Avery Chandler 28:07

Were you any good at basketball? Or was it just really fun for you to play?

Lowell Toliver 28:11

You know I was good [laughs]! The only problem was I just didn't make it into the NBA [laughs]. Average. Incidentally, there should be a picture there at Simms hanging on the wall somewhere of our team. And I was in the picture. Incidentally, I was number 30. And it's been published quite a few times [unclear].

Avery Chandler 28:52

What position did you play when you played basketball?

Lowell Toliver 28:56

I was a guard. And, actually, we didn't have any set positions because you just played wherever you got the ball at the time. We had set plays, but we didn't stick to them. You have to remember we were high school kids, 15, 16, 17 years old. Basketball was entirely different than what it is now. Our whole gym would be half court to what a professional court is right now in the NBA. And believe me, we had one of the better gyms in the whole valley. [unclear] compared to Charlottesville, because they played in a little building outside. And Waynesboro, I can't remember what kind of building it was. But all our activities was within the school itself.

Avery Chandler 30:25

And what was that gym and facility like? What do you remember? What do you remember hearing in the gym? seeing in the gym?

Lowell Toliver 30:34

I can remember trying to figure out why they put the basketball backboard so close to the wall and not have pads. We had radiators in front of the basket backboard. And if you run into it? You'd hit a brick wall. I mean, it was just one of those things where they had some space and

they said, 'Oh, we'll make this a gym, an auditorium,' and whatever else they need it for. It wasn't made for a gym, as gyms are today. But we learned how to use what we had and we was very happy that we had what we had, because there were places down the road that didn't even have a school. I know in Luray, Virginia, they played basketball outside, on the side of the hill on dirt. That was their court. So we were really fortunate to have something like that. And we appreciated it.

Avery Chandler 32:02

Do you remember playing with Don Burgess?

Lowell Toliver 32:06

Whoa. No. [Laughter.] Now, you're talking about maybe 40 years difference. Oh, incidentally, bring it back when you said I remember playing with Don Burgess. No, I don't. He was much younger than me. We had to contend with World War II veterans that came back that did not finish high school. And they could come back and get their, I was going to say college, their high school diploma after they had served in World War II. So we had a few of the older players that were veterans. I mean, they were men returning from World War II. And they played basketball with us. So whenever they would come in, men older and more worldly individuals, then they usually took over the gym. And they played much better than the younger kids.

Avery Chandler 33:25

So were they intimidating, those veterans that came in there looking all muscular?

Lowell Toliver 33:31

You know, I can't ever remember them. They played with us on the home games. But if we had anything like a tournament, they didn't play. I'm trying to figure it out. I can't figure it out so I'm not going to try to. So they had to be at least three or four years older than the ones that were there. Well, I graduated when I was 17. And I left Harrisonburg at 17 and a half. I went into the military. You didn't hang around after you got out of high school because we couldn't. Well, if I wanted to go, the only place I could go to was Virginia State and Elizabeth City. Our superintendent [William Hampton] Keister had worked a deal out with those two colleges, that they would accept students from Simms into their college program. Any other college, any other HBCU, you had to go to school for a whole year to get a high school diploma, because our eleven grades wasn't a high school education.

Avery Chandler 35:16

So you said you graduated in 1952. After that you did join the military. I remember you saying that. But what were your years like after attending the Simms School and after you graduated?

Lowell Toliver 35:27

I graduated in '52. I left in '52. I went in the military in '52. I didn't have any downtime in Harrisonburg after I graduated.

Avery Chandler 35:44

So you went straight to war. I believe you said you fought in the Korean War, correct?

Lowell Toliver 35:49

Correct. Incidentally, my parents had to sign for me to go in. Well, the majority of the kids that graduated then, and when I say the majority, we had a real large graduating class, which was six. Did you hear me?

Avery Chandler 36:13

No, say that again.

Lowell Toliver 36:15

We had a large class that graduated that year. It was six.

Avery Chandler 36:21

Oh! So, you only graduated with six people? With five other people, I guess.

Lowell Toliver 36:27

[Laughs]. It's been a long time, you know, getting there, but once I graduated and got my diploma and whatever, my mother and father signed for me to join the military. So I joined the military and after three years and two days in the military, I got out. But before I went to the military, you couldn't get a job in Harrisonburg. You almost had to wait until somebody died to get a job. And that would be like as a porter at one of the hotels, or a waiter, or a chauffeur. And that that was it. That was it. So there wasn't any vacancies around for young black kids other than the military. And then the military wasn't the best place in the world either because it wasn't too easy there [laughter].

