

Interview with Sam Ewell and Elizabeth Rohrer
Lucy F. Simms School Oral History Project

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Name of interviewee: Sam Ewell and Elizabeth Rohrer

Name of interviewers: Brody Sigman, Sierra Flowers

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Interview with Elizabeth Rohrer and Sam Ewell

Brody Sigman 00:00

And then I will ask if it's alright if I record this interview?

Elizabeth Rohrer 00:05

Yes, of course.

Sam Ewell 00:06

Yes.

Brody Sigman 00:07

Thank you very much. All right. This is January 20 [2023]. It's a Friday, we are at the Lucy Simms Center and we are interviewing Mr. Sam Ewell and his sister, Mrs. Rohrer, Ms. Ewell as well. So... And the interviewers will be Brody Sigman and [speaking simultaneously] Sierra Flowers.

Sierra Flowers 00:26

[speaking simultaneously] Sierra Flowers.

Brody Sigman 00:28

Alright, let's get started.

Sam Ewell 00:30

Okay.

Brody Sigman 00:31

So, first thing that we'd like to ask you is just how it is being back at the Simms Center. I'm sure it's been--it might have been a while since you've been here.

Sam Ewell 00:39

It's been a few years.

Brody Sigman 00:40

Yeah.

Sam Ewell 00:40

No but I was here a couple of years ago. Maybe there was a dance or, last time I was here, there was a dance on. You know.

Brody Sigman 00:50

That's fun. Dances are fun.

Sam Ewell 00:51

I've seen it, you know, just redone. So they've done a marvelous job.

Brody Sigman 00:56

Is there anything that really rings any bells? Brings back some good memories?

Sam Ewell 01:01

Well, the auditorium. That's where we had our school meetings and et cetera, et cetera. So, I remember that. Remember that well.

Elizabeth Rohrer 01:12

The auditorium was also our gym.

Sam Ewell 01:14

That's right.

Elizabeth Rohrer 01:15

I do remember that. That the boys played their basketball games, of course on the gym floor. And then we would come to watch the game, we actually set up on the stage to watch the games.

Brody Sigman 01:30

Did either of you participate in anything that you would be involved in in the gym and auditorium there?

Sam Ewell 01:36

Too young.

Elizabeth Rohrer 01:37

Too young.

Sam Ewell 01:38

Yeah, because I was here for the... I was here with third, fourth and fifth grade. So, you know...

Elizabeth Rohrer 01:44

And I was here for first, second, and third grade.

Brody Sigman 01:48

Right. So fairly young, but I'm sure...

Sam Ewell 01:51

I still remember. Absolutely. Because I was here. I was here on the day that Kennedy was shot. I remember that exclusively. We called school out around one o'clock because of the news.

Brody Sigman 02:05

Did you guys have like a TV in your classroom then, or?

Sam Ewell 02:08

No, no. [laughs]

Elizabeth Rohrer 02:15

Although, we did have a television in our home, and that wasn't... That was somewhat rare for African Americans to have a television. So I do remember watching it at home.

Brody Sigman 02:28

Watching what?

Elizabeth Rohrer 02:29

Watching... You know, the news of it. You know, for the rest of the day, there wasn't any other regular programming, you know? So it was all the news about what was happening.

Sam Ewell 02:43

Because they dismissed class that day, awfully early. Of course, we were upset. Obviously. I was.

Elizabeth Rohrer 02:52

I was, but I think I was ignorant of the political world.

Sam Ewell 02:57

Well, yeah, you were what, second grade? Something like that.

Brody Sigman 02:59

Pretty young, so... Well, I mean, you guys did say you were here pretty young. But that does mean that you went to some other schools during your school life. So, how does the Simms school compare to those?

Sam Ewell 03:18

On a scale of one to five? For Simms, I give them a five.

Brody Sigman 03:21

Oh, yeah.

Sam Ewell 03:22

Because of professionalism, the principals, the teachers... It was just a cut above. That's what I remember. Because after I left here, I went to Parkview Elementary, in Parkview and it wasn't bad or anything, but you know, just Simms was... Simms was unique and very professional. Matter of fact, the principal, he was very involved. He would stop, ask you questions, quiz you. The principal! I guess that's unheard of today isn't it? Yeah, just... And I guess it also helped that our father and the principal were friends. So he kind of took, he took I guess a little special interest in us. Which, you know, I appreciated.

Brody Sigman 04:22

Was the principal at the time Mr. Harris or?

Elizabeth Rohrer 04:24

Mr. Giles.

Sam Ewell 04:26

Mr. Giles. Leslie H. Giles. In the time I was here.

Elizabeth Rohrer 04:33

I have a funny story about Mr. Giles, outside of school. We were visiting in the home where he stayed and his home had a porch swing. And so on this porch swing, I remember sitting with Mr. Giles, and sitting right next to him, and there were two other siblings on this porch swing. We were just swinging along, and the side of the chain breaks. That was just a very comical thing.

Sam Ewell 05:11

No one was injured, right?

Elizabeth Rohrer 05:12

No one was injured.

Sam Ewell 05:13

All right, mmm hmm... So, you know, the memories... The teachers, they were involved. They were... We only... our class sizes was maybe 15? 20? So relatively small classes but the teachers... And we had we had one teacher, Miss Arrington, she was known for her ruler, and you got out of line, you got smacked. You know, she'd smack you across the knuckles. Didn't matter, you know, male, female, you know if you... But everybody, everybody knew it, going into the situation. So she had some things in order. I guess that'd be cruelty today wouldn't it?
[laughs]

Brody Sigman 06:04

Just a little rough parenting, you know.