Avery Chandler 37:50

What was your experience like in the military?

Lowell Toliver 37:54

Well, like I said, I went to a joint, I went to Alexander. I got on a Greyhound bus in Harrisonburg on Wolfe Street, and went to get my physical and to be inducted in the army in Alexander, Virginia. From Alexander, Virginia, I went to Fort Meade, Arkansas, Fort Meade, Maryland. And I was there long enough to get a suit of clothes and on a plane the next night to Camp Chaffee, Arkansas. I'd never even knew it was in Arkansas. And it was cold. And I called my mother and father. I never will forget it and I said, "Daddy, I want to come home." "There's nothing I can do for you boy. You got it, you asked for it and you got it." Then I had about 12 weeks of training at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, and I got orders to go to FECON [Far East Command, U.S. Department of Defense]. I didn't know what FECON was. And I'm in Camp Chaffee. What's the name of the town in Arkansas? Anyway, I got a plane ticket. They gave me a plane ticket back and said, "So, where do you want to go to?" And being from Harrisonburg, the closest big town that I knew was Charleston, Charles Town, West Virginia. And that was close to Washington. So I knew I could get transportation. I'd have my brother, sister, somebody pick me up in Charleston, Charles Town. So I said Charles Town, and they wrote the ticket down Charleston,

West Virginia. Do you know how far Charleston, West Virginia is from Charles Town? From Harrisonburg?

Avery Chandler 40:08

No. About how long is it?

Lowell Toliver 40:09

Oh, it's a long ways. I got home. I had a four day delay enroute on the troop train. I was at home and said hello, goodbye, and showed him my uniform. And it was a guy going back to Fort Lee, Virginia. And he dropped me off at a nice little airport. And I flew to St. Louis and caught the troop train and from there to Fort Lewis, Washington. And Fort Lewis, Washington. I found out FECON was in the Far East. And there was 150 of us in the unit. And 149 went to FECON, and one went to Camp Lee, Virginia. Oh, man, I wanted to go there so bad. But anyway, ended up in Fort Lewis, Washington, stayed there for about a day and got on the ship and off to Korea. Was on the boat for 22 days going over and went to.... Stopped in Japan and then to Incheon, [South] Korea. And that was it.

Owen Longacre 41:32

Mr. Toliver, this is Mr. Longacre again, I wanted to just pop in for a question. It sounds like you had quite a life and a career in between your graduation from the Simms School and when it actually closed in 1966. And I just wanted to ask, I know it was 14 years apart, but when the Simms School officially closed, even though you might not have lived in Harrisonburg, did you have any parents or family in the area? And do you remember any reactions to the Simms School closing and maybe what that meant for the surrounding community, even though you might not have been living there yourself?

Lowell Toliver 42:15

I may have this all wrong. But I'm thinking the closing of the Simms School and the redevelopment was all at the same time.

Owen Longacre 42:24

You're correct, it was.

Lowell Toliver 42:27

And that was, excuse the expression, that was a shock to the black neighborhood. Because I remember, very few people in the black community knew what was going on then. There was only a couple of people. And the majority of the blacks didn't know what was going on with this redevelopment, because we had just built... Well, the house was around about maybe 10 to 15 years old. And my mother and father scraped and begged and worked and built that and we had a comfortable house that we lived in on Mason Street. And then when I came back and they said, well, they have redevelopment. They had torn down all the old parts. Well, they said.... How did they put that? "The blighted area of Harrisonburg." And our house wasn't blighted. It was probably one of the newest built houses in that whole neighborhood. But they didn't have any choice. They voted it [unclear] eminent domain. And that meant you either took what they

was going to give you or you was gonna end up losing more money fighting it. But anyway, after the redevelopment and the closing of the school, it seems like the kids that went to Harrisonburg High, they really wasn't accepted out there at first and it was a rough turnover between leaving Simms, being all black, and going to an all white school, which didn't change. That meant the kids had to change. Now I'm coming back from the military, and I knew you was gonna have to change. But the majority of the kids around there, that when they went to Harrisonburg High, they accepted it was for the good because they got a better education. At Simms, you was limited to where you could go.