Sam Ewell 06:09

Just across the knuckles. It'd make you think about it [laughs].

Elizabeth Rohrer 06:15

I was in the second grade in this classroom. So I did have Mrs. Fairfax.

Sam Ewell 06:21

This was second grade, wasn't it? [speaking simultaneously] Yes. [speaking simultaneously] Right.

Elizabeth Rohrer 06:26

And, you know, I don't really have much memory of... You know, of course we had our individual desk. I think we had individual desks in here. And... yeah.

Sam Ewell 06:42

[speaking simultaneously] We did. They were old and beaten up and just marked up, and well, of course, you know we got our school equipment from Harrisonburg High.

Elizabeth Rohrer 06:53

Leftovers.

Sam Ewell 06:54

Leftovers. Well after they were through with it, they'd pass it down to us. That's what we had to work with--books and everything. Books were are all written into. But hey, it is what it is. But, we flourished. So... Even with ill equipment. So, but that's I guess that's a tribute to the teachers. And adversity.

Brody Sigman 07:24

Speaking of teachers, Mrs. Rohrer and Mr. Ewell. But you seem to have fonder memories of the classroom or at least more vivid ones. Did you happen to be educated by Ms. Awkard in this classroom?

Elizabeth Rohrer 07:40

It was Mrs. Fairfax in this classroom and--

Brody Sigman 07:43

I'm sorry.

Elizabeth Rohrer 07:44

No, it's okay. And I guess--

Sam Ewell 07:47

I had Ms. Awkard. No, I had Ms. Eubanks.

Elizabeth Rohrer 07:50

She was fourth grade, Ms. Awkard was all, was fourth... Oh no [speaking simultaneously], she was second.

Sam Ewell 07:53

[speaking simultaneously] Miss Arrington was fourth grade.

Elizabeth Rohrer 07:55

Arrington was fourth grade.

Sam Ewell 07:56

And Ms. Eubanks was fifth.

Elizabeth Rohrer 07:58

Ok, I don't remember the third grade...

Sam Ewell 08:00

Ms. Bates, Ms. Bates was third grade.

Elizabeth Rohrer 08:02

Ok, so that was third grade. And another memory that I had was going down to the cafeteria that was in the downstairs area. And I remember lunch was 25 cents and I always had to make a big decision. I can either buy the full lunch for 25 cents, or I can get the hot dog and the ice cream sandwich and water. So, I always did like hot dogs and I still like hot dogs today. So it was always a toss up. But the lunches were, you know, full-course, they were a very well-balanced meal. I do remember that.

Sam Ewell 08:08

Mmm hmm. Good food. [speaking simultaneously]

Elizabeth Rohrer 08:20

[speaking simultaneously] And the big trays.

Sam Ewell 08:34

Very good food. It was very good food.

Elizabeth Rohrer 08:54

And then the school that we went to after this. It was a three-room school, from first grade to sixth grade.

Sam Ewell 09:03

Oh Parkview?

Elizabeth Rohrer 09:04

Yeah. And we did that-

Sam Ewell 09:04

[speaking simultaneously] They didn't have a cafeteria.

Elizabeth Rohrer 09:06

We did not have a cafeteria.

Sam Ewell 09:08

We were expecting a cafeteria. Uh-uh. You had to pack your lunch.

Elizabeth Rohrer 09:08

We had to pack a lunch. So that was a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. [laughs]

Sam Ewell 09:16

And potted meat. Who likes potted meat?

Elizabeth Rohrer 09:21

They don't even know what potted meat is.

Sam Ewell 09:23

You don't know what potted meat is?

Elizabeth Rohrer 09:24

That's a good thing. [speaking simultaneously] It's bad stuff.

Sam Ewell 09:27

[speaking simultaneously] It's a gourmet dish. It's gourmet. If you're a bum. [laughing] Yes, next.

Sierra Flowers 09:44

Speaking a little bit back to talking about the underfunding of the school. Did it really affect you guys as a kid having to understand very quickly what you were at odds with?

Elizabeth Rohrer 10:02

I don't believe I had any knowledge of that. But again, I'm six, seven and eight years old.

Sam Ewell 10:09

Yeah. What was the question?

Sierra Flowers 10:11

Did segregation bother you as a kid, and knowing the underfunding of the school?

Sam Ewell 10:20

Well, matter of fact, we just accepted it because we had no other option. Either you accept it or you don't go to school. So we, you know, being in elementary, didn't like it. Because, well, we came from Farmville and we... I went to first and second grade in a one room school. And they had all 12 grades in that one room, with an outside john. In Farmville. [laughing] So Simms was actually a step up for me.

Elizabeth Rohrer 11:03

Yeah, actually, yeah.

Sam Ewell 11:04

It was.

Elizabeth Rohrer 11:05

Quite a bit [laughs].

Sam Ewell 11:05

It was more and more or less a modern facility because the school in Farmville was, you want to talk unequal? Good God. Potbelly stove, windows were leaking in air. And roof leaking, and just... Just it was destituted. Old building. We have 12 grades in one room. But we persevered, because we had no other option.

Elizabeth Rohrer 11:38

Now, I think I remember that. I never went to that school. But I do remember the building. It had steps and we would kind of walk up to it. And the building was supported by stone columns, you know?

Sam Ewell 11:54

Yeah.

Elizabeth Rohrer 11:55

Brick, well not bricks, but they were...

Sam Ewell 11:56

[speaking simultaneously] The building was dilapidated.

Elizabeth Rohrer 11:58

[speaking simultaneously] Uneven, a stack of stones, you know, in the four corners?

Sam Ewell 12:02

Totally dilapidated.

Elizabeth Rohrer 12:03

I remember that. Because you could... [speaking simultaneously] Yeah, you know [unclear] [speaking simultaneously] Yeah, you could actually go, you could look under the school... Quite a bit. And I used to go to meet them when they got out of school.

Sam Ewell 12:17

And of course when you had to go to the bathroom, you had to go outside. And hopefully there's no line.

Elizabeth Rohrer 12:25

Or snakes. [laughing]

Sam Ewell 12:27

Or snakes. [laughing] You all just don't know. Just don't know.

Elizabeth Rohrer 12:37

But back to Simms...

Brody Sigman 12:40

Yeah. On the note of Simms, I know there's a big sense of community here. I definitely get that when I come to the school, when I hear from you guys, I can tell--

Sam Ewell 12:48

Oh, absolutely.

Brody Sigman 12:49

Lots of community here. And I'm curious about how you were able to feel that sort of in the area around Simms, in the town where you live nearby...

Sam Ewell 12:59

Well we lived right up the hill here. In the projects, for three or four years or so. So we, you know, we were definitely part of the community.

Elizabeth Rohrer 13:10

And we would have walked to school--

Sam Ewell 13:11

Oh yeah, we definitely walked. By the old swimming pool.

Brody Sigman 13:16

Harris Pool, I think it was called, right?

Sam Ewell 13:18

Yeah, Harris Pool. That's correct. That's correct. That's right. That's right. I remember when it was built.

Brody Sigman 13:23

Do you have fond memories of that place?

Sam Ewell 13:25

I do. I learned how to swim there in Harris Pool.

Elizabeth Rohrer 13:27

I learned how to swim in that pool as well.

Sam Ewell 13:30

Right because the lifeguard, the lifeguard threw me in. [laughing] He was a good friend of the family, but he threw me in so I didn't have much of a choice--on the deep end too. So I was scrambling. I learned how to swim though. [laughing] See fond memories, fond memories, yeah.

Elizabeth Rohrer 13:55

I remember the highlight of my day, every year here would have been May Day, because it was the event of... the music and wrapping the May pole and...

Sam Ewell 14:10

[speaking simultaneously] Warm May, and the weather was warm, after coming through a harsh winter...

Elizabeth Rohrer 14:14

[speaking simultaneously] And so May Day was a very wonderful [unclear]-

Sam Ewell 14:17

And the whole school participated. The whole school participated. Never any violence, dysfunction, none of that. It was amazing. School was amazing.

Brody Sigman 14:37

[Sam Ewell & Elizabeth Rohrer – Lucy F. Simms School Oral Histories]

And I know the May Day tradition was carried to a couple other schools by some of the teachers from the Simms Center.

Elizabeth Rohrer 14:44

Okay.

Brody Sigman 14:45

I don't know that either of you ended up going to any of those schools, but it is still carried out today at some elementary schools and... Yeah.

Elizabeth Rohrer 14:53

Good, good.

Sam Ewell 14:53

Where they wrapped the May pole? Yeah. That was deep. Never did understand what May Day was about. [laughing] It was a day out of school, that was all I cared about. [laughing]

Elizabeth Rohrer 14:56

But I'm pretty sure the teachers probably told us what it was about. But we were there [speaking simultaneously] for the song and the dance.

Sam Ewell 15:19

[speaking simultaneously] I wasn't paying attention. I wanted to go outside [laughing].

Brody Sigman 15:30

If you'd like to ask a question Sierra...

Sierra Flowers 15:32

Yeah, I was trying to... Ok, walking into the Simms Center, which was the old Simms School, I know that there wasn't a lot saved. Like, reserved, a lot of it is modified and a little bit more modern, like the projectors and everything. Do you think that it takes away some of the memories? Or do you still remember how the school was even after all of the modifications?

Sam Ewell 16:12

Oh, I do.

Elizabeth Rohrer 16:13

Oh, yeah, I do.

Sam Ewell 16:14

Absolutely. Well, third, fourth, and fifth, that's three years. So I have fond memories, you know. I remember exactly how it was. And of course, upstairs was high school. Down here was Elementary.

[Sam Ewell & Elizabeth Rohrer – Lucy F. Simms School Oral Histories]

Elizabeth Rohrer 16:29

Which I never would... never had the nerve to walk up those steps.

Sam Ewell 16:33

We weren't allowed upstairs either. If the principal called you going upstairs? Uh uh. You in trouble.

Elizabeth Rohrer 16:41

Speaking of going upstairs, I do remember one of the things that I had looked forward to, is that it's, and I don't know if I made this rule myself, or if it was reality, but I remember for first, second, and third, I always walked into the building from the back of the building. And I had made it--

Sam Ewell 17:06

From back there right?

Elizabeth Rohrer 17:07

From back there yeah. And I had made it my goal that when I was coming from fourth grade, I was gonna walk up those front steps. And in my mind, they were a lot of big tall steps. And I was looking forward to walking into the front of the doors.