Owen Longacre 45:03

Mr. Toliver, we've talked in class about some of the unintended consequences of the desegregation process. And it seems to me that's part of what I'm hearing in your story is that not all of it might have been positive. Even though there, even though integration was something that most people seemed to want. Did you feel like that's a fair characterization?

Lowell Toliver 45:29

That is true. That is, I can remember that whenever we would have a program, we'd always get hand-me-down stuff from the school board. Now, you learned how to deal with it. The teachers during my time in school, they accepted that, and they knew they wasn't gone to get anything any better. And they wouldn't get anything else. So they have to use what they have. And I'm talking about school books and desks. I can remember in first and second grade, we had tables, which the names were, you could see where they had been carved in. And then when I got to third, fourth, and fifth grade, there was actual desks. And they were in terrible condition. I mean, you just couldn't describe it. But they were better than what we had because we had nothing. I think through the years, the supply system got better, or it had to get better, couldn't get any worse. And it was just like books! We would get books, we'd have to buy books from the school system. And you had to have those books on your first day of class. And the only way for you to get them was to buy the used books from whatever system that they had. There in the city of Harrisonburg. My biggest fault is Superintendent Keister. We had a principal which was W. N. P Harris. He was against everything like that. I mean, but he knew he couldn't win the battle by himself. So if you needed a desk, so if you got a desk with a name carved in it or with all kinds of... Everything. I mean, you can't think about how bad some of the conditions were.

Owen Longacre 48:08

Is it fair to say that most community members in the Harrisburg area would have reacted positively to the integration process? Or was it more complicated than that? And with the urban renewal that came along with it and pieces like that?

Lowell Toliver 48:28

No, because we could walk to school. And everybody had a sense of community. Everybody looked out for each other, you know, and from what I understand, when they integrated the bus system, they had to walk to begin with, which was a long ways. From Simms School to Harrisonburg High was a long way. And there again, I don't know whether they had snow days or "I'm tired" days or whatever, you know, I just can't make it. But my wife talked to a cousin that

was one of the first ones that went to Harrisonburg High. And some of the things that he said was terrible. We didn't have to put up with that at Simms. And they were spit on, threw rocks, called names. When they got far enough away from school, they would throw rocks at them. And the kids from our neighborhood would have to run to survive. And there was no need in calling the police. They didn't do anything. It was a school problem. And I'm pretty sure it's not the same way now. I hope it's not [laughs].

Owen Longacre 50:14

It certainly sounds complicated.

Lowell Toliver 50:16

I can remember my brother and sister. They were much older than me. And they could not believe that they was integrating the school almost overnight. I mean, there wasn't a warning or you know, we're gonna do this, we're gonna do that. It just happened. You know, you report to Harrisonburg High. And a lot of the parents just wasn't up for that. They had to work. They had to go to work in some of the homes where the kids who would walk would right past. So, that meant that they didn't know whether the kids were going to go to school, walk to school, or what. But they couldn't stop work to make sure that their the kids got to school. Actually, that was the downfall of the black neighborhood when they integrated the schools. That school. Harrisonburg High.

Owen Longacre 51:39

Interesting. What do you mean by that?

Lowell Toliver 51:43

Well, you knew just about all of the kids, they walked home together, they talked together. And there again, there was this redevelopment. That we had our own little grocery stores, and restaurants, and pool halls, and places like that. And after that, all of that was gone and nobody seemed to care any. Let me give you a little example. We had a drowning and you can probably look this up in Harrisonburg Daily News Record. It was a black kid drowned in the Rock, we called it the Rock Quarry [a rock quarry], which was on Depot Hill. We could not swim but in ponds and places like that. And we would always go to Bridgewater. The water was real low and you can walk through it. But then you'd get down and you go to the Rock Quarry to swim. Well, Happy Holly dived in. And when he dived in, he ended up on a rock that went right straight through his body. And all the rest of the kids that was there with him, they left, they ran. You know, something was going to happen. And they pumped that place for about two or three days before they found his body impaled in a rock. About two or three months or years, they gave us a swimming pool, which was about ten feet long, and about seven feet wide, and about five foot deep. It was nothing. But that was the only place that the kids had to go. And then everybody would just.... The kids went there for a couple of hours and they knew they were safe. But after that the redevelopment took that away. They took everything away that the black man was really comfortable with. Everything.