Sam Ewell 17:27

Didn't make a difference to me, front or back. Generally came from the back, because we lived back that way, so we had to walk down to the school.

Sierra Flowers 17:43

While, researching about the Lucy Simms community, we read a lot about how it was the only school that was available for black Americans in Virginia. And there was also a lot of students who came from all around like West Virginia. And just like, like really far places from here just to go to this school. Did you guys know about that?

Sam Ewell 18:15

Yes. We knew a family called the Moats. They lived in Moatstown in West Virginia. But that was, eventually they got their own school. So you know, I remember I'm vaguely remember some students from West Virginia. But they weren't here [unclear]. When I was here they, I vaguely remember, but you know, they weren't really. Because they built a school over Moatstown in that area there, so obviously they had to come across the mountain. But can you imagine having to come from Moatstown, West Virginia to come to school every day? Man. What do, if you want an education, what you gonna do? You can't go to school five miles away.

Brody Sigman 19:07

Gotta travel.

Sam Ewell 19:09

You gotta go where the education is. Things have definitely changed, a little. [laughing]

Sierra Flowers 19:19

Do you think that there was anything that you were taught or anything big from your experience as a kid in the school that influenced your adult life?

Sam Ewell 19:34

They taught us manners. Big on that. Yeah. And respect. You know respect for [speaking simultaneously]. [speaking simultaneously] And respect. That's right, respect for teachers. I don't know what's going on in high school today but I'm willing to bet is not as intensified as it was back then as far as manners and respect, etc. etc. Because, you know, it was Mr. Giles, it was always Mr. or Mrs. And we never really, with the teachers, we never really mingled. They were over here we were over here. And no one, you know, didn't cross that line. You stay in your place. Absolutely. Because if you didn't you had to go home. And then when you were home you're in trouble. They used to call or whatever get word back to your parents that after the day, whatever, you know. And of course, you would suffer the consequences when you get home. Well we never misbehaved, did we? . No. Well, especially not me. But now, hey. We called her super B.

Elizabeth Rohrer 20:54

One unspoken rule, or maybe it was spoken, is that the authority, that teachers had authority.

Sam Ewell 21:01

Absolutely.

Elizabeth Rohrer 21:02

And our parents, the parents always supported that authority.

Sam Ewell 21:09

100%. 120%. Well, our father taught here for some years, so. And of course, they knew us, so the teachers all... We were... Our parents were friends with the teachers. They socialized together and stuff, so...

Elizabeth Rohrer 21:30

You could never get away with any of that.

Sam Ewell 21:34

Right, we had... beeline right to father.

Elizabeth Rohrer 21:38

No. Mother.

Sam Ewell 21:39

[Sam Ewell & Elizabeth Rohrer – Lucy F. Simms School Oral Histories]

Mother, well, we... You didn't want to go that far. [laughing]

Elizabeth Rohrer 21:44

Mom was the disciplinarian.

Sam Ewell 21:48

She hit you in your face. And anyway, you learn a lot.

Brody Sigman 21:54

Would you say that connection between your father and the teachers was one of the biggest impacts of having him also teach here?

Sam Ewell 22:02

Well, we used to go to teachers' homes. You know, when they visit, we would, they would they would pull some of us along with us. And of course, you know, you stay in his room while they conversed over here. And you stay put too. You sit in the chair and that's it don't move. Until you're gotten.

Elizabeth Rohrer 22:27

Now, in our family, there would have been six of us kids, you know, so we certainly knew how to entertain ourselves quietly. We would not go interrupt the parents, or interrupt the adults.

Sam Ewell 22:46

And plus, we were actually, we came to Simms, then we went to Parkview, making new friends, then we went to John Wayland and John C. Meyer and making even more friends, and went on to High School. So we were... I guess we were used to transitions. [laughing]

Elizabeth Rohrer 23:10

[laughing] Living our life.

Sam Ewell 23:14

Yeah. Smooth transitions.

Elizabeth Rohrer 23:18

Yeah.

Sam Ewell 23:19

That was a smooth transition.

Sierra Flowers 23:23

Speaking of transitioning, when you had to move schools, how as a brother, did you notice the effects of moving schools had on Mrs. Rohrer?

Elizabeth Rohrer 23:38

Hmm, that's a good question.

Sam Ewell 23:44

Hmm, what kind of effect did it have on us?

Elizabeth Rohrer 23:47

Well, you know, our experience going to a different school. We went from Simms, which was a very large school. And then of course, we went to a school that was just a three room school. And also one of the differences is that when when we left... We left Simms a year before segregation happened. And when we entered Park school, I don't remember that we knew we were going to a school with all white children. We were not told that. And I guess in our minds, it wasn't necessary to be told. Our parents were a part of a plan to help integrate schools in a peaceful way. You know. And I think the biggest difference, it wasn't the color of our skin, the biggest difference is that I came from a classroom of maybe 20 or 30 kids, and in the classroom there, there were six of us. And I was in the fourth and fifth... No, I was in the third and fourth grade, and a total of the third and fourth grade was probably 23 kids.

Sam Ewell 25:22

What, in Park school?

Elizabeth Rohrer 25:23

Yeah, and that was two classes. So, the major difference was just the size of the building and the size of the room, and no hot lunch. They did have the ice cream though.

Sam Ewell 25:42

And also, there was never really a problem with us as far as Black and White. Never a problem. Smooth transition. I've never been involved in a fight in my life; not physically. So, all through school, never any fisticuffs. I was ready. [laughing] But anyway, I never had any problems, even in Broadway when I was the only Black student there. Out of 800 students. I never had any problems as far as any physical altercation, the whole four years. I came close, but then I thought, truly you're not going to win this. So, you know it's you against 800. No. The odds weren't good, so I kind of had to back up or whatever. I didn't back down, but I reasoned, I said, 'Hold it. You fight one, you might have to fight 30. Hmm... That's not good odds.' But anyway, I came to Broadway High School without any altercations whatsoever. Am I right there Beau? [speaking to Beau Dickenson] You wouldn't know that would you?

Beau Dickerson 27:12

I don't have access to the records.

Sam Ewell 27:15

You went to Broadway right?

Beau Dickerson 27:17

[Sam Ewell & Elizabeth Rohrer – Lucy F. Simms School Oral Histories]

I did, yeah.

Sam Ewell 27:17

Right. You're a Gobbler.

Beau Dickerson 27:19

I am.

Sam Ewell 27:20

You're a Gobbler, that's right.

Elizabeth Rohrer 27:22

A decade later?

Sam Ewell 27:27

You were there the 80s? 90s?

Beau Dickerson 27:30

I graduated high school in '97.

Sam Ewell 27:35

Oh, wow.

Elizabeth Rohrer 27:35

'97? So that's two decades. [laughing]

Sam Ewell 27:37

I graduated '71, so...

Beau Dickerson 27:41

I was the last year at the old Broadway High School.

Sam Ewell 27:43

Yeah, I was at Broadway when they first installed lights on the football field matter of fact. That was a big deal. Because before then, we played Saturday afternoons. Now we went to Friday nights. Big deal, big deal, but anyway.

Sierra Flowers 28:08

What was the average school day like for you guys, and what teachers did you spend the most time with?

Elizabeth Rohrer 28:17

Okay now we're back at Simms?

[Sam Ewell & Elizabeth Rohrer – Lucy F. Simms School Oral Histories]

Brody Sigman 28:19

Here at the Simms Center, yeah.

Sam Ewell 28:26

That's when I had Ms. Eubanks. Fifth grade. Well you know... Not anything extraordinary but just, you know, well the good thing was you got you got equal attention from your teachers. I did. I mean, the whole class got got equal attention, that I remember.

Elizabeth Rohrer 28:52

I would remember that as the same. I would have been an extremely shy, quiet person. So, I never would have drawn attention to myself or asked for...

Sam Ewell 29:05

We were taught not to draw attention to ourselves.

Elizabeth Rohrer 29:12

So to answer your question, spending the most time, I would, I guess--

Sam Ewell 29:18

I'd say it was Mrs. Eubanks, fifth grade.

Elizabeth Rohrer 29:20

And I think for me, I didn't have any more time with any one teacher.

Sam Ewell 29:24

Yeah, I was closest to her [Mrs. Eubanks] I know, of all the three teachers here.

Brody Sigman 29:31

How about any specific memories from the Simms school, like any stories you'd just love to tell that are about this place, or something that might have been fun or funny that happened here?

Sam Ewell 29:48

Whenever we walk down the hall, and we saw the principal, Mr. Giles, coming we all got to the side [laughing]. I remember that. And walked in a straight line, because he, I remember, he stuttered. He had a stutter. And if he pointed you out, or, what he would do, he would pull you to the side, and have you spell 'Philadelphia' [laughing] in front of your, you know... So the pressure was, you know, and of course, you know, 'sausage' or whatever... I remember that. So, that's one of the memories I have of here. I learned a lot too, so. And, like I said, this is a community school. Yeah. Very, very tight. Because, you know, our uncles went here. Our aunts went here. The teacher knew my uncles, aunts, mother, etc. etc. So very close knit.

Elizabeth Rohrer 31:08

I remember learning to read, and the books, the little paperback, little flimsy books. It was--

[Sam Ewell & Elizabeth Rohrer – Lucy F. Simms School Oral Histories]

Sam Ewell 31:17

Dick and Jane?

Elizabeth Rohrer 31:18

See Dick go. See Sally run. See Timmy in the wagon [laughing]. But, I enjoyed learning to read.

Sam Ewell 31:28

I guess, when I got here I could read, because I was third grade. So you, you got to experience the beginnings beginnings.

Elizabeth Rohrer 31:43

See, there was one particular, one day that everyone else left for school on time and I was late. And then I had to walk by myself. And then, I knew that I was out of notebook paper. And I was supposed to go into my sister's second grade classroom to get some notebook paper from her. Well, I have mentioned that I was a very shy child, and so I walked partway to school. And then I stopped at the corner of where the swimming pool was, and I was just crying, and some neighbor woman called my mother. So mom came up to get me, she took me home. She spanked me with a bedroom slipper [laughing].

Sam Ewell 32:41

That's the only beating you ever got, wasn't it?

Elizabeth Rohrer 32:44

I got two [laughing]. I remember that. That was a bad day.

Sam Ewell 32:53

When we first got here we were at a disadvantage too, because we had lost a whole half a year of school, where we could not attend. So we got here, we started school in January. So January through the spring. The decision was made to hold us back a year, so we, they held us back a year so, so I had to repeat third grade. Did you repeat first grade?