Owen Longacre 54:33

It sounds to me that in a way you lost a lot of the pillars of your community that you had built there.

Lowell Toliver 54:41

Yeah, let me give you another example. I was still just getting out of the army. We had to build a house up in called Newtown on Myrtle street. Which was 520 Myrtle Street. Which if I call the names, you'd recognize the house because he's really Ralph Sampson. Have you ever heard of him?

Avery Chandler & Owen Longacre 55:16

[Simultaneously] Yes

Lowell Toliver 55:17

Well, our house was there. And his parents, his grandparents live next door to us on Myrtle Street. In the process of them doing this redevelopment, they knocked down our house on Mason Street and set it afire. I could smell it burning. Now, I have a bitter outlook about Harrisonburg about that. There's a book that you should read: "Keeping up with Yesterday." I'll send you a copy of it.

Owen Longacre 56:20

You said "Keeping up with Yesterday"?

Lowell Toliver 56:23

Did you read that?

Owen Longacre 56:24

I have not heard that book.

Lowell Toliver 56:26

Oh, I'll send you a copy of it. You want to send it to the school or to your home?

Owen Longacre 56:35

To the school would be fine.

Lowell Toliver 56:36

Okay. That will give you an inward look of how people felt during the redevelopment and maybe about the integration of the high school.

Owen Longacre 56:53

That would be great. That'd be a great resource.

Lowell Toliver 56:56

Yeah. We had a community in Harrisonburg at one time.

Owen Longacre 57:04

Right.

Lowell Toliver 57:05

And everybody knew everybody. All the blacks knew everybody. And I don't ever remember seeing a sign... Well, let me take that back. I do. At the bus station, they had 'colored' and 'white'. And that was probably the only place that I ever saw a sign in Harrisonburg that said [that]. But we knew where we could go and where we couldn't go. So that was in the back of your mind all the time. And believe me, I had some real well, some of my best friends who were white [laughs]. I know you've heard of that term before. I had good white friends. And because we used to play together. Believe it or not, on Rock Street, we lived next door to a white family, which they would eat breakfast with us. My mother and father would fix breakfast for their family and us. And we would eat breakfast with their family on the days that they had to go to work early. So we had that interconnection. And I really, you know, like I said, and we played ball in the evenings when we come home from school, and in and out each other's house. But now like I told my kids, "Hey, you can't go to certain places." I remember when we was coming through Harrisonburg at McDonald's where McDonald's was in second grade, you could not eat at McDonald's, out in Virginia. And my kids were just young and they couldn't understand that. And it's just little things like that. And now they are up in age now. Sixty and sixty-five. So they look at it and say "Now Daddy, I know what you were talking about."

Owen Longacre 59:26

Right.

Lowell Toliver 59:28

But it wasn't easy after integration, as far as I'm concerned. Things got tougher. He was supposed to compete with people that you didn't have to compete against. And, like the only jobs that you could get was in a hotel. And believe me, the people that had those jobs, they weren't going nowhere because they paid good money. So you didn't have anything. My father... [laughs]... I better not tell you this one. But when he ran... [talks to someone off mic] Like I said, I got bitter things about Harrisonburg.

Owen Longacre 1:00:25

Sure. Well, I certainly understand it's complicated. And I hear in your voice how much the Simms School meant for that community in particular.

Lowell Toliver 1:00:40

Let me give you a little quote from W. N. P Harris.

Owen Longacre 1:00:43

Sure.

Lowell Toliver 1:00:45

You ought to look up his credentials. He was quite a scholar. I don't even deemed to carry his hat. But he had a quote, and I picked it up. "A little learning is a dangerous thing. Drink deep or [thirst] not [of] the [Pierian] spring." And it never dawned on me until I got older. And I said, "He really knew what he was talking about." And he always would try to get the best out of us. If he had to take you into his office and sit you down and teach you who was the president in 1915. He was just that kind of individual. And after that, we lost all of that. I could probably tell you who the President was and..and what happened on.... Oh, incidentally, you know, today is Black History Week! I mean month! Or this one is!

Owen Longacre 1:02:14

That's right.

Lowell Toliver 1:02:16

When I was going to school, we had black history week. And that was where you had to always have a quote from someone that was a famous black individual. But I see Harrisonburg is making a strive for the better. But until they get rid of the old people in Harrisonburg, because they turned the Simms School into.... I don't know what it was when it first opened up, but it wasn't a center for the.... I don't know what it was. It was a place for people that just didn't, couldn't get along.