Elizabeth Rohrer 33:20

I had to have, but I have no really memory of first grade.

Sam Ewell 33:26

I remember.

Elizabeth Rohrer 33:26

This and then--

Sam Ewell 33:28

Which I didn't mind because it didn't matter then. School was school.

Elizabeth Rohrer 33:32

Yeah. Some background. The reason we missed six months is because our family, we were in Farmville, Virginia and in 1959, of course, Farmville closed the schools. And, so that is why when we moved then back to Harrisonburg. And we missed all that time.

Sam Ewell 33:56

And also our father taught at Robert C. Moulton. He was the vice principal. He lost his job. So we had to end up coming up here. Boom. So we lost like six months of schooling. But then again, there's some kids that when Farmville lost four or five years of school. Horrible, just horrible.

Elizabeth Rohrer 34:27

And then, that being said, I would say that our parents handled the situation very, very well with us. They... We were never taught to have any resentment, any regrets. You know, it was just the way things happened, and then we just do the best we can, and move on.

Sam Ewell 34:53

Roll with the punches.

Sierra Flowers 34:59

How did being forced to move schools affect you and the attitudes of those around you?

Elizabeth Rohrer 35:08

I guess for us we were not forced, it was a family decision. Well, it was our parent's decision, you know, for us to move and like I said, we were...

Sam Ewell 35:19

We accepted it.

Elizabeth Rohrer 35:20

We went... We were there a year earlier in 1964 when, for Simms, they were open until 1965.

Brody Sigman 35:33

I've noticed you guys have both mentioned the pool in some of your stories. So, I just wonder if there's any other locations you remember like restaurants or maybe like, I believe there was a barber shop called Turner's or...

Sam Ewell 35:46

Blakey's.

Brody Sigman 35:46

Blakey's.

Sam Ewell 35:46

Blakey. Mr. Blakey, 25 cent a haircut. I remember that. The skin too. You know, back then you got, you know, a kid got out of the barber's chair.

Elizabeth Rohrer 36:01

Looks familiar? It's just white now.

Sam Ewell 36:03

I'm just saying. I wasn't asked how I wanted my hair cut. You sit in the chair, you got a buzz, that was it. 'I want a fade.' 'Uh-uh.' [laughing] Not then. But you know so, ladies barbershop. You used to be a customer, etc. etc.

Elizabeth Rohrer 36:31

Because it was a Roses department store, which is still here, and there was a Safeway...

Sam Ewell 36:36

W.T. Grant.

Elizabeth Rohrer 36:38

Grocery store. W.T. Grant?

Sam Ewell 36:41

Which is Roses now. It opened as a W.T. Grant.

Elizabeth Rohrer 36:45

Really? Really. Mmm hmm. Okay.

Sam Ewell 36:50

Of course, W.T. Grant's out of business, but hey, that's what it opened as. And that was a big deal too. It was right, right below the section.

Elizabeth Rohrer 37:02

Another location, I remember: Broad Street Mennonite Church. Which is on Broad Street. And that that was a church that was started, I believe, by Eastern Mennonite College as an outreach. And we would go there for Bible school. And...

Sam Ewell 37:27

That's right. Vacation Bible School, exactly.

Elizabeth Rohrer 37:29

And we had an aunt that lived right at, a great aunt that lived across the street. So I do remember that we would, at my great aunts house, she would get a watermelon, and we would

take our slices of watermelon and sit on the church steps to eat and spit the watermelon seeds out. And why I remember that, who knows?

Sam Ewell 37:51

And of course, during the 60s, we weren't, we didn't have the opportunity to go to a lot of restaurants because we weren't allowed, because of the segregation laws, etc. etc. So, and there weren't really a lot of Black restaurants? No. Not in Harrisonburg, no.

Elizabeth Rohrer 38:07

I don't think we have any now.

Sam Ewell 38:12

We ate home a lot, so. We had a Kenney Burger.

Elizabeth Rohrer 38:14

We didn't go out. Oh, yes. [laughing] That's not school related [laughing]. But I'll tell you anyway.

Brody Sigman 38:24

All right.

Elizabeth Rohrer 38:25

As a teacher, dad got paid once a month, and so one of the most family fun things we would do would be to, so there's eight of us in a car, go to Kenney's Burgers and we would all get our drink, our french fry, and our hamburger. The hamburger was 15 cents a burger. Of course, we ate in the car because mom didn't let us get out. But, that was...

Sam Ewell 38:53

That was a big night.

Elizabeth Rohrer 38:54

Oh, yeah.

Sam Ewell 38:54

Big night, big night.

Elizabeth Rohrer 38:56

And they were big spenders. That night.

Sam Ewell 39:02

Going back to when you mentioned the Mennonite school, how did... Was there any was there, like a culture shock of Mennonites versus the Simms school, or the community? I never attended the EMHS. I went to Broadway High.

Elizabeth Rohrer 39:29

No, I think she's talking about the elementary school.

Sam Ewell 39:31

Oh, Parkview?

Elizabeth Rohrer 39:33

Are you talking about Park school, the elementary school?

Sam Ewell 39:35

No, it wasn't a culture shock, to me.

Elizabeth Rohrer 39:40

Is that your question?

Sierra Flowers 39:44

I thought you mentioned the Mennonites' school for...

Sam Ewell 39:48

She went to EMHS too.

Elizabeth Rohrer 39:49

I did go to the high school. So was there... There wasn't for me because I was a part of the--very very much a part of the Mennonite community from the time I was 10. You know, because we attended the church and we attended in the summer times...to go to Bible school. I think I probably went to every Bible school out there if time allowed. So, that was not--I was already immersed in that community.

Brody Sigman 40:31

Would you say then, that the churches were a big center of community for the Black community in the Harrisonburg area? Or...

Elizabeth Rohrer 40:39

No...

Sam Ewell 40:40

Not the Mennonite church.

Elizabeth Rohrer 40:41

No. That was a big center for our family because we actually moved into a Mennonite community. But, to answer your question about church, I do remember going to, when when we lived in this community, I remember going to AME... AME? African...

Sam Ewell 41:06
Methodist Episcopal.

Elizabeth Rohrer 41:07
Episcopal Church, on Kelly Street. And it had a potbelly [stove]--

Sam Ewell 41:12
Remember Miss Stewart? Mr. Stewart's mother and Mr. Stewart? Yeah.

Elizabeth Rohrer 41:17
[simultaneously] Yeah, that's right, they had the store. I would go and get my penny cookie. Oh, yeah. But the church. We would go to the church, and for Sunday school, and we didn't often stay for the worship service. But I do remember one time that we decided that we were going to stay for the worship service and that was a very... The adults got very, very emotional. They were literally standing up singing, dancing in the aisles, and my aunt did it too. I thought, what are they doing? But anyway, I remember that particular day. And so, then, the church was a part of the African American community. Yeah.

Sam Ewell 42:12
Oh, that one? Yeah AME. Yeah, absolutely.

Elizabeth Rohrer 42:14
It was.

Sam Ewell 42:15
And Miss Stewart.

Elizabeth Rohrer 42:16
Yeah. And then he had mentioned the grocery store. And we lived close enough to the grocery store that we would--we could walk. And...

Sam Ewell 42:30
The only grocery store in the community.

Elizabeth Rohrer 42:31
Yeah, and our...

Sam Ewell 42:33
[simultaneously] or, convenience [store].

Elizabeth Rohrer 42:33
Our parents never gave us money to go to the store to buy the bubble gum and the cookies, but we always looked around the neighborhood and we picked up pop bottles, and you got two cents deposit for a pop bottle. So I'd get three bottles, and then go down and get my one penny

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cookie and I'd pay five cents for my chewing gum. That was my thing for the beginning of the weekend. So that I could chew gum all weekend.

Brody Sigman 43:08

What was that store called?

Elizabeth Rohrer 43:11

We called it Miss Lena's.

Sam Ewell 43:12

[simultaneously] Miss Lena's.

Elizabeth Rohrer 43:13

Miss Lena's store that was...

Sam Ewell 43:14

Lena Stewart.

Elizabeth Rohrer 43:16

And it was a situation where the store was in the front of a long house, and so...

Sam Ewell 43:27

No, it was to the side of the house. Because the house was here, and then the store was over here.

Elizabeth Rohrer 43:33

Yeah, and it was a long narrow store then.

Sam Ewell 43:35

Well, it only had one aisle. Yeah, it had one aisle. Yeah, okay. You had the candy cases, etc, etc, and the pops and all that--

Elizabeth Rohrer 43:44

And it seems like she just sold candy--

Sam Ewell 43:48

She sold junk, that's basically what she sold [laughing], nothing but junk.

Elizabeth Rohrer 43:53

You know I don't remember ever seeing food, but we wouldn't...

Sam Ewell 43:55

Junk.

Elizabeth Rohrer 43:56

But we wouldn't have looked for food either.

Sam Ewell 43:58

We weren't interested in food.

Elizabeth Rohrer 44:01

But, I guess, and our mom, if we took the time to gather the pop bottles, she'd let us walk down to the store and buy what we wanted.

Sam Ewell 44:15

It's your six cents.

Elizabeth Rohrer 44:16

Yep. [laughing]

Sam Ewell 44:20

What would six cents buy you now?

Brody Sigman 44:22

Probably nothing.

Elizabeth Rohrer 44:23

Nothing. I don't think you could get anything for six cents. By the way, I was born in 1954, so I'm not but so old.

Sierra Flowers 44:35

Thinking about Harrisonburg as a kid to Harrisonburg now, how do you think the city has changed over the years?

Sam Ewell 44:47

Two words. James Madison.

Elizabeth Rohrer 44:53

Well, that's why the city has changed.

Sam Ewell 44:56

Absolutely. That's the reason why they--the growth.

Elizabeth Rohrer 45:01

I would say yes to that. But I would also say that our city has changed because we have churches that welcome immigrants. And immigrants just gives us so much flavor and so much

diversity and so much good. And if we, you know, if we think about the foods that are available to us in this--and I consider has a small community--the different variety of foods that are available, it's just a wonderful thing. And that is a very good difference, and it's because of the--it's because of our attitude of accepting and welcoming immigrants.

Sam Ewell 45:55

Right, because 70s--60s ,70s--Harrisonburg was not very inclusive. At all. But then the 80s, it opened up so immigrants... Farmville, Turkey plant... We had a lot immigrants through there, so you know, anyway. Things changed.

Brody Sigman 46:19

What were maybe some of the first sights and smells you remember when you came to Harrisonburg?