Owen Longacre 1:03:18

I believe now it's a center for continuing education and a community center for events in other capacities. So it has changed probably a quite a bit since it first opened.

Lowell Toliver 1:03:32

I can remember for now. In the later years, they even gave us a baseball ground. A court. All we had was a set of swings. And that was it.

Owen Longacre 1:04:13

Sorry, Mr. Toliver. Are you still there?

Lowell Toliver 1:04:15

Yeah, I'm still here.

Owen Longacre 1:04:16

Oh, I'm sorry. I think we might have lost it just for half a second. Well as we just think about the school, I wanted to just offer you is there any other memories about school in particular or the role it played in the community that you feel like we didn't get a chance to talk about this afternoon?

Lowell Toliver 1:04:36

At the school, I always remember there was a connection, the community, was Memorial Day and then the last day of school. Because on the Sunday, we had a little program at the cemetery and then we walked across and had another little program at the school, and that was the end

of the school year. So you knew everything. But that was more or less a community thing. And everybody participated in that. But we didn't have any organized sports, per say. Because we didn't have the equipment, like gymnastics or anything like that. We had a couple of mats that they threw out on the floor where you could do a flip [laughs]. And that was the extent of our gymnastics. I think somebody had the right idea, but it just took a little time to take effect.

Owen Longacre 1:06:00

Sure. And I guess that no matter how old you get the Simms School is always a part of you in some way.

Lowell Toliver 1:06:07

It was a part of me until they start turning it into different things.

Owen Longacre 1:06:15

Right.

Lowell Toliver 1:06:16

And what got me was they could have easily kept it a high school there in that community. The kids could walk to school. There wasn't any... I can't ever remember a drug problem in our school. And now I know down here, they're just going out of control. And it's the younger generation. I think the worst thing we did when we grew up was we would smoke. They had cigars that would fall off the trees [laughs]. And you'd get sick behind the smoke, you know. So you never tried that, you know. So, as far as smoking weed and all of the drug problems that you have in the school system. I don't know if Harrisonburg has got it yet. But if they don't, it's on its way.

Owen Longacre 1:07:33

Yeah. No, it's certainly not a perfect world anymore.

Lowell Toliver 1:07:37

No, and in the old community that we had, you wouldn't dare do anything like that. Because everybody knew everybody. And, I don't know. When I tell my kids... They talking about they graduated from a class of 200 and 300. And I say Yeah, well, you're lucky. I graduated with six in my class. [Laughter]

Owen Longacre 1:08:11

Yeah.

Lowell Toliver 1:08:12

And they thought... I didn't tell them how many was in the class until eventually they saw a picture [laughs].

Avery Chandler 1:08:25

Well, this has been a great experience to talk with you Mr. Toliver. I've really appreciated and loved hearing what you've had to say and how you've shared your experience with us.

Lowell Toliver 1:08:36

I probably have many more but I just can't... You know, the older you get, the more you lose them. And you only stick with the bitter things. And I don't think I should do that. Because I'd like to be more negative, I mean more positive than negative.

Avery Chandler & Owen Longacre 1:08:55

[Speaking simultaneously] Right. Yeah.

Lowell Toliver 1:08:57

Because you get nowhere being negative. And I see a great improvement in Harrisonburg by being away from it. But then talking to several people: The reason why they left was because of redevelopment. And when you start thinking about redevelopment and how it was done in Harrisonburg, it's ridiculous. But that's one of the things that I think a few of the people are trying to correct down there now. A few. Not many. But it's going to take a good education for these kids to outgrow it.

Owen Longacre 1:09:51

Well, I think hearing from individuals like you and the students' participation in a project like this is a small step, but a step towards maybe learning from our past and in trying to correct some of those wrongs that have happened in the past.

Lowell Toliver 1:10:12

You know, I think somebody that should really get some flowers or whatever is W. N. P. Harris. He was the principal of the school, of Simms. And he and the superintendent of schools just could not get along. First of all, Ruth Hollins made an impression on me. Miss Jean Francis, and W.N.P Harris. Those are the three individuals that I would consider that I look up to.

Owen Longacre 1:10:58

Well, thank you, we certainly have those names. We certainly have the recording here. I'm gonna go ahead and stop the recording.