Sam Ewell 46:26

When I came to Harrisburg?

Brody Sigman 46:28

Yeah, like when you were forced to move from the Farmville area, and you came up here towards the...

Sam Ewell 46:34

Well we left country and came to country. [laughing]

Brody Sigman 46:35

Yeah, I guess that's a good point.

Sam Ewell 46:38

Farmville?

Elizabeth Rohrer 46:39

No, but Harrisonburg was a bigger area.

Sam Ewell 46:44

Well it's bigger than Farmville

Elizabeth Rohrer 46:46

Harrisonburg's a bigger community.

Sam Ewell 46:47

Not much. Any anyway, right. Well...

Elizabeth Rohrer 46:52

Well, and I would say when we lived in Farmville, we were in, you know, of course, in a house. And we were--our neighbors were pretty far apart. And then moving to Harrisonburg...

Sam Ewell 47:06

On River Road, right?

Elizabeth Rohrer 47:07

Yeah, and we lived a couple places there. But then, and then coming to Harrisonburg, when we moved here, you know, we went into what, we called it the projects or the Federal Housing up on up on Lincoln Circle. But, an experience that is unique to Sam and I is when our family moved here, and we did not have... our homes not available. The federal housing was not available. And so we moved into a two room duplex house with my great aunt. Two bedroom. Two bedroom. So there's two bedrooms, living room in the front, and a kitchen in the back with a wood stove. Cook stove. I loved that cook stove. It did have a bathroom, an indoor bathroom. But, there was... in our family there were eight of us. And already at that house, my great aunt lived there, she had a bedroom, and in the other bedroom there were three uncles that live there. So then where we stayed for, I don't know, a couple of months? My memory isn't very good. It's kind of like we were camping out--

Sam Ewell 48:50

Along with Anthony, Sherry. Wasn't very long. --the whole time. But, mom and dad slept in a chair and us six kids, we had a sofa that laid flat and us six kids slept on the sofa.

Brody Sigman 48:54

Wow.

Elizabeth Rohrer 48:54

You know Margaret talks about them being there but I think--

Sam Ewell 48:57

They were there.

Elizabeth Rohrer 48:58

You sure they weren't just visiting?

Sam Ewell 48:59

No they lived there too, for a minute. It was like twenty people in that house, it was unbelievable.

Elizabeth Rohrer 49:05

But you know, it's a time, people do what they have to do--

Sam Ewell 49:10

Absolutely.

Elizabeth Rohrer 49:12

Family does what you have to do, to kind of hold each other until--

Sam Ewell 49:17

And always orderly, very orderly. The whole situation was orderly.

Elizabeth Rohrer 49:22

Oh, yeah. They wouldn't--

Sam Ewell 49:23

No fighting. No arguing. None of that mess.

Elizabeth Rohrer 49:24

They wouldn't let us fight with each other. Absolutely not.

Sam Ewell 49:28

Iron fist.

Elizabeth Rohrer 49:31

Well, we knew that there was a threat. You know, we talked about that, there was the threat of an iron fist, but it was never needed to use it, because we knew, you know, when mom would say, "Now, I did say stop." She doesn't have to tell you a second time because if you don't stop, she will smack you across the face and tell you, "Go over there and sit down." And you don't want that smack. So you know it just, we just, it never really would happen because--

Sam Ewell 50:03

All it took was a look.

Elizabeth Rohrer 50:05

Yes. [laughing]

Sam Ewell 50:08

You knew when to stop. Anyway.

Beau Dickerson 50:11

Mr. Longacre texted me that they're about to wrap up. So we, I don't know if this would be an opportunity to ask if there's anything that we failed to ask that you would you like to share?

Sam Ewell 50:23

I think we pretty well covered it. As far as I--

Elizabeth Rohrer 50:26

You all have asked very good questions.

Brody Sigman 50:28

Thank you very much. You've given awesome responses. It's been great to talk to you.

Elizabeth Rohrer 50:32

We hope it is something useful.

Sam Ewell 50:36

Childhood through high school. Then you get married, have kids and all that. So... [laughing]
And grandchildren.

Brody Sigman 50:51

I've got, yeah, I've got a grandma that's close to your age. And I was telling her about the visit yesterday. She was very excited to hear about it. So I'll be--

Elizabeth Rohrer 51:00

Good.

Brody Sigman 51:00

--sure to tell her.

Sam Ewell 51:01

This is important. This is important.

Brody Sigman 51:03

Yeah.

Sierra Flowers 51:03

Did you think I was like, having firsthand experience from being at the Lucy Simms school? Did you think like, it would ever become this important time in history?

Elizabeth Rohrer 51:17

Oh, no.

Sam Ewell 51:18

No, not a time, it was just school. But you know, just, as time went on, you know, so... It's vital that this story gets out to people. Of Lucy Simms and the history etc. etc. Because we have some folks in government that's trying to squash it. As you all well know.

Elizabeth Rohrer 51:43

Well, that being said, I would say that all of us, all of you, have important things in your life that happens. And you too have a story.

Sam Ewell 51:55

You got your whole life in front of you so, choose wisely. [laughing] Mmm hmm.

Brody Sigman 52:05

With that, I think we'll call the interview to a close, we'll let Josh stop the recording and we'll just thank you for your time.

Elizabeth Rohrer 52:14

You're certainly welcome